

A NEW NOTE IN AMERICAN SCULPTURE.

STATUETTES BY BESSIE POTTER.

THERE is a pleasurable sense of relief when, in the mass of conventional work at the annual exhibitions, the critic comes face to face with some evidence of thought and personal execution beyond the commonplace. And this feeling gives way to real satisfaction when the effort assumes a significant importance that warrants enthusiasm.

There were shown at the Society of American Artists in New York, in the spring of 1896, some statuettes of graceful young womanhood, essentially modern in conception, singularly naïve in treatment, refined,

and withal intensely personal. The interested visitor who found pleasure in the work discovered in a modest corner the name of Bessie Potter, and the catalogue gave her address as Chicago.

New notes in exhibitions are not too frequent. Often the departure means affectation or presumption, if not downright insolence. Much spurious coin passes current in the republic of art. It is not difficult to make radical departures with paint and canvas, but to say something new in a plastic way means much more. Sculptural form is



PORTRAIT SKETCH OF ALICE.



PORTRAIT SKETCH OF MRS. R.

arbitrary. It cannot be ignored or disguised either by deft modeling or ingenious arrangement. It demands a rigorous adherence to prosaic facts of construction. Human anatomy permits no trifling or uncertainty, and in this the difficulty of the sculptor exceeds that of the painter.

Homely domesticity in strictly modern dress has presented little incentive to our serious workers, and has been relegated to the domain of the commercial Italian, that skilful imitator of fabrics and detail of the tombstone variety.

While the disclosure is by no means novel,

Miss Potter makes us aware of the fact that in the daily prosaic life about us there are possibilities conventional, yet attractive, simple, but containing much of suggestion, waiting only the sympathetic touch to be responsive if the proper chord is struck.

In art matters completeness is rare, even impossible, of realization; however great the ability, long years are requisite to round out the talent, to mellow the judgment, to perfect the technic, and to bring the gifts to a consummation.

The interesting statuettes that come from Miss Potter's hands comprise groups of chil-

dren, dainty girlish figures in easy, flowing draperies, or pathetically natural visions of maternity. They possess to an eminent degree the charm of spontaneity, observation, and keen appreciation of the beautiful. It may be a line of tender delicacy that catches the eye, or a happy disposition of mass that

Chicago, the typical Western city, standing for all that is bustling, hustling, and rushing in the civilization of to-day, is surely the antithesis of that little town in Bœotia where, two thousand years ago, the esthetic Greeks wrought out their delicious idyllic creations of grace and beauty.



A YOUNG MOTHER.

lifts the work out of the commonplace; but there is generally an astonishingly clear perception, that grasps with certainty and quickness the picturesqueness of the situation. The methods are difficult of analysis, but they are present, and there is no mistaking them.

It is curious to note the affiliation of this young woman with the efforts of the Tanagra workers, whose quaint figurines, unearthed only twoscore years since, are to-day the wonder and delight of the art-loving world.

True, the freer garb of classic maidenhood presented easier and more inspiring problems to the ancient masters of clay and stone, and the open-air life of the people of that epoch produced a more robust type of femininity; but our Occidental civilization is not without its advantages in the matter of beauty of face and form, and the hideous fashionable dress of the present may by proper treatment be softened and mitigated, and its incongruities kept in intelligent subjugation.

But if the inspiration of the young woman

is evident, her work can in no way be called imitative. Of course it matters little what the art be, if it be good art. No one can claim absolute originality; every worker has a particular preference; the influence may be traced, even if it be not acknowledged. It is in interpretation that the individual may claim consideration. Fresh personality in the rendering of old themes gives them their charm. The story of mankind is as old as history; the telling varies with each generation, and the tale is ever new.

It may be said that the naturalness in Miss Potter's work at times defeats its purpose, if purpose it has other than absorption in her art. She lingers now and then with uncomfortable insistence over lines of too great severity. Her occasional long sweeps of rigid limbs or drapery have an aggressive assertiveness that dangerously approaches the ugly, and there are faults of balance that betray immaturity. It would be strange indeed if these were always absent, but they may be noted, nevertheless, in the general review.

Hitherto there has been little about the sculptor's profession that suggested its adaptability to feminine hands. The studio, in its cold, cheerless, uninspiring character, however necessary for the proper manipulation of clay or the cutting of stone, is nevertheless essentially masculine in its surroundings, uninviting to womanhood, and apparently without possibilities for the sex. To be sure, there are no good reasons why man should have preëmpted the field; but he has, and has had it nearly all his own way. Where woman has come in occasionally, there has been about her work nothing especially characteristic of her sex. Statues, portraits, or groups she has made along recognized lines, and she has followed man as closely as her ability permitted.

But in the case of Miss Potter the results are different. Her statuettes are purely and

obviously the work of a woman. The feeling, the sentiment, and the delicacy are thoroughly feminine, but they are feminine from the psychological side entirely, for there are no traces of that weakness of artistic conception and that technical inefficiency which, it must be admitted, are frequent attributes of woman's plastic efforts.

Woman has an instinctive intuition for her sex. The thousand nothings peculiar to her are quite beyond the ken of man, no matter how closely he observes or how minutely he investigates. The last word in sculpture is yet to be said; and if, by virtue of natural perceptions, there are certain phases clearer to the eye of woman, all other things being equal, it is obvious that where she is to delineate her sisters she will have this much advantage over her hitherto supposedly stronger brother.

For detail in the general acceptance of the term Miss Potter has little use. It is the abstract, and not the concrete, that appeals to her and arouses her enthusiasm. Her leaning is to the picturesque rather than to the simply beautiful,—if the distinction may be made,—though in her search for the former she rarely misses the latter. But hers is the inclination toward modern realism, so arranged that she may find grace of form in simple masses; and her work, like certain bits of melody, conveys, above everything, a sense of delightful suggestiveness.

It is six years since Miss Potter began the study of art, two of which were spent at the Art Institute of Chicago, and two in Paris. Among modern sculptors in the latter city she found herself more closely drawn to Rodin than to any other master. The brevity of her experience in art makes the results all the more remarkable; and it is fair to presume that she is only at the beginning of a career which will be full of interest as her powers unfold and mature.

Arthur Hoebner.

