Mountains from a Painter's Point of View.

By ALFRED EAST, A.R.A., V.R.B.A., R.E.

(Read before the Alpine Club, May 7, 1907.)

A PAPER dealing with 'Mountains from a Painter's Point of View' may perhaps be regarded as an innovation in this Club. Alas! as an artist member, I have no thrilling adventures to relate, no physical feats to rouse your admiration, nor am I concerned with the geological structure or the topographical details of mountainous regions; no, I must content myself with falling back upon their æsthetic aspect, and such qualities as are not usually dealt with in papers chiefly concerned with the technicalities of climbing.

The difficulties of mountaineering lend themselves to dramatic description, and readily fire the imagination, but the painter's difficulties are of another order; they often lie too deep for words, they are of so personal a nature that they elude description and can only be understood by brothers of the brush. But just as in scaling great heights one needs physical courage and a clear head and calm judgment, so in the realm of painting one requires strong moral and mental courage to put down the emotions which the mighty forms and forces of nature inspire.

We artists, I am afraid, hold what is to this Club a heterodox opinion, that mountains are better seen from afar, that 'distance lends enchantment to the view;' and I am sure no member will disagree with me when I say that they possess qualities disassociated from physical exertion, which stimulate the mental capacities of man and find expression in poetry and music. Without depreciating in the least the part they have played in the art of painting, I venture to think that the arts of literature and music have received greater stimulus, and have gathered fuller inspiration from them, than the art of painting.

When one sees mountains for the first time in one's life (and who does not envy the man who has yet to see them?) they seem so unrealisable, so surprising in their magnitude, so gigantic in their proportions, that one feels that one's whole view and conception of the universe must be readjusted; the sudden widening of one's horizon seems to throw one's whole preconceived notion of the earth out of all perspective. And apart from the effect of their immensity, we are overawed by the sense of their majesty and mystery, we are conscious of that 'sense sublime of something far more deeply

Digitized by Google

interfused,' and we feel we must make some effort to express their effect upon us. It is this craving to express the truth that is in him which impels the painter again and again to attempt the impossible, and lures him on to sacrifice himself on the rocks of his self-esteem.

There is a proverb which says 'we cannot paint the lily,' yet if you go to any current exhibition of pictures you will find many attempting it; and how many a tourist with an eye for colour, and a light-heartedness born of blissful ignorance, will sit down gaily with a sketch block before him, ready to drag down the eternal giants to the dimensions of his little sketch!

Well, gentlemen, I am speaking to you as a painter, and as one who knows full well the difficult passes, the steep and perilous ascents, and the fearful humiliation of defeat, just as you mountaineers know them, in their physical aspect, and I know what awaits the man who attempts to realise the stupendous grandeur of nature with paint. When a sketcher approaches the question of mountain painting, it may be he has never carefully considered whether the subject comes within his power of expression at all; whether it is ever possible in his Art to suggest the dignity and solemnity of the scene before him. He is so impressed by the view that he feels he must make a record of it, and he forthwith gets a sheet of paper and endeavours within the limits of its area to paint mountains 14,000 feet high! He fails. Yet he cannot tell why he fails to convey a just idea of the majesty of the scene. It may be he has overlooked the fundamental principle of relation. We see certain objects, and we can only ascertain their actual size by comparison with other known objects. We see a picture of a mountain standing alone, there is nothing to indicate its height, and it is only by comparison that we are able to get any idea of its real dimensions. You would get a truer sense of the height of Mont Blanc by painting it just as a little bulge of white as it appears to you in the extreme distance, than if you filled the whole area of your canvas with its form, because at that distance you are better able to judge of its height in relation with other peaks, and, besides, something is left to your imagination; it is by suggestion, rather than by an attempt to realise the actual fact, that the artist is able to convey any idea of the majesty of these mountain heights.

It must be a solace to all who try to paint mountains to know that in looking back upon the whole range of classic painting you have never known a painter succeed in painting

Digitized by Google

a mountain *qua* mountain—to give the same qualities as literature can express—its dignity, its solemnity, and its grandeur. I would like you to consider that point carefully. It is much better to make your sketch and add your notes rather than attempt those peculiar qualities which are almost if not quite impossible to describe by paint.

I am reminded of Fuji-Yama, the sacred mountain of Japan, round which have gathered the song and story of a thousand years. It is some seventeen years ago now since I first made the acquaintance of that wonderful peak. I was on my way to My-anoshita when through the clouds which drifted across the face of the blue I saw a piece of glistening white, stationary amid the movement of the vapour. It was so high, so remote, so far beyond the earth; for all below was curtained off by the warm grey of the lower clouds, which completely isolated it from the intermediate hills. This perfect cone of gleaming snow gave me such an impression of dignity and grandeur as I shall never forget. It realised all that I had heard and read of it. But one clear morning, having settled down to work in the domain of his kingdom, I looked to the sky expecting to see the 'incomparable one,' as the Japanese call it; but I saw, low down, a peak of snow depressed as by some great convulsion of nature to a very ordinary object. All its majesty seemed to have vanished, and no longer was I stirred by the feelings of admiration such as I had experienced when I first saw the solitary peak amid the sunlit clouds. Before me rose the mountain, the same yet not the same, for it was stripped of its regal garments, its vestments of state and majesty; and all the glory of its colouring and the accessories which had given it such dignity and authority had disappeared. And so it is with Art and Life. It is not the actual fact which is so significant to the poet or the painter, but rather the glamour which his own personal feeling casts about it, the associations so linked with his individual experience. The expression of the actual cannot convey the emotions which we associate with that actuality. The grandeur of a scene, the associations which are gathered round it, frequently form its chief interest; and the predominant qualities of mountains—their size, their majesty, their mystery—are qualities which the painter and the poet always associate with them. They are the legitimate habiliments by which he clothes them, and without which they would be poor indeed. The fact that a certain peak is some 20,000 feet has no special interest for him; he would not trouble to dispute any such statement,

Digitized by Google

nor does he care whether or no he can ascend it. No; all he is concerned with is the predominance of such qualities as I have mentioned, and which arouse within him emotions which he endeavours to convey in his own fashion.

Most of you have seen Mont Blanc at the foot of the St. Bernard Pass at Pré-St.-Didier. Here the noble mountain is apparently raised in height by the foreground of foliage. On the day I saw it, it did not depend on the garment of clouds but by the comparison of nearer objects; for between the noble trees and in the intersection of intermediate hills I saw the white peak hard against the blue, small in quantity—a mere bit of white in comparison with other objects of the landscape. But it was the life and soul of the scene; all objects, although so fine, seemed as mere accessories to it. It was the vitalising point of the composition, the artistic *raison d'être* of their existence. Here it was possible to paint it and to convey some idea of its authority.

You have probably travelled over the plains of Lombardy when the long strips of warm tones of spring green are interspersed with newly ploughed land or manured earth, and through the flowering almond-trees caught sight of the distant Alps; you may have noted their subtle colour through the interstices of the blossoms of such exquisite quality that no painter could do it justice. They did not seem to be less wonderful nor lose their sense of grandeur because they were seen from a distance, yet had you photographed them, the camera would certainly have diminished their grandeur and exalted the manure in the foreground. The painter, having a free hand, would not have done so, even though he could not fully convey to your mind just the sensation you might have received from nature. He may have given you a truer impression than the camera could convey, even though he was not able in common pigment to touch that exquisite colour-chord of the juxtaposition of the distant mountains with the blossoms.

As I have already said, 'the predominant sensations' aroused by mountains are the real facts to be recorded: there is an instinct in human nature to express either by writing, painting, or in music everything that makes a strong impression on the mind. And we do not always stay to consider if the subject is possible to illustrate by any of these mediums, but we rush at it with an uncontrollable enthusiasm, often to discover later, in the bitterness of defeat, that we have taken the wrong medium to express the particular object we had in view. There is no excuse for the

Digitized by Google

littérateur or the painter if he select the wrong material to express the beauties of nature. If the artist wishes to paint mountains, he must, like Turner, have sufficient faith—that is, they must be subservient to his will—if by their alteration he obtains some of their greater qualities. You will see how unfaithful the artist may have been to the actual facts if you compare his picture with nature; you may see that the mountains in his picture appear as mere accessories, yet you cannot dispute the success of his treatment, even if you dispute his authority to transpose nature to suit his purpose. You may call him a sublime liar, yet if his method conveys to you a truer idea of the scene than the photograph you may be inclined to withdraw that drastic assertion. Turner in no instance painted mountains as mountains, but rather the setting of them, the associations of forms and effects, and the countless accompaniments which he used to further the end he had in view—the qualities which are never to be demonstrated by mere feet or fact.

I remember painting in 'the hills of the Sun's brightness,' as the Japanese call them, so beautiful indeed they are that it is said that 'he who has not seen Nikko must not use the word "beautiful."' Two Japanese artists were painting the same subject. The pictures were all alike in the sense that they represented the hills, but the treatment was very different, because I as a European had expressed one quality, and they as Orientals had expressed another. How interesting is this difference of treatment resulting from difference of birth, education, environment, and ideals!

I fear that to-day there is too much of the literary feeling in our painting, and I am not so sure, on the other hand, that the *littérateur* does not trespass too much on the artist's domain. We must never lose sight of the fact that the art of painting has a sphere of its own, a particular sphere, not necessarily inferior to literature or music but different. We do not want in music the imitation of natural sounds such as the thunderstorm, for the real storm is much more impressive; but there are beauties in nature which seem to call for the interpretation of music, and such as these are its true *métier*. And it is so with literature; what is suitable to the literary theme may not be adaptable to the painter. Each art has different qualities to express. For instance, the beauty of progression can be best expressed in writing. The charm of the changing light, the progress of the dawn to daylight, or the beautiful suggestion of the progress of life with its innumerable incidents: all these are for the pen

Digitized by Google

rather than for the brush. The artist must be content to take one particular moment in the progression. It is in the painter's power, however, to give you an emotion which the poet cannot convey by words; he can give you the actual pomp and circumstance of the conjunction of form and colour, which will suggest to your mind ideas impossible to be obtained from words alone.

The association of mountains with literature is far greater than with painting. A written description goes farther than a painting in giving us a clear conception of those qualities which we always associate with such a subject. Who can ever forget Olympus, the home of the gods; or 'the last peaks of the world beyond all seas' whereon the old Greek poets staged their immortal dramas; or who can think of Dante without calling to mind the way he piled up his mighty rocks and mountains; or who can forget the beauty of Sir Walter Scott's 'Sentinels to enchanted land'? All of us are familiar with those lines of Shakespeare in that sonnet where he says:

> 'Full many a glorious morning have I seen
> Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,
> Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
> Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy.'

Note Shakespeare says, 'Flatter the mountain tops.' Why flatter the noblest and most sublime things on earth, why not salute them as equals? It is evidently to show the sovereignty of the morning that he can *flatter* the mountains with his smile of patronage, and *kiss* the meadows where the children play without loss of dignity.

> 'Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
> Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy.'

Such is the beautiful description of the progress of the morning's light. We can trace it as it first touches the mountain tops, as it rises above them, leaving them in the effulgence of its glory, till from its greater height it kisses the meadows which lay in the shadow of the hills, and at length gilds the pale streams with its heavenly alchemy, and so on till the day is done. This is the beauty of progression which no painter can express. No, he must be satisfied with other subjects wherein the poet cannot venture; but which may yet reveal qualities as great, though of a different character, so that when we attempt to paint mountains we must remember that we are to convey something approaching the sublimity

Digitized by Google

that Shakespeare suggests in his sonnet, though our means are different from his. We must clothe our mountains with all the accessories that will suggest the majesty and dignity with which nature has endowed them. But again I say the painter can never succeed in arousing the emotions which we feel in the presence of these lofty peaks. No man who is susceptible to the beauties of nature can be indifferent to the effect of mountains on the imagination, their all-absorbing sense of things great, their solitude, their solemnity and magnificence, these which the painter cannot adequately express. He can, however, suggest the splendour of the colour along the distant hills, or the mystery of distance when the sunset reveals them against a glowing sky. He may produce pictures of different effects and incidents in the progress of a day amidst the mountains, each good, each conveying some of the charm of nature; but the writer can in one poem express the whole round of the day's events. The painter, however, cannot afford to be less observant of each passing event, he must be ready with his brush to catch just those effects which are possible to reveal the character of his subject and in its best mood. If he assumes either the exactitude of the photograph, or the progressive quality of the changing light from dawn to sunset, he will fail to convey the impressions the thoughtful man enjoys when in their presence. Above all things, if he attempts to paint mountains, let him beware of that fatal materialism that endeavours to imitate their structure. The fact of their material will never give anyone the sense of their dignity and style. Let him be content to treat them as a medium to express grandeur, rather than attempt to realise their actual constitution. The sense of scale can never be obtained by the aggregation of little things, however interesting. Facts such as chalets, trees, &c., do not make up the real qualities we seek for in mountains. The insistence on the exactitude of the details in a scene is not consistent with the greater qualities we look for. A thousand truthful details may yet suggest one great untruth.

The New Edition of Ball's 'Alpine Guide,' 'The Central Alps,' Part I.

WE congratulate Mr. Valentine Richards and his fellow labourers on the appearance of this volume. In *format*, type, and, as far as possible where there are so many different writers concerned, in its general lines, it follows its prede-

Digitized by Google