

EDMUND C. TARBELL

By KENYON COX

In these days of chaotic experimenting and of “isms” innumerable, in which it has seemed that every tradition of sound painting has gone by the board, there is much encouragement for the lovers of older art in the success, and the consequent upon younger artists, of the recent work of Mr. Tarbell. Here is work essentially conservative, based on the soundest and sanest painting of the past, yet of a quality that insured the enthusiasm of brother artists and the appreciation and financial backing of intelligent collectors – work of the lineage of Vermeer and Chardin, yet with a modern and contemporary accent – a much-needed proof that what was always good is good still, and that painting may be very much alive without being revolutionary.

Mr. Tarbell’s conservatism is the more interesting and more exemplary because it has been of slow growth. Born in 1862, he was known as one of the most brilliant of our younger painters, who had taken prizes and medals, had experimented with various forms of *plein air* painting and was a notable virtuoso with the brush. Then, almost suddenly, came the “Girl Crocheting” which in its quiet perfection seemed to eclipse his own previous works, as it did those of others, making them look like mere paint, while it alone looked like nature. Since then there has been a series of pictures in the same vein : the “Girl Mending”, the “New England Interior,” and “Preparing for the Matinee,” and much of the same quality has been brought into portraiture, as in his portrait of President Seeley. Without seeing these recent works side by side it is impossible to be certain whether the earliest of them is still the most perfect, or whether this is an illusion of memory. In any case, the pictures all have a large measure of the same beauty, and in the last mentioned this beauty is achieved on a larger scale, the figure being of life size.

The analogy of this art to that of Vermeer is apparent at a glance. There is the same simplicity of subject, the same reliance on sheer perfection of representation; the same delicate truth of values, the same exquisite sensitiveness to gradations of light. No one since Vermeer has made a flat wall so interesting-has so perfectly rendered its surface, its exact distance behind the figure, the play of light upon it, and the amount of air in front of it. There is much, too, of Vermeer’s accuracy of draftsmanship without manner or acquired style, and there is the same willingness to use a few elements of composition-a few objects-again and again, in the confidence that slight differences of effect and a fresh observation will insure sufficient variety. In the “Girl Mending” and in the “New England Interior” we have the same room, with its triple window at the left and its open door beyond, and in both is the same gate-legged table that figured in the “Girl Crocheting.” The sofa of the “New England Interior” appears again in “preparing for the Matinee.” Yet each is an individual picture-a change in the lighting and in the grouping and distance of the figures has sufficed to give to each as great a freshness as if the others had not existed.

But if the inspiration of Vermeer is evident, there is no trace of imitation. Mr. Tarbell is trying to do what Vermeer did, not to do it as Vermeer did it-still less to give the superficial aspect of the Dutchman's pictures. It would never have occurred to him to produce a costume piece and to attempt the reconstruction of a seventeenth-century interior as Meissonier attempted it. The environment he paints is his own; his models are people of his own day. To find the pictorial elements in what he sees about him in his task, as it was that of the masters of Holland. Neither has he attempted to investigate the technical methods or to reproduce the handling of any painter of the past. As far as his processes are decipherable they seem to be those of every one else-there is nothing in the manner of laying on paint that particularly distinguishes his present work from his earlier or from the work of his contemporaries. If he has made any experiments in under-painting and glazes they are thoroughly concealed in his final result. What one sees is apparently perfectly simple and direct workmanship of the modern kind-opaque color laid on with a full brush.

What Mr. Tarbell has set himself to recover is not the method of the Master of Delft, but his point of view; not his technique, but his temper. Using his own tools and his own equipment, he sees as Vermeer saw and feels as he felt, and it would be hard to find a better model. There have been greater artists than Vermeer-was there ever a better painter? He was not a man of lofty invention, not a master of the grand style or of sumptuous decoration; but no one ever saw more clearly or rendered more perfectly the infinite beauty of common things. To be exquisite in choice and infinitely elegant in arrangement, balancing space against space and tone against tone with utmost nicety; to depict the forms of Nature as they are, yet to invest them with a nameless charm while seeming only to copy them accurately; to color soberly yet subtly, giving each light and half-tone, each shadow and reflection, its proper hue as well as its proper value; to represent not objects merely, but the atmosphere that bathes them and the light that falls upon them, yet with no sacrifice of the solidity or the character of the objects themselves; to achieve what shall seem a transcript of natural fact yet shall be in reality a work of finest art-this is what Vermeer did as no one else has done it, and this is what Mr. Tarbell is trying to do. It seems to me that he has more nearly succeeded than any other painter of our time.

The refinement of spacing in such pictures as the "Girl Crocheting" and the "Girl Mending,"-the adjustment of the picture to its frame, of the figure to its background-the entire success of the design as a pattern of variously shaped and colored masses, is admirable. The best example of Mr. Tarbell's draftsmanship is perhaps the head of the "Girl Mending," in which great charm is attained without special research for beauty of feature and by dint of thoroughness of observation and sympathy of feeling. The head of the girl in "Preparing for the Matinee" is not so in type, but its modeling, in the delicate half-shadow cast by the hat and the upraised arms, is nothing less than masterly. In this picture, also, the drawing of the arms and hands is carried farther than in the other, and the slender and supple body is unmistakably present under the dress. The perfect tonality of these canvases, the fineness of discrimination between closely related values, is also notable. The depth of the room and the exact amount of space between the various objects in it are gauged to a nicety in each case, and one does not know whether this expression of space is more wonderful in the "New England Interior," "with its many planes, of in the simple empty which remains so perfectly behind the figure in "Preparing for the Matinee." in the latter case the problem, simple as it looks, is perhaps the more difficult of the two.

In color the "Girl Mending," with the rose-geranium-colored kimono contrasting so piquantly with its surrounding grays, is the most obviously decorative; but perhaps the quieter canvases, made up of grays and browns and blacks but full of quality and never suggesting monochrome, are the more permanently delightful. There is no surer test of the colorist power of an artist than his treatment of whites and blacks. All these pictures are full of subtly varied whites. One of the most striking instances of the painter's ability to handle black is the academic gown of president Seeley-an admirable piece of rendering, broad and free in handling yet thorough and logical in form, fully illuminated yet never becoming slaty or chalky, filled with color, yet never suggesting purple or brown or anything but black.

Such simply beautiful painting is even rare to-day than it has been in the past. We are the more grateful for the straightforwardness and the accomplishment of Mr. Tarbell's work.