

REFLECTIONS ON THE ART OF
JOHN ARMSTRONG (OP)

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*John Armstrong by Harry Jonas, c.1922
(National Portrait Gallery)*

IN EARLY FEBRUARY an exhibition of paintings by Mr John Armstrong was held at the Leicester Galleries. The genius of the artist was such that this review was felt to be imperative. This is its sole *raison d'être*.

The first impression which one receives is that in these pictures two opposed and, as it appeared, mutually hostile aims are reconciled and fused into one great purpose. The first is that of the Old Masters – of Giotto and Michelangelo and the Van Eycks – to

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create in terms of positive values, to emphasise the unity and the simplicity of the Divine Idea, to add something to God's world; the second is that of both Science and Art in the modern world – to disintegrate the whole into its component parts, and to analyse these parts for their own sake, for the interest which they possess not in relation to each other, or to the macrocosm, but as individual, self-contained in an intense and heroic attempt to regain the whole through the parts, a crusade to recover the full original unity through a co-ordination of the diversities, to see God's world as again simple and integrated by looking at it not from a loftiness without it, but from the centre within it. This aim, which he regards as a universal duty incumbent on all mankind, he preaches with the full fervour of a doctrinaire and a prophet; like a prophet he is completely without mercy in exposing and indicting the tendency of our civilisation. In every picture which he has painted he has drawn essentially the same type of humanity: a race of men which is striving to achieve perfection by stripping itself of everything personal, typical, individual; whose megalomania consists in an insane desire to dispense with every apparent superfluity, to destroy everything which does not seem absolutely essential for a material existence. Together with sentiment it seeks to kill imagination, together with weariness and disorderliness to suppress intimacy, beauty and love; and all this because a mortifying of the spirit will bring a purer and greater material strength – a kind of inverted asceticism which aims at robot-like power and efficiency.

This attitude is embodied with remarkable boldness and ruthlessness in 'King Solomon'. We have always conceived Solomon as a master of wisdom, and a slave to Love and Beauty. But in Armstrong's painting everything has yielded to the craving for absolute strength: wisdom is gone, and Love and Beauty are chained because they are elements which hamper and retard the progress to absolute strength. These beings are spiritually so poor and naked that they must convert the whole world, including their own souls, into something concrete and tangible, because only so can they understand it and subdue it; so afraid are they of enclosed spaces, because in them there may be hiding something intimate, and immaterial, and imponderable in material values, and their whole lives are, as it were, passed in the open streets. Like the hero of Chamisso's story, they wish to lose their shadow, which,

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because peculiar to themselves, is unique and therefore mysterious and unanalysable; to rake out of themselves every scrap of inward life and colour and feeling, so that under the cold, dry light of the open thoroughfare they may appear hard and transparent and perfect in their strength.

Portraits are dumb, but if these could articulate, they would speak thus: 'It is no matter of yours what we feel, or what our ideals are, or whether we possess or ever possessed ideals, or that we are God's creatures; we have destroyed our shadows, our illusions, and expect the same from you; we hold nothing sacred except the Law of Barter. We are here; we do what you want us to do; we demand our payment, and that ends the matter. Beyond that there is nothing.'

This is the lowest depth of sordid spiritual suicide, a bolder, more cold-blooded prostitution of positive human values, of the *sacra* of mankind, than ever Faust dreamed of. Their tragedy is that they failed in their aim. They crippled themselves in the quest of strength. For the spirit neither surrendered nor died. They tortured it, and crushed it down, and still it lives. It is here that Armstrong's genius shows itself: he never lets us forget that the struggle is, in fact, vain, that the 'deiform spark' cannot be quenched, and that to fight against it is to fight a losing battle.

Here his message is strong and clear: he has reached the Positive by a long journey through every phase of the Negative; he concentrated on the parts, and through them saw the whole. It has been given to few to come out of the adventure unscathed; among the modern writers, Shakespeare and Cervantes and Rabelais and Rolland, among the sculptors Michelangelo and Rodin, among the musicians Beethoven alone has done so. As in them, so in Armstrong the result was a great widening and deepening of their love of humanity, a sympathy with all living creatures which caused that which they created as contemporary and particular to pass into the general life of humanity as absolute and general, and finally a clearer and fierier vision of their goal. It is surely right to compare this painter to these giants, and especially to Shakespeare. Both were possessed by the insatiable craving to see all that could be seen, in all its details; both possessed the sublime audacity of shrinking from nothing, and an inward force which did not suffer them to linger and admire any detail, however pleasing, until they had seen all; in both awoke an endless love and devotion for that

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undying element which nothing could expel from human life, and which has always saved humanity from its own purblindness. And he who can articulate and make explicit what may be implicit in the minds of other men and women, as Mr Armstrong has done it, is a great artist and a rare genius. If we have made this last fact clear, we shall have fulfilled the sole purpose of this brief attempt at an interpretation.

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