

AARON ESHLEMAN

Towards the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth, painted, in England, Reynolds, Romney, Lawrence. After them, in America, painted Gilbert Stuart. After Gilbert Stuart painted Eichholtz; after Eichholtz painted Bannade; after Bannade painted Aaron Eshleman. These men, our local portrait painters, from Eichholtz on, could no more get away from the influence of Gilbert Stuart than can those so-called ones now, in our own time, rise above that of John Sargent—Sargent who now holds in the world of painting that place which was once Stuart's.

If it can be said of a great modern, short story writer, "He was the first to make vulgarity art," then we can surely say in speaking of Stuart: "He was the first to raise confectionaries into the realm of talented painting."

All of Stuart's followers, from Eichholtz to Eshleman, have copied his surfaces and his cloying sweetnesses, missing the greater things which make his art, at times, more or less real. This, of course—this copying of the lesser traits of the great—happens in all ages. See how the disciples of Sargent can imitate his technique. The copied brown tone does not make a Rembrandt any more than the copied violet shadow and pale orange high-light does a Monet. The genius of the great is always securely hidden from the imitator, behind its obvious characteristics.

The so-called artist (or band of artists), who follows through his career some other man's work and gives it nothing of himself should, if he has the courage, after realizing his state, become an artisan, or an idler. He does for art far more by laying aside his tools than he will ever do for it in the imitation of others.

Imitation not only spoils the general appreciation of the best in art, but, in the end, does away with the real personality of the imitator, and the losing of personality, whatever that personality may be—spiritual, material, morbid, sensual, aesthetic, means the end of personal creation, the only thing which, after all, counts in music, literature, sculpture, or painting.

Stuart was one of the smaller of the "little masters." His followers, those we are considering, with the probable exception of Eicholtz, were not artists, for the word artist, when applied to those who have painted, should call up in our minds the names Monet, Goya, and our own Americans—John Twachtman and George Luke, at least.

And now, after what we can hardly call a preface, for Aaron Eshleman.

The material for either a biographical sketch of Eshleman, or a critical one of his art, is small. Few canvases by him remain, probably he did not paint many. Few known happenings in his life can now be gathered, but these events, slight and confused as they are, suggest, when compared to the paintings, that he gave most of his energies to life rather than to his art. Slightness of real material, however, in writing a biography or art criticism should not discourage. Biography being usually written by those obsessed in favor for or in ridicule of the subject disregards real facts. Great art criticism can use as

easily an Eshleman canvas as a Phidias marble for its *raison d'être*—in this it is only the personal view of which counts. A paradox, perhaps. But, remember, my material is small, and mere size or length in a work of painting or literature has a subtle, but sure, effect. Notice sometime when passing through the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art the crowd before "The Horse Fair" by Rosa Bonheur, and tht in front of Monet's "Boy With the Sword." My aim is to please!

Eshleman's early life was spent in Lancaster. His father was proprietor of "The Fountain Inn." Aaron was born in the year 1827, and, after his remaining canvases, one landscape learned of his early life—he kept an inn of his own, called "The Cross Keys." His wife's name was Sarah Demuth. These few facts and three remaininv canvases, one landscape and two portraits, are all the authentic material at hand.

Facts concerning people are rarely as interesting to us as gossip; because gossip, being more or less personal, must always be related to romance, and hence, in capable hands, sometimes rises into the sphere of art.

After Aaron had an inn of his own and a wife, it is said, he grew dissatisfied. Although before having these he thought that if he could only possess them, and also paint, happiness would be assured. To possess this or that, money, love, fame, and then write, paint or play, has been the dream of many—of all, perhaps. One must grow old, or have faith in the great one in art, before he can believe that the only happiness for the artist is in art; in these fierce, almost exalted, moments of creation, when he can say

to himself, "It is well," lies his only happiness.

Eshleman, judging from his canvases, knew no fiery moments of creation. His lack of ability to paint, or lack of success in the business of the inn, or even the more personal troubles, caused him to dabble into many experiences, experiences in which he either sought mental relief or the hope of finding himself.

About 1857 he went to Kentucky—if there was a Kentucky in 1857. However, he left his wife and two children in Lancaster. In this act he can claim kinship with many artists and some geniuses. If one have great imagination and can forget his canvases they can hear him talking to Shakespeare (a genius, G. B. Shaw, notwithstanding), or Wagner, let us say, on the subject of "The Influence of Domestic Felicity Over Personal Art."

His wife, after receiving news from him of his whereabouts, decided to follow him to the South. Aaron on her arrival had completely disappeared; completely and finally. Nothing was ever heard of him after this. There is a vague rumor among the people who still remember Aaron Eshleman that he was drowned in the Mississippi river. A rather exciting life, when one thinks of it, if only he had allowed some of this excitement to get into his paintings.

These few facts and stray tales, one hopelessly intertwined with the other, are all that can be gathered. Of his art (you will see it for yourselves in the coming exhibition) I will not write.

If I have in any way reached for the laurels of Boswell in this paper, it shall not be said that I've even glanced at those of the inimitable, both in style and aesthetic criticism, Walter Pater!

Author: Demuth, C. B.

Title: Aaron Eshleman / by C. B. Demuth.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Eshleman, Aaron, 1827-
Artists--Pennsylvania--Lancaster County.
Lancaster County (Pa.)--Biography.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society, 1912

Description: 247-250 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 16,
no. 8

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.16

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

=====

+++++

Institution Name

Institution Address

Institution Phone Number

Institution E-mail Address