THE CENTURY MAGAZINE

VOL. LII. MAY, 1896. No. 1.

THE PAINTER DIAZ.

BROUGHT face to face with nature, every painter meets a problem which bears with unrelenting force upon the development of his art. Shall he sacrifice himself to nature and give her the first place in his work, or bid her wait upon the expression of his temperament? Obviously the perfect solution lies in a compromise, but it requires a man of genius to hold the balance true. It is impossible to think of Diaz without thinking of Ziem and Monticelli, the three forming a group of enthusiastic colorists by whom a certain taste for caprice and dream was cultivated in common. But in the long run Diaz detached himself from these men and fell into line with the painters of Fontainebleau. The safest basis for a study of his work is one on which the familiar hypothesis of a fantastic and headstrong colorist is abandoned, and a sincere student of nature is recognized without reserve. There is no man in French art more genuine than Diaz, more sane, more superior to mere impulse and self-will. Sorrow enriched his nature, and made him, above all things, strong.

His troubles began with his birth. He came of a Spanish family, but his mother was an exile in Bordeaux when he was born there on August 20, 1807, and his father was excluded from both Spain and France because of some political mischances in which he had become involved. In his tenth year the boy was left an orphan in possession of a fine, impressive name,—Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Peña,—but otherwise without a single resource. It took him years to win position, recognition, substantial comfort; but they came at last, chiefly through his affiliation with the Barbizon school and through his admiration for Rousseau. The latter became his inspiration, after nature herself, and taught him much—so much that, as the different elements in the naturalistic and romantic movement of 1830 fused and produced a school, Diaz found himself permanently one of its pillars. He improved rapidly under the sympathetic companionship of Rousseau. He was a lesser man than the latter, but he had the same serious spirit, the same spiritualized, clairvoyant feeling for the great forest in which Corot, Millet, Rousseau, and he found their material, and he made himself a lofty place. But the fight had been hard, and all through his life there ran a strenuous vein, as though this were a man who had conquered fortune through pain. Up to the day of his death at Mentone in 1876 there clung to him the atmosphere of a rugged, storm-tossed struggler. Albert Wolff, to whom we owe the most picturesque and interesting of the descriptions of Diaz as he lived and talked, says that in the recital of his past trials «he had the appearance of an old soldier telling the dangerous adventures of his fights.»

All this is in anything but agreement with the debonair and careless mood that we gen-

Copyright, 1896, by THE CENTURY CO. All rights reserved.

erally attribute to the painter. But here lies the great, the lovable fact about Diaz. With all his troubles, with all his pain, with all his fiery declamation over the incidents of his life, he remained unspoiled, remained a gentle, winning nature, responsive to the most subtly poetic appeals of the forest to which he had consecrated himself, and quick to feel the most delicate emotions. Thus there existed in him, with more definiteness than most men experience, absolute sunshine and absolute shadow, the one playing ceaselessly over the other, and drawing from it strength and power. His abundance of gaiety as an artist, therefore, is never to be taken as mere superficial contentment with things of gaiety and lightness. Fixed firm in his belief in the more serious elements of his nature, he gave himself with delightful elasticity, delightful ingenuousness, to the sunny walks of life and art. Diaz was beyond a doubt capable of profound feeling. The volubility, the stormy talk, of which his friends have left such entertaining records, was not the mere froth and fume of a volatile Frenchman. Under it all he possessed a warm, generous nature, a sympathy which, much more legitimately than his sensuous delight in color, carries us close to the essential character of his art.

It is significant that that art was formed most systematically and persistently upon the art of Rousseau. For the idyllic, tenderly poetic sentiment of Corot he undoubtedly had a sensitive taste, and in a way was nearer to that sentiment than to the vigorous feeling of Rousseau. Nevertheless, the latter touched him on his more thoughtful side, stirred him more deeply than did any other painter of his time, and left a more definite mark upon his art. In the beginning there was in Diaz the indecision, the lack of definitive aim, which often belongs to a masterless painter. But when he fell under the spell of Rousseau he began to try for a more scientific crystallization of material in his work. Left to himself, he might have worked out his instinctive theory that one should overlay upon life all the sunshine possible, and this might have made him purely a painter of lyric, fugitive motives, an artist for whom a group of airy figures, a nymph with one or two Loves about her, held all the substance that a picture needed to hold. He might have kept his tenderness, his poetic insight, for purposes other than artistic. Rousseau came at this juncture, and made him something more than a painter of lovely genre—made him a great landscapist, one of the greatest France has produced. His genre panels are countless, it is true; his landscapes pure and simple are not half so strong in numbers: but in spite of this, the first picture by Diaz to which it seems fairest to refer in this place is a certain composition called «The Bather,» which hangs in one of the great private galleries of London. The single figure in the design, as though to assert that, after all, Diaz should have been a landscapist and nothing else, is so swiftly and broadly brushed in that it has no charm of individuality whatever. You feel that this peasant woman, seated at her ablutions on the brink of a sedgy pool in the late afternoon, is the merest accident in the scene. The scene itself is the thing. Mossy rocks rise from the edge of the pool on one side, and break the transition from still, smooth water to the thick grove beyond. On the other side of the pool, to the left, where the bather sits, the land is heaved up in grass-grown rocky strata until the sky-line is reached above the low trees and brushwood well toward the top of the canvas. The principal characteristics of this painting are among the very first virtues of Diaz—a straightforward massing of foreground, middle distance, and highest plane; a natural but extremely artistic and picturesque distribution of light and shade; and a most exact gradation of color and texture in the evolution of the work through its deep and even solemn perspective. Diaz might be more brilliant than he is in this landscape, but he could not be truer or more an artist; he could not be a worthier devotee of the sylvan solitude in which he wandered for the greater part of his life.

It may be objected that solitude is hardly the word for a forest in which Diaz was so constantly seeing groups of laughing figures. But the answer is easily found. If he saw them, it was because he put them there. His landscape is that of the forest of Fontainebleau; his people come from a dreamland of his own. Did he ever really see the men and women who come in graceful procession down through the shining glade of «La Descente des Bohémiens,» and did he actually behold the wood-cutter who stoops over his task in more than one of the gleaming «forest interiors»? Perhaps. It is conceivable that he used models; it is even most probable. But by the time he had dismissed them they were metamorphosed on the canvas, and had assumed in their lovely environment the air we know so well—an air of innocence, of rusticity unsophisticated but cleanly, of graceful artlessness. This was fair play in the eyes of Diaz, and his public feels no cause for complaint. The landscape envelops the figures,

ENGRAVED BY E. KINGSLEY.

LANDSCAPE UNDER SHADOW, BY DIAZ.

OWNED BY J. A. GARLAND.

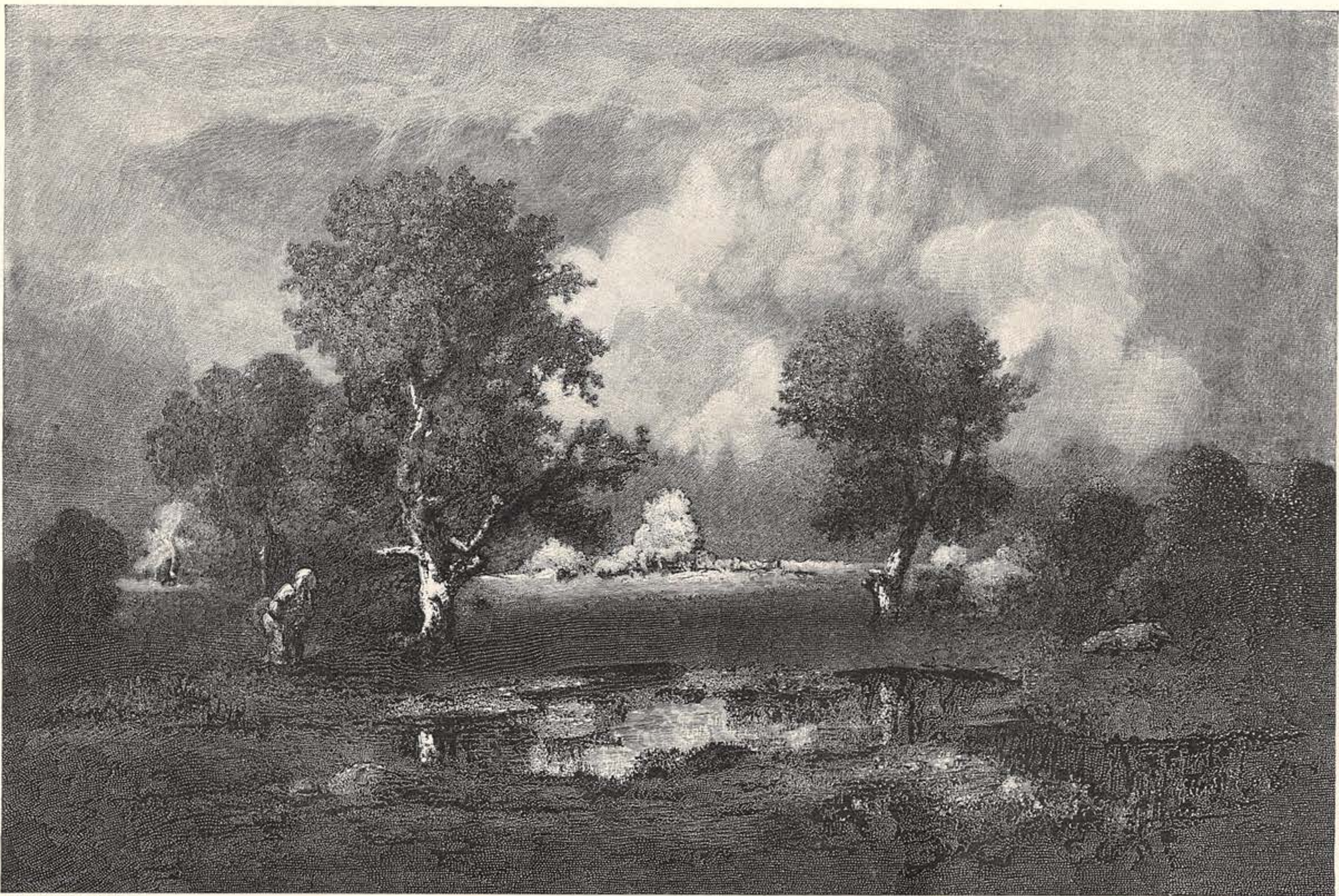
and the hues and odors of the forest cling to their slightly unreal forms. Unreal they are, if you like, but so in the last sense is the forest itself, a wonderful place of quivering leaves and strangely cracking twigs, and a humming, rustling, panting, gleaming life that penetrates to the roots of your nature with poignant reality, and yet steals over you like a phantom thing—like some dim fairyland into which one has strayed without losing one's accustomed five senses. In such a place as this some little unreality in the figures is more than forgivable: it is necessary. Diaz proves it by making even a finer impression with figures altogether unreal. He brings «Diane Chasseresse» upon the scene, and with her a court of bewitching maidens, Cupid at her side, and such a charm of loveliness and gleaming beauty flung about the whole that the very dogs that leap beside the huntress lose their ferocious aspect and become one with the poetic glamour of the scene. Here begins the art of the colorist of which we have heard so much in Diaz. He has worked lovingly and searchingly over the remote woody haunt in which his figures stand, and now, with the coming of those enchanted and enchanting visitors, he lets his love of gorgeous hues spring out and have free play. Tube after tube he empties upon the palette, brush after brush is snatched up by his nimble fingers; even then the color will not come swiftly enough, and the palette-knife is called into service. The paint goes on in layers, and the silvery flesh of the dryad which he paints grows warmer and firmer, the flowers in her hair grow brighter, the drapery flung from her shoulder takes, in one bold, passionate stroke, a quivering life of color into its texture, and the picture is complete: the record of an inspiration begun in meditative contemplation of a lovely scene, and developed further and further, until the fervor of the artist rises into a species of happy intoxication, and you get the ravishing art which makes Diaz a master.

We have shown the fallacy of supposing that color was meat and drink to Diaz, the sole *raison d'être* of the painter's work. He was first of all a serious interpreter of nature; but this does not deprive him of the distinction of handling color with a grip and a magic that have rarely been even remotely rivaled. The important fact to observe is that he never descended to the tricks of the mere juggler. Recognize that, and you can revel in Diaz as one revels in Monticelli, only the revel lasts longer. It lasts longer because, long after pure flaming color would have lost its power of attraction, these gorgeous panels, with their thick impasto, hold the imagination and lead the eye vaguely, dreamily, into the depths of a forest which might be Fontainebleau, which certainly is a living, murmurous wood, but which ought to declare itself the veritable home of nymphs and amorini, of smiling, fleeing damsels too swift to be overtaken, of flowers too fragrant to lose their fragrance, though the seasons come and go and the leaves prepare to fall. They do not fall. Sometimes Diaz painted the autumn, and painted it with a full appreciation of its maturity of loveliness; but as a rule he lives in the summer, gives his fairy figures balmy airs and mellow sunshine, and seems fairly to riot in the gaiety, the beauty, the lightness, and the youth of his merry world. It is his world. The first and the last thing to remember is that it is nature's world too—a world which he could never have created without long hours of communion with the eternal woods and springs. To any one who really cares for Diaz there is peculiar comfort in this last reflection. It is a precious thing to which to return in the face of that maddeningly familiar conception of him which would place him somewhere between a craftsman in mosaic and a child turning a kaleidoscope gleefully about in his hands. The true picture by Diaz has always the tang of nature in it. For a man so frankly fond of elusive, magical themes he has extraordinary vitality. This is because he had an extraordinary gift for throwing himself heart and soul into the scene he wished to paint. He flooded his canvases with the richest golden light; he peopled them with fantastic personages; he made his composition minister to his sense of color, of poetry, of fanciful and mysterious things: but he remained a landscape-painter—as has been said above, one of the greatest France has ever produced.

Royal Cortissoz.

ENGRAVED BY H. WOLF. OWNED BY ICHABOD T. WILLIAMS.

THE LOVERS, BY DIAZ.



ENGRAVED BY E. KINGSLEY. OWNED BY R. R. CABLE.

LANDSCAPE UNDER SUNSHINE, BY DIAZ.