

REVIEWS

with all the others, and whether his violent Catholicism is a fair presentation of that harmonious synthesis of nature and grace. That is questionable; but the book on the whole is of great value: it is one of the 'paper-backs' that one feels compelled to get bound.

A.M.

RECENT ART EXHIBITIONS

THE divergent estimates of Sir William Orpen's work made during his life and haphazard immediately after his death can at last be checked, and perhaps modified, in the light of the collected exhibition of his work held at Burlington House under the auspices of the Royal Academy. We are now given the opportunity of making, if not a definitive statement of his relative place in the history of English painting—that, it is to be hoped, next winter's exhibition will determine—at least a definite conception of his individual stature as an artist. The opportunity would, of course, have been far more valuable, were the system on which the paintings are arranged less obscure; as it is, the rooms are hung with so little regard for chronology or even for *genre* that any attempt to trace Orpen's artistic development is rendered at least three times as tedious as it need have been.

It is convenient to begin with one of the earliest works shown, *The Play Scene from 'Hamlet'* (No. 125), the focus of attention in the 1932 Academy. Apart from its intrinsic merits, and this is probably the best picture Orpen ever painted, it is in some sense a key to the whole of his development. Better and more original pieces of painting he certainly produced, but he never again achieved the coherence of design, the subordinated functional colour, the mellow spontaneity that we find here. Here we have an epitome of the romanticism that he later so irremediably, and I think unfortunately, discarded. It contains, however, just those weaknesses that are apparent through all his later work; the diffusion of interest, the distraction, for instance, introduced by the irrelevant illumination of the group in the right foreground, may be paralleled by the way in which in another admirable painting, *Mother and Child* (No. 3), the very skill of the painting of the yellow and green diversions detracts from the force of the picture as a whole. Besides this, the very close affinity, visual and technical, of the figures on the stage to Rembrandt and the Rembrantesque impasto of the chiaroscuro should be observed. Without careful study of Rembrandt this picture could never have come into being and indeed, if we consider it with *Behind the Scenes* (No. 47) and *The Saint of Poverty* (No. 16), it seems to show that Orpen was

BLACKFRIARS

at his best when imitating either Rembrandt himself or something technically Rembrandtesque like the pseudo-Daumier of the first or the late Goya of the second. Each of these pictures is the conscious assumption of an alien style, yet the *Play Scene* alone, for all its youthful eclecticism, has the individuality, the just balance that in any other case than Orpen's would portend a very great painter indeed.

To turn from this phase to two of the most ambitious pictures in the exhibition is to drop from *Rob Roy* to *St. Ronan's Well*, *The Peace Conference at the Quai D'Orsay* (No. 28) and the glittering *Café Royal* (No. 10) are everything that the *Play Scene* is not. Brilliant, pretentious, unimitative, the former is still as a picture a failure, but it is instructive all the same to compare it with the Peace Conference drawing (No. 809) scribbled in pen and water-colour on note-paper. This sketch shows that the fundamental mistake of the larger composition is the failure to coincide Lloyd George's head with the circular clock above it, and thereby not only to unite the row of statesmen to the rest of the picture (as it is they seem a mere accretion) but also to attract the eye to the lower instead of the upper half of the picture and thereby synchronise the psychological and visual centres of attention. The fault is further at least partially attributable to the lack of co-ordination in the group of statesmen itself, each member of which is seized photographically in a typical moment of arrested action and planted in his place in the row without any sort of reference to his neighbours. The result is a series of first-rate caricatures, extremely interesting if peered at from six inches away, but devoid of any pictorial significance whatever.

The *Café Royal* is in a different category because, though it shows the same over-indulgence of a superlative technique, it is a picture and not, like the other, a mere rectangular piece of painting. Technically, indeed, I doubt if one could find any single English painting one-half so remarkable. Yet even here Orpen just fails to recapture the restraint, the equipoise of the *Play Scene*; always the painting outstrips the composition. The triangular echoing of the green glasses and drinks, for example, would be a completely satisfactory unifying factor in a picture in which technical limitation supported an innate, or even imposed an unnatural, power of selection. As it is, their effect is lost in the even mass of exuberant, over-emphatic detail:

This is also the failing, I think, of the still-lives and cabinet portraits shown. The *Mirror* (No. 34) of 1900 and *China and Japan: Reflections* (No. 36) both contain patches of miraculously beautiful painting, but the fault of each is that the interrelation between the objects depicted is never sufficiently de-

REVIEWS

fined. In each we find a sense of colour contrasts, but not of colour relations. Every object is complete in itself and therefore, like the globe in *Miss A. M. G. Harmsworth* (No. 30), a discordant, isolated element in the whole. Though far less well painted, the later *My Work Room, Cassel* (No. 62), done on panel, not canvas, represents a more serious attempt to combine the accurate representation on which all Orpen's work is based with real cohesion of design.

A somewhat similar comparison may be made between *The Girl at the Window Seat* (No. 8) and *The Window Seat* (No. 132), or between the interior portraits, *J. H. FitzHenry, Esq.* (No. 2) and the extraordinarily brilliant *Sir Arthur Birch* (No. 127). In the former pair Orpen is primarily concerned with the question of the spatial relations between the girl in blue and the window out of which she is looking, and comparison between the two pictures attests the success with which the looseness and disproportion of the first is rectified in the second. The first of the latter pair, with its stiff, lifeless figure, its confusion of theatrical properties, its muddy colour almost unique in Orpen's work, unequivocally recalls Sir Francis Grant. The other is from every point of view, I think, the best portrait in the exhibition. Not only are the pink walls, the desk and papers painted with very great skill, the lighting admirably contrived, but each of these qualities assists to draw the attention towards and not away from the central figure. Here entirely through meticulous composition Orpen achieves real psychological contact with his subject.

If the FitzHenry portrait is like Grant, the much praised *Fracture* (No. 12) is visually sublimated Wilkie, a clever and entirely demoded relic, even in the year it was painted, 1901, of the epoch when what was illustrational alone was art. Its heavy shadows connect it with the *Nude* (No. 76) painted five years later. Equally experimental, but of more durable quality, are the two semi-impressionist pictures, the very beautiful *Sunlight* (No. 149) and *The Studio* (No. 151), hung rather unfortunately on either side of the *Homage to Manet* (No. 150). To turn to these after looking at *The Fracture* indelibly impresses on one the enormous range of Orpen's palette and the enormous variety of the influences which guided it.

The *Sir Arthur Birch* has been instanced as one of the few examples in Orpen's portraiture of the successful subordination of the painter to the artist. Though the exhibition gives unexpected evidence of the high standard reached by a large percentage of Orpen's output, I cannot myself feel that he was a great portrait painter as we apply the term, say, to Reynolds. Often superior to Raeburn, equal at times to Romney, yes, but

BLACKFRIARS

it is rare to find in his work as a portrait-painter the sympathy with and character interest in his subject which the great portraitist, as opposed to a man like Pisanello to whom a portrait is as abstract a design as a religious picture, must have. Orpen's interest is generally in his subject's clothes and not his personality. If you doubt this, look at the *Sir Charles Villiers Stanford* (No. 124) or the *Portrait of a Surgeon* (No. 83)—note the emptiness of the gloves—and think of some of his titles, *The Red Scarf* (No. 27), *The Blue Hat* (No. 17), they provide a kind of clue to the way Orpen's mind worked, in contrast at all events to Reynolds'. These pictures exist only as so many solutions to problems arising from the rendering of texture. They are the work of a virtuoso who gets his applause by rushing about over the surface of his music with little real musicianship. As such their psychological and consequently their pictorial value is nil.

But Orpen the portrait painter is not only negatively not sympathetic—for that his facility sufficiently accounts—but often definitely unsympathetic, cynical almost, as the astonishingly clever *Mrs. Arthur Henriques* (No. 21)—*tempus edax rerum*—the self-portraits (Nos. 35, 51, 71, 77) and particularly the series of war pictures suggest. The best of them is the group of angular silhouettes, *Bombing : Night* (No. 73), lent by the Imperial War Museum, where simply by virtue of the intrinsic drama of the composition Orpen attains the *pazzia bestialissima* that eludes his austere objective, slightly supercilious comment elsewhere.

It would be absurd, however, to pretend that the repellent cynicism of the war painter permeates any large proportion of his portraiture. At his best, in portraiture (Nos. 32, 37, 91, 117) as in the other branches of painting in which he experimented, he produced some very remarkable work, and it is because of his to us horribly unsparing approach, and not, I think, in spite of it, that posterity when it looks back on the first two decades of this century will see them probably through Orpen's eyes. To-day, if we find him just a little obvious and therefore just a little superficial, we can say nothing more than that he would have been a much better painter, an artist even, had he painted consistently less well.

I have suggested that it is the extraordinary elasticity of his technique that makes Orpen's imitations of Rembrandt palatable. Much the same might be said of the exhibition of etchings by Mr. Augustus John held during January at the Leicester Galleries. With one exception, that of the magnificent self-portrait (No. 60), all are listed in Mr. Campbell Dodg-

REVIEWS

son's catalogue raisonné, and their main interest, therefore, was the contrast they afforded with the forty-three etchings by M. Dunoyer de Ségonzac which succeeded them in the following month. The contrast was not so much technical—the technique of both artists is, as we know already, supremely efficient—but one of perception, of the way in which Mr. John's often over-emphatic statement and M. de Ségonzac's often over-suggestive impressionism both adapt themselves to so rigid a medium. Mr. John is at his best when he is least imaginative, in the portraits of Epstein (Nos. 11 and 12), Yeats (Nos. 25 and 27), Benjamin Waugh (No. 34) and the second self-portrait (No. 46) for instance, while M. de Ségonzac is distinguished by his faculty for imparting to landscape a peculiar imaginative freshness—*Le Verger* (No. 2), *Le Pont St. Louis* (No. 8), *Les Joncs dans le Barrage* (No. 30) are examples of it—which when he approaches Mr. John's more precise preserves (Nos. 40 and 43) is apt to become a little commonplace. His *Fernande* (No. 31) is exquisitely sensitive and is indeed typical of an exhibition which well repays a visit, the more so that it adjoins the annual exhibition of the Seven and Five Group, which, together with the most interesting collection of paintings and sculpture at the Redfern Galleries, must be reserved for discussion until next month.

JOHN POPE-HENNESSY.

MUSIC

IN the past few weeks we have been treated to a wonderful succession of concerts at which every conceivable type of music has been performed. Certain of these performances stand out even above the general high level of all the rest. Paderewski's recital at the Albert Hall in the middle of January must certainly be counted amongst the greatest of these events. On that night musical London was shown just what can be done with the piano by one who is its absolute master. Here was no ardent striving to reach the heart of music through the barriers of technique, but the generous gift of full-throated waves of melody untroubled by the difficulties of its production. There are some who deplore Paderewski's almost ruthless brilliance of tone, but no one can deny its stirring effect on the senses.

Another notable occasion was the concert given by the B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra on the first day of February. On this night the new Vaughan Williams Piano Concerto received its first performance. It is sad to have to record that, nothing that the brilliance of the orchestra or the pluck of Miss Harriet Cohen could do, was able to save this work from ponderously percussive mediocrity. The disappointment caused by this item