

COLOUR AND THE MOGHULS

Reflections in an Indian Museum.

IN the lucky month of March the garden which environs Bombay's principal Museum puts on its holiday clothes to welcome the curious stranger. As the visitor enters the gate and proceeds along the path, he will pass by brilliant beds of petunia, a medley of scarlet and purple, and will see across the palm-sprinkled garden, even brighter glimpses of phlox, pinks, and clarkia, enacting their drama of colour in the hot sunshine. After this the grey museum in the Bijapur style of architecture must seem less grey and the entrance hall with the white western statues less pallid.

The colours of the garden linger in the visitor's recollection until he has reached his objective, the Indian picture gallery upstairs. And here his eyes will meet the appeal of the paintings, and the sub-conscious transition between the Indian flowers in the garden and these beautiful Indian pictures in the galleries is natural. Outside the Museum, he knows, the flowers are breathing their eternally fragrant message; inside the building he is ravished by the colourful work of artists who hundreds of years ago studied that message to some purpose.

Shakespeare tells us that it is the duty of the actor to hold the mirror up to Nature, and the Moghuls proclaimed this similar mission of the sister art. The Moghul artist was a translator, rather than an innovator and converted the works of Nature into the 'lingua franca' of pictures. So does every artist or at least so every artist tries to do. True; but there are radical distinctions between the methods of different translators. The old picture-writing of the Aztecs and of the Egyptians both tell their tale but in different languages.

The visitor to the Prince of Wales Museum of Bombay, whose progress we have traced from the gate to the garden, and thence to the Indian galleries, now begins his promenade of the long corridor between the cabinets of Indian

pictures, and while he does so may well fancy that he is in another garden surrounded by other flowers. As he walks among these pictures he may even sense their perfume !

For what wizardry of all the arts can surpass the magic of colour ? What student of painting, however much he may acclaim the grand intellectual style of the Roman School, does not yield his soul's allegiance to the colour-spell of the Venetians ? Who that is not destitute of the colour sense, does not respond with delight to the colour rhapsodies of a Rubens and (while the spell is on him) snap his fingers at the classic coldness of a Raphael or a Bronzino ? Colour is the child of Art, but it is also the Master's master. It cannot be scientifically controlled by him like Drawing, Form, and Chiaroscuro, but gambols on before the painter's vision, a smiling tormenting elf, luring the artist to pursue vainly and, when he has almost caught it, leaping like a rainbow across impassable morasses, or glittering like the coral from beneath fathomless seas, or, like Sirius sparkling in ever-changing brilliance across the mighty gulf of space.

To the artist who has conquered some of nature's subtle secrets of line we may defer with all respect. To him who has succeeded in plucking a single feather from the plumes of the Colour-Elf we should bend in deepest reverence. The elusive sprite has appeared in many differing aspects to the world's artists. To some it has distinguished itself by its subtlety ; to others by its purity ; and to others again by its forceful brilliance. In the works of a Rembrandt, a Fra Angelico and a Bihzad the profundity of the Dutch Master, the ethereal tenderness of the Italian, the exquisite romance of the Persian are all feathers plucked from the wing of the same angel.

The visitor, whose steps we are unobtrusively following through the galleries of this Indian Museum, may perhaps be reflecting somewhat on these lines, for he pauses in front of one of the Persian pictures,—it may be that which illustrates Firdausi's epic the *Shahnamah*, and depicts in radiant hues the doughty deeds of the great Rustam in the midst of fighting hosts¹. No doubt the Western stranger is trying to "fit" this piece, which is unique to him, into its proper place in his cosmic conceptions of Art. He will not find that easy, however, all at once ; for these delicious blues, reds, and yellows,

(1) Sir Ratan Tata Art Collection.

—the absence of contrasted darks from the background, and the virility and refined strength of the composition are almost as unlike the colour of the old Buddhist painters of the Ajanta Caves¹ as they are unlike the recent exhibition of the Dutch Masters at Burlington House.

Well--more paths than one may lead to Rome, and our visitor will admit to himself, as he at last moves onward, that henceforward his ideas of "Colour" must comprise this lovely discovery of Oriental arabesque and simple patterned shape, as well as all the "effects" of light, playing upon flesh or fabric, or landscape, that he had gleaned in the course of past years in the picture galleries of Europe. He may now, if he will, proceed to trace on the walls of these cabinets the gradual evolution of the Moghul painter's Art, like a rose-bush from a Persian garden transplanted to Indian soil!

In the pictures of Akbar's school² he will perceive the grafting of Indian shoots upon the old Persian stem, and in the later works of Jehangir's time the full blooming of another—this time a really Indian rose. But always as he moves from one picture to the other he sees colour; winsome and winning him with smiles; forceful, commanding him with power; or serious, impressing him by dignity and strength. Gradually he grows to feel that this colour has a peculiar influence in addition to its natural charm for the eye. It generates an atmosphere about him. It can carry him on a flood of blue and silver back into a great era, an age that is lost.

Perhaps he recalls Mathew Arnold's vivid description:--

"And on the other side the Persians form'd;
 "First a light cloud of horse, Tartars they seemed.
 "The Ilyats of Khorassan; and behind
 "The royal troops of Persia, horse and foot,
 "Marshalled battalions bright in burnished steel."

It seems to him that the painted warriors, with their long spears, seated on their richly caparisoned horses, are no longer unfamiliar. The portraits of the stout cheerful-looking Indian monarchs, and princes seem to bestow a regal greeting upon him, one by one. Beautiful ladies bending down the boughs of trees to pluck the *champak*, or dreaming over their flowers and birds, or listening to a tale of love, cease to be merely the illustrations of a Moghul fairy-tale.

(1) Copies lent by Sir Akbar Hydari are exhibited in the Museum.

(2) The Sir Ratan Tata Collection and Sir Akbar Hydari's Loan Collection in the Museum furnish good examples.

Colour has created in him an ardent belief in the past, — even converted the past into a greater and a much more beautiful reality than the present. He feels as though he also had been graciously admitted to look upon great Oriental festivals, an honoured guest on occasions of high state. The stereotyped halls of the Museum are dull no longer, for they are fragrant with musk and the rose petals on which, it seems to him, he is treading. The music of rhythm and colour has enveloped his soul.

The colour-spell of the Moghuls can achieve something which all their marvellous line or brush-work may fail to perform; and when closing-time compels the visitor who has so long interested us, to leave with reluctance these colour-haunted halls, we, his unknown observers, whisper, as we too steal away, that India is the colour-box of the World!

W. E. GLADSTONE SOLOMON.