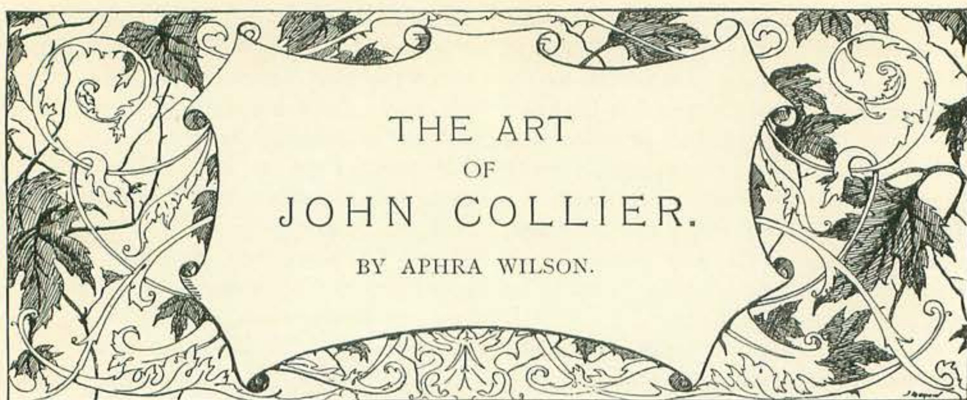


THE ART OF JOHN COLLIER.

BY APHRA WILSON.

NOT a great while ago a man—a private-view man and a keen amateur in the first sense of that word—said to me, "Account for it how you will, John Collier's pictures always stick in my mind. I think they are so vividly realised because the artist has painted them to please himself. There is nothing of the pot-boiler about them; they are painted *con amore*, and as this is art pleasing to the artist himself, it is fine art. Certainly his pictures have that air of reality which is the supreme virtue." This is true. Mr. Collier is essentially a realist. In his portraits, his great preoccupation is to get an accurate and characteristic likeness, this sometimes at the expense of more artistic qualities. In his subject pictures he is anxious above all to give the scene as it may actually have happened. With regard to *technique*, he is chiefly concerned with truth of drawing and tone, and to obtain these is rather apt to neglect his brush work. He holds it an incontrovertible truth that a habit of accuracy is the foundation of all good painting.

From a photograph by Maule & Fox.
THE HON. JOHN COLLIER.

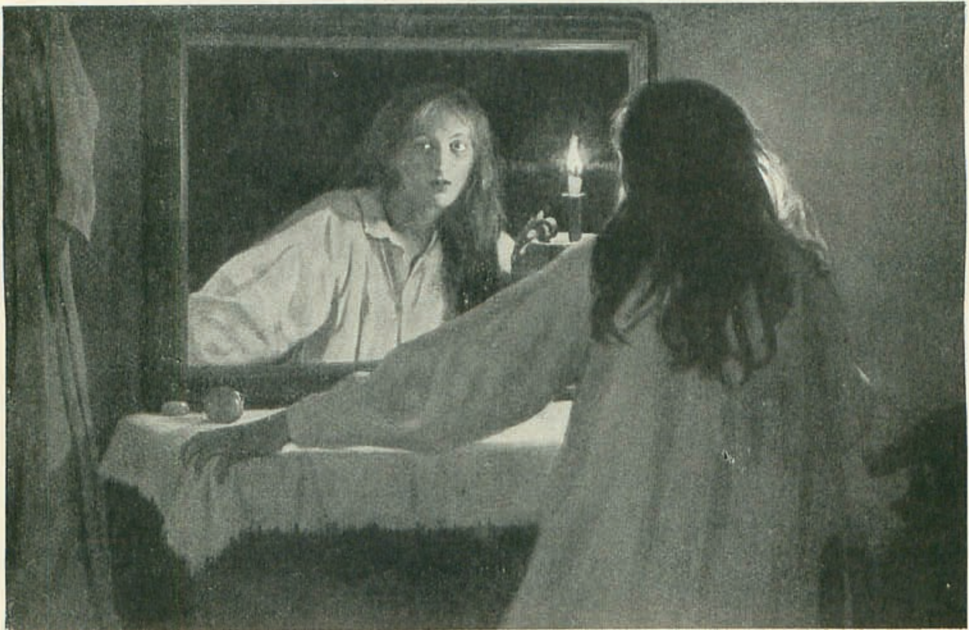
He got his chief training at the Slade School, under Sir Edward Poynter. He is also in some sort a pupil of Alma-Tadema, who painted his celebrated picture of "A Sculptor's Model" in Mr. Collier's studio for the express purpose of teaching him painting. He first exhibited at the Academy with a study of a head. This was in 1875. Two years later he made his first Academy success with the portraits of Major and Mrs. Forster. Though he has painted many admirable and some most striking portraits of

"THE GARDEN OF ARMIDA."

interesting and notable people, it was not his original aim to practise systematically this very difficult and highly specialised form of his art. After his success in 1877 he gradually drifted into it; but never to the neglect of his subject pictures. Here, indeed, Mr. Collier is most truly and most fully himself.

His first important picture, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1881, was "The Last Voyage of Henry Hudson"—that great navigator's last tragic voyage to the Polar Seas; for in the summer of 1611 his crew mutinied and set him adrift in an open boat with his son John and some of the most infirm of the sailors. They were never heard of more. This picture attracted a great deal of attention, and was bought under the terms of the Chantrey Bequest. It hangs now for all the world to see in the Tate Gallery. It was recognised as a praiseworthy effort to depict the scene as it may actually have happened. Portraits of Sir Joseph Hooker and of Edwin Booth as Richelieu were hung the same year. "A Glass of Wine with Cæsar Borgia," exhibited in 1893, besides being an effective and dramatic picture—it portrays a terrible and thrilling moment—illustrates this artist's capacity for taking immense pains to secure correctness of historical detail. His pictorial and artistic conscience never disdains any aid to accuracy. Though he has shown only one or two landscapes since his "Glacier Stream" of 1877, he is always making landscape studies. His "Touchstone and Audrey" of 1892 is a characteristically literal rendering of that world-famed clown and his country wench, who, in the magic Forest of Arden, are for ever fleeting the time carelessly after their Shakespearean fashion, as they were wont to do in the golden world. It is as modern, though not so fantastic, as a scene in one of Gilbert and Sullivan's operas. "When Music, Heavenly Maid, was Young," is a charming pastoral, bright, clear, gay, and as English in quality and treatment as Collins's ode is.

Mr. Collier has studied *technique* in Munich and in Paris; nevertheless, his treatment of a subject is typically English—distinctly and decidedly he remains an English artist. This does not imply that (to quote Mr. Henry James) his art "means rose-coloured window-panes," and his selection "means picking a bouquet for Mrs. Grundy." His art is too honest and too wholesome to be of the niminy order. His "Circe" of



"HALLOWEEN."

"THE DEATH OF ALBINE."

1885 is a classic subject significantly but beautifully treated from an English point of view. His "Godiva" of 1898 is exquisitely realised. Here is depicted that nobly pitiful English lady who, at the challenging behest of her lord, the grim Earl whose heart was rough as Esau's hand, rode forth, "clothed on with chastity," and

> The deep air listen'd round her as she rode,
> And all the low wind hardly breathed for fear.
> The little wide-mouth'd heads upon the spout
> Had cunning eyes to see: the barking cur
> Made her cheek flame: her palfrey's footfall shot
> Light horrors thro' her pulses: the blind walls
> Were full of chinks and holes; and overhead
> Fantastic gables, crowding, stared; but she
> Not less thro' all bore up, till, last, she saw
> The white-flower'd elder-thicket from the field
> Gleam thro' the Gothic archways in the wall.
> Then she rode back, clothed on with chastity.

Godiva of Coventry, delicate, dainty, finely daring, who did this splendid thing, "who took the tax away and built herself an everlasting name," is—and we like to think it—a typical Englishwoman.

Mr. Collier was never more happily inspired than when he went to Malory for his "Queen Guinevere's Maying." In our great national romance, "La Morte d'Arthur," essentially English in form and mostly English in spirit, how Queen Guinevere, "that beautiful white ghost," went a-maying is set forth in the first chapter of the nineteenth book. In the picture the queen is shown to us riding forward with her train decked out in all the May-day's bravery of blossoming bough and leafy branch. Behind them and about them is the fresh foliage of the spring, tint on tint of green, bright, tender, ethereal. It is the very height and heart of lusty spring.

It is a point to be noted that Mr. Collier has illustrated Mr. Hardy's "Trumpet-Major." An acute critic has said of this delightful novel, "Here Hardy shows himself a practised and perfect craftsman. It is terse, clear, decisive, like the notes of a trumpet blown by a strong, able, practised man. 'The Trumpet-Major' has complete pictorial unity." These two artists were well associated, for they have much in common. One would like to see a portrait of Thomas Hardy

painted by the same hand that has fixed for us on canvas the Rudyard Kipling of "Plain Tales from the Hills," maker of "Soldiers Three," and singer of "Things as They Are."

Mr. Collier holds that it is seldom worth while to work from models who are positively ugly, as it is dangerous for the artist to get used to ugliness in any form. He holds, too, that a really good subject ought to arrest our attention and set us thinking; it ought, if possible, to be beautiful, and it ought to more or less explain itself; but he considers it equally true that a picture fine in drawing and colouring is a fine picture, even if it have no subject at all. In fact, no subject is better than a bad one—that is, a radically unpictorial subject, or one inadequately treated. His "Death of Albine," exhibited in 1895, is a simply beautiful picture. The subject is vividly realised and exquisitely treated. It is Albine, the lovely child, the charming girl heroine of Zola's poetical novel, who wandered with her lover in that marvellous wilderness of flowers, Le Paradou—"ce Paradou qui était une grande caresse;" Albine "qui muette, sans un soupir, se coucha sur le lit, sur la floraison de jacinthes et des tubéreuses, et qui était morte dans le boquet suprême des fleurs."

That the lives of the poor offer scenes where pathos or dramatic intensity can amply atone for the lack of beauty, Mr. Collier has triumphantly shown in "Trouble," which was exhibited in 1898. Those who were fortunate enough to see this remarkable picture are not likely to forget it. "Anything might be coming through that door!" cried a spectator, who had been gripped by its direct intensity and moved by its simple human pathos. Another intense moment, a weirdly startling one, is given in "Halloween," which is now being exhibited at the Guildhall among the War Fund pictures. The damsel eating her apple at the glass, in accordance with the time-honoured custom, is plainly terrified by the glimmerings of an apparition in the mirror. The candle-light effect is very well got. Of late he has been paying a good deal of attention to effects of artificial light. "I hope," he modestly says, "in time to learn how to render them with a fair degree of truth." "The Laboratory" of 1895 and "The Whist Players" of 1897 are two fine examples of such effects. The former is a realistic and elaborately worked out presentment of the scene described in Browning's poem:

> Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,
> May gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitely,
> As thou pliest thy trade in this Devil's smithy—
> Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?

"The Whist Players" is extraordinarily clever.

"The Garden of Armida," an admirably composed picture exhibited last year, made a sensation. It arrested attention and provoked questions, verbal and written. Many saw it as a strikingly painted temperance tract, and approved the pointed moral. Not only have practical folk decreed that it points a moral, but they have utilised it to adorn a magic-lantern slide, and probably at this present it is perambulating the country with a temperance lecturer. Not a few were puzzled by the title. "Who is Armida? What is she?" they asked. Others said, "Tasso's Armida we know, but this is a modern, up-to-date picture—look at these Chinese lanterns, these modern costumes! Why call it 'The Garden of Armida'? The man should be clad in Crusader's armour, and the rest of the scene should be in keeping." Your bat-eyed sticklers for the superficially correct will flap and flutter round the immaterial and the trivial, but will blunder by the essential: they miss that because it is dark to them. "The Garden of Armida" is a typical earthly garden; it is as old as human nature, old as the garden called Eden, and is here for all time short of the millennial age. In it the eternal feminine and the everlasting masculine confront one another, and concentrate their powers in a duel for domination. But the artist was primarily concerned with his picture: a moral—an ethical moral—might be inevitably included in it, and so be drawn from it, but that was not his affair. The painter who "attempts to render the *look* of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface,—

and the substance of the human spectacle," and who succeeds, may unconcernedly leave the implicit moral to reveal itself to the intellect. It is nature's method. Thackeray has well said that the power of a great artist lies in the fact that he makes you see and think of a great deal more than the objects before you.

There is a suggestive serpentine subtlety in "Evil," which was exhibited last year in the New Gallery. This female Mephistopheles is a figure of brooding perversity, malevolent, malign. She has gone out into her weird wilderness, a solitary and desert place, to plan mischief. The landscape in which she is set is Egyptian. The few sparsely leaved trees in the background fit in with the figure. The effect of moonlight and firelight is admirably got. It is a striking picture.

"EVIL."

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Mr. Collier is most anxious to avoid getting into a groove. It is partly for this reason that he varies his subjects so much. Every picture he paints is more or less in the nature of an experiment. He is always modifying, altering, inventing. He holds that painters must learn to study their business with the same devotion and intelligence with which men of science study theirs. This reminds one of what old Hokusai of Yedo wrote at the age of seventy-five: "Since the age of six I had a mania for drawing the forms of things. By the time I was fifty I had published an infinity of designs; but all I have produced before the age of seventy is not worth taking into account."

Compared with his brother artist, Hokusai of Japan, "the old man mad about drawing," Mr. Collier is a youth in years. He is in the prime of life, so we expect much from him.