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CAN WE SEE THE PICTURE IN THE LANDSCAPE?

BY WALDO DENNIS, CHICAGO, ILL.

OFTEN while enjoying a painting I have wondered where lay the secret of transforming commonplace scenes into interesting and beautiful pictures. I have been entranced by paintings of which the scenes themselves, I am sure, would not have stirred my feelings. Coloring did not account for this magical change, thought I, for in both scene and picture they are the same. To say it was the artist's power to idealize, even if true, left the matter no clearer. Because "idealize" stood not for something known, but for something unknown, and thus, instead of clearing up the mystery, it only appeared to.

Lately while looking at a painting in the Art Building at the World's Fair, some light came to me. The painting was beautiful, and yet the scene was commonplace. At once came the question, "Was that landscape really so beautiful to the artist as he has made his picture? Did the artist really see, in the scene before him, the picture he has painted? In short, was the scene a *picture* to him before he painted it?" Thus meditating, I unconsciously tried to see the landscape as he must have seen it, to look at it through his eyes.

Evident at once was the difference between looking at a landscape and the picture of it. A landscape covers several or many square miles. In looking at it, our eyes wander over it, from place to place. To look to the left, a direction to the right has to be turned away from. While regarding the farmyards in the foreground, we see less distinctly the wooded hill of the background. As one part passes into view, another part passes out of it. In fact, every portion of the scene before us must be seen in its own particular direction, and with its own particular focal adjustment. The conditions of distinct vision thus imposed enable us to see one thing well at the cost of seeing all else faintly.

How different is all this in looking at the picture. The many square miles have been reduced to a square yard. The multitude of objects, which to be seen well require the eyes to wander about, and to constantly readjust themselves, have all been brought to the same plane, and can all be seen at one glance. Moreover, while looking at the square yard of picture your attention is not distracted, as in the scene, by a flock of blackbirds suddenly flirting up from among the cattle in the pasture, circling about in a whimsical way, and then as suddenly dropping down again in the same place. The man at the plow does not finally reach the end of his furrow, turn his horses and come back; nor does the wagon on the road move along as it seems to be doing, and compel your gaze to follow it till it passes behind the hill out of sight. All things are caught in an eternal pose, which offers no interruption to your gaze. You see it all at a glance, and you see it always the same, that is, without distracting changes.

In this transfer of a scene to canvas, plainly the beauty of the landscape is concentrated. The variety of color and form scattered through miles of extent is crowded into a glittering square yard. It is like the enchantment wrought for us as children by a fragment of looking glass. The glass reduced the landscape before us to a picture, and thus enabled us to comprehend it; beauty flashed out upon us, where before we had not so much as thought of there being any beauty, and I am persuaded that, in general, only as we have power in some way to picture the scene before us, do we gather its beauty. We may be greatly attached to a familiar scene; this attachment may help us to its beauty; but how much of this we see, depends on our power to picture the scene.

And here our question comes back to us: Did the artist see his picture in the scene from which it was taken before he painted it? But for an experience of my boyhood I should conclude that to see a landscape as a picture were out of the question. When a boy I was somewhat addicted to dreaming with my eyes open. As my reverie engaged consciousness, I was little aware of the scene before me. But as the reverie concluded itself the *scene* began to obtrude itself. In this condition of waking from what was passing within to a consciousness of what was present without, there was an interval, during which I saw the scene before me as a whole, as a picture. Consciousness not yet distracted into making a focal change was passively attentive to a larger and larger field of the retina. The eyes, in their staring fixedness, seemed literally optical instruments through which an inner self was peeping, and stealthily peeping, lest a disturbance should take away the opportunity by destroying the conditions. This experience was like waking from a delightful dream; it always left me feeling like one having visited another world whose beauty was unspeakable. Recalling this experience led me to conclude that the power to see natural scenes as pictures may be acquired. Subsequent trial has proved it to be true.

Of course we cannot escape our visual limitations. As the field of view becomes larger and larger, distinctness of the whole of it suffers. But experience shows this to be no serious obstacle. Our general familiarity with nature enables us to form a clear mental image from an indistinct visual impression. The man we see at his work or the cattle in the pasture need not be seen very distinctly for us to know what they are and what they are doing. In their contribution to the picture this is sufficient.

The enjoyment of standing at will in the midst of a gallery of pictures in nature's own coloring can be understood only by one who can see them. Whoever enjoys nature enough to look for her pictures will find them. And in them, once found, his eyes will be opened to beauty that he knew not of before. Thus to see and feel the unity in the scene before us, seems like seeing with other eyes than the physical, like neglecting external form and getting at the spirit of beauty.