

HENRI BARBUSSE

MEISSONIER

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Meissonier

INTRODUCTION

ONE day – it was neither in war time nor during manoeuvres – on a July morning, with the sun shining radiantly, a squadron of cuirassiers passed at full gallop across a magnificent field of ripening grain, in the neighbourhood of Poissy, although on every side there were wide reaches of fallow land and pasture.

When this hurricane of horses and men had, like a blazing meteor, devastated and laid low the splendid gold of the crops, two men remained behind, surveying the scene with visible satisfaction and undisguised interest.

One of the two was tall and the other short. The tall man was Colonel Dupressoir, who had directed the manoeuvre. The other, an elderly man, short of leg, and ruddy of complexion, with a long beard, white and silken, and a singularly expressive eye, was the painter, Meissonier. The latter had achieved his object. Thanks to long insistence and the payment of indemnities, he had brought about the passage of cavalry across that field, in order that he might make studies from nature, needed for a painting then in hand, 1807, of how standing grain looks after it has been crushed and trampled by the onrush of a charge.

The whole artist, whose work we are about to study side by side with his life, is summed up in this anecdote. It reveals one of the most typical sides of his temperament, and, consequently, of his talent: a constant and scrupulous endeavour, maintained even at the price of sacrifices that would seem excessive to the layman, to interpret nature precisely as she is. It was this noble ambition – and we shall find other examples of it in the course of an artistic career in which it was the dominant note – that made him say to his pupils, with a conviction that commanded respect: “If I should sketch a horse from memory I should feel that I had been guilty of an insult to nature!”

And it is because he conceived his ideal after this fashion that this unerring painter of so many military types and scenes never attempted to picture skirmishes or battles. It was not that he did not want to, or had not cherished the dream of doing so. But he had never seen a battle; and a battle is a thing that cannot be reconstructed, like a marching column or a detail of camp life. Accordingly he painted none, because he decided, with a certain loftiness, *that he did not really know what a battle was!*

Let us keep this attitude of mind before us, and even underscore it in our memory. For this alone, in a vague way, would suffice to characterize the artist with whom we are concerned; and his whole long, rich, and fruitful career may be summed up as a successful and varied application of one great principle: devout and inflexible respect for reality.

EARLY YEARS

When Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier was born at Lyons in 1815, under the fading light of an Imperial sunset, these were scarcely the ideas that predominated in the national school of French art. Pictorial art, to confine ourselves to that, had, both before and during the First Empire, achieved at most a lumbering and trammelled flight; and the influence of antiquity, so perceptible in the language as well as in the manners and fashions at the close of the Eighteenth Century, served only to confine the inspiration of artists more strictly within the bounds of classic tradition. Roman characters, Roman costumes, Roman virtues, – such was the ideal to which each debutant who did not revolt openly must make surrender! To be sure, the commanding figure of David gave a magnificent prestige to this rather cold and dishearteningly classic programme. But, like all great artists, David was exceptional; and he stands today as the only one who, in an epoch sadly poor in genius, produced a host of living masterpieces, to swell the lists of a school so artificial that it would now be forgotten, save as an echo of his name. It is true that, by way of ransom, he spent much time in painting vast canvases that today hold but a small place in his life work.

On the threshold of the Nineteenth Century, in 1799, Eugène Delacroix was born. It was he who brought a new spirit into French painting and, single-handed, wrought a great revolution.

Such is not destined to be the rôle of Meissonier! His was neither so tragic a struggle, nor so immense a triumph. Unlike Delacroix, he did not restore the Beautiful nor hand down new forms to glory. He succeeded none the less in inscribing his name in modest yet precise characters – that will long remain legible – upon the marble of the temple.

How did the artist get his start? According to the monotonous and mournful formula, “after a hard struggle.” The lives of all beloved and admired artists have this in common with fairy tales: they always begin badly and end happily (unluckily, they sometimes end a long time after the death of the principal hero!).

The father of Meissonier was a dealer in colonial products and chemicals, and kept a drug and provision shop in the Rue des Ecouffes. Beneath the low ceiling of this shop and between walls lined with drawers, bearing strange labels, the childhood of Jean-Louis-Ernest was passed. His mother was a fragile woman. We are told further that she was sensitive to music and that she had learned to paint on porcelain and to make miniatures.

Are we at liberty to attribute to the tender and brief contact of that mother, who died so young, with the life of her child, the origin of his artistic vocation? It is pleasant at least to fancy so and to try to believe it, even though we are told that parents bequeath to their children, not a vocation – a mysterious gift, of unknown origin – but rather a certain number of necessary aptitudes and qualities, which will enable them to profit by the gift, if perchance it falls to them from Heaven.

Yet the fact remains that in the depths of a cupboard, in the house on the Rue des Ecouffes, there lay the paint-box which Mme. Meissonier once used, while taking miniature lessons from the authoritative hands of Mme. Jacottot. As joyously as other children would have appropriated a jar of jam, the boy possessed himself of the magic box, and on that selfsame day entered, with stumbling fingers, upon the laborious mission which was destined to cease only with his life.

He was not a very good student. A report has been preserved of his standing in a school in the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, at Paris, where his later childhood was passed. In this document the proper authorities alleged that the pupil, Ernest Meissonier, showed “too marked a tendency to draw sketches in his copy-books, instead of paying attention to his teachers.”

The said tendency did not fail to awaken anxiety in M. Meissonier, the father. It should be remembered that, for some years previous, the question of painting in France had been taking on a rather bitter tone. The romantic school was entering boldly into the lists, and among its champions were some who distinguished themselves less by their works than by their long beards and the public

challenge they flung at their traditional enemy, the phalanx of David's pupils. And among the latter, it must be owned, the majority made no answer beyond a disdainful silence and some mediocre paintings, – with just one single exception: the admirable, undoubted, impeccable exception of the great Jean-Dominique Ingres.

The press, the art clubs, not to mention the salons, were all more or less divided between the romantics and the classicists, the innovators and the traditionalists, and fanned the flames of a quarrel which, in view of the worth of the two leaders – one of whom spelled genius and the other perfection – was destined to appear without sanction to the eyes of posterity.

But, as may be imagined, these tumultuous polemics were not calculated to reassure a thoroughly pacific bourgeois, already much alarmed to find that he had begotten an artist. And just at this crisis another damnatory report exploded, this time from a master of the eighth form in a school on the Rue de Jouy: "Ernest has a decided talent for drawing. The mere sight of a picture often takes our attention from our serious duties." This diagnosis, so categoric underneath its familiar form and somewhat faulty grammar, sounded a serious cry of alarm. It was promptly heeded by the father, and young Ernest was forthwith entered as a druggist's apprentice, in a house on the Rue des Lombards.

Yet it was not long afterwards, thanks to a dogged persistence, that the lad had overcome paternal opposition and was allowed to do head studies in charcoal, at the studio of a certain Julien Petier, whose slender artistic fame rested solely upon the fact that, once upon a time, he won the *grand prix de Rome*.

Meissonier very shortly quitted this somewhat dull discipline, and he stayed scarcely longer in the studio of Léon Cogniet, which at that time was quite celebrated. Yet during the four months that he remained under the guidance of the worthy author of *The Four Seasons*, it must be admitted that he laboured greatly to the profit of his art.

M. Phillippe Burty, his contemporary and his first biographer, explains to us that, while at Cogniet's, young Meissonier did not work like the other students, from casts or nude models: "He passed his days in an enclosure adjoining the studio, where the master was engaged upon his ceiling painting for the Louvre, the *Expedition into Egypt*, and hired by the day soldiers in republican uniform, dragoons, artillerymen and their horses." In the midst of this resurrection of a past that was still quite recent, in the very presence of the stage setting, the reproduction of the Napoleonic Epic, he suddenly conceived of it as the greatest of all subjects that might tempt his accurate artist fingers. It must have seemed to him, later on, that he himself had witnessed its close.

But while waiting to achieve his dream, he had to achieve a living. This was not easy. His father spared him an allowance of fifteen francs a month, not counting the privilege of dining at home once a week, and from time to time allowed himself to be cajoled into buying a small aquarelle.

Be one's tastes never so modest, it is difficult under such conditions to make both ends meet, and there was many a day of sacrifice and privation for the future painter of canvases destined later to sell at a hundred thousand francs per square decimeter. He shared his poverty light-heartedly with a chosen circle of friends whose fame in after years has made their names familiar: among others Daumier, the caricaturist, and Daubigny, the great landscape painter, with whom, it is told, Meissonier collaborated in manufacturing for the export trade canvases that were generously paid for at five francs a meter!

He was unable to enter the classes of Paul Delaroche, the monthly charge for admission to the studio from which *The Princes in the Tower* had issued reaching the exorbitant sum of twenty francs! He had to content himself with frequenting the Louvre.

Unlooked-for windfall: in company with his friend Trimolet, a needy artist who succumbed to poverty before his real talent had had time to ripen, he obtained an opportunity to decorate fans. Then, some religious figures and emblems of saints for certain publishers in the Rue Saint-Jacques. This meant the assurance of an honest living; they could go to a restaurant twice a day, every day in the week, and proudly pass the paint-shop knowing their account was paid.

When only sixteen years of age, Meissonier exhibited for the first time. As a matter of fact his name appears in the Salon catalogue of 1834, accredited with *A Visit to the Burgomaster*. In this picture one may find, I will not say *in miniature* (since all his paintings were destined to be contained in narrow limits) but in a youthful way, an indication of those qualities of relief and of realism which so energetically stamped his productions later on.

Is there any need of saying that the public failed to distinguish a work which did not sufficiently distinguish itself?

The first connoisseurs to pay attention to the newcomer were editors, the severe and imposing editors.

Not quite at the start, naturally; and the first instalment of illustrations that he offered to a magazine then famous, the name of which is now forgotten – four little sepia drawings – was curtly rejected. But he refused to be discouraged, and not long afterwards deliberately made his way to the celebrated art-publisher, Curmer. This bold venture went badly at the start. The publisher, rendered distrustful by so youthful and importunate a face, assured the young man and the friend who had introduced him, that “for the time being he had nothing for him.”

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