

LOUIS M. EILSHEMIUS: BANKS OF THE HUDSON AT NEWBURGH. OIL. C. 1901. COLLECTION PHILLIPS MEMORIAL GALLERY

THE DUALITY OF EILSHEMIUS

BY DUNCAN PHILLIPS

LOUIS EILSHEMIUS HAS won his accolade at last! Museums have purchased his paintings, visiting foreign authorities on art have recognized him as the authentic genius of a uniquely American style, and now a big book* has been written about him which not only tells his story but settles his account with the world. It does not claim too much for him as some biographers are inclined to do for their heroes, but proposes for him a modest little room of his own among the immortals. All this constitutes earlier recognition and greater fame than ever came to innumerable artists of his calibre who died as they had lived, completely unknown.

The biography of Eilshemius which has just appeared is the work of a writer who has made his name in fiction. His first published story was triple starred in the 1938 collection of the Best Short Stories of that year. Since then William Schack has been a contributor of prose and verse to various magazines and a free lance critic of the arts. His selection of Eilshemius as a subject for his biographical effort was a fortunate one since it gave him a chance to make a psycho-

* *And He Sat Among the Ashes*. By William Schack. American Artists Group. New York, 1939. Price \$3.00.

logical novel out of a true story. It is the tale of a gifted man who was his own worst enemy; a man who had an abnormal craving for celebrity; who would not or could not wait for fame; whose career got off to a bad start because of an almost incredible blindness in the art world of the 'nineties; who, as his failures continued year after year, resorted to frenzied publicizing of his own talents and, finally, to pathological self-glorification. Thus he repelled the very people whose good opinion he needed. Thus "he forestalled by several decades the recognition that would have come inevitably to his unique and charming art in painting." Mr. Schack's book has compassionate candor and presents a complete record of the known facts and the private papers of the ill-fated genius he portrays. *And He Sat Among the Ashes* is precisely the work which was required as a source and reference book for all future research work on Eilshemius. Whatever the rank that is finally given to the artist, this volume should guarantee that there will be no further lack of knowledge and interest in the man. It is to be hoped of course that, in time, the instinctive and inspirational art which was the essential part of him will be estimated on its own intrinsic merits without too much bias or prejudice, according to the personal reactions of future critics. Those of us who cherish his best

paintings, especially the idyllic and romantic landscapes of his early and middle years, but also the passionate reversions to childhood half hidden in the haunted gloom of his last and most afflicted period, have often wished that a big bonfire could be made, and without too much delay, of his cheapest and craziest things. I, for one, would throw the books of puerile verse into the blaze. And while this cleansing and consuming act was being carried out, his well-wishers for posterity would resolve to hear no more, tell no more, laugh no more about all the extravagant claims to supreme greatness. Those excesses of a wounded vanity were clearly symptoms of a sick man who had yearned too constantly for fame and had been driven mad by total obscurity. As symptoms of the "delusions of grandeur" to which he escaped from his humiliating failures they have their value in the study. When he could no longer paint and while the world continued to look away or to sneer at him, those wild boastings and those fantastic titles he conferred upon himself represented his flight into dreamland. All this needed sympathetic and scientific interpretation. Perhaps now that William Schack's narration has told everything, there can be an end to the

notoriety and a more auspicious and soundly based beginning for the rare enjoyments which his unique art and his naïve spirit afford. It makes Mr. Schack's tribute to Louis Eilshemius all the more impressive that he has suppressed nothing in his determination to reveal the whole truth. When, after close contact with the worst, the most mawkish lines he wrote, the most clumsy daubs he painted, when, in spite of all this, the critic ranks his man with Ryder, Homer and Eakins, we can be sure that in the scales of Time his genius at his best will continue to outweigh his grotesque behavior calculated to attract attention. The book is timely. We must be reconciled to it in spite of its compilation of so much we would have preferred to have consigned to oblivion. The record is not irrelevant. It is significant. It carries with it an indictment of man's inhumanity to man. But there is also a warning to artists that they need to acquire an armor of humility and fortitude and that spiritual independence without which the creators of personal whimsy are at the mercy of the most cruel circumstance. If Mr. Schack's book is not only a psychological novel but also a clinical "case history" of progressive mental illness, this is as it had to be. It helps us to understand certain con-



LOUIS M. EILSHEMIUS: LAUREL HILL, ARLINGTON, NEW JERSEY. OIL. 1907. PRIVATE COLLECTION

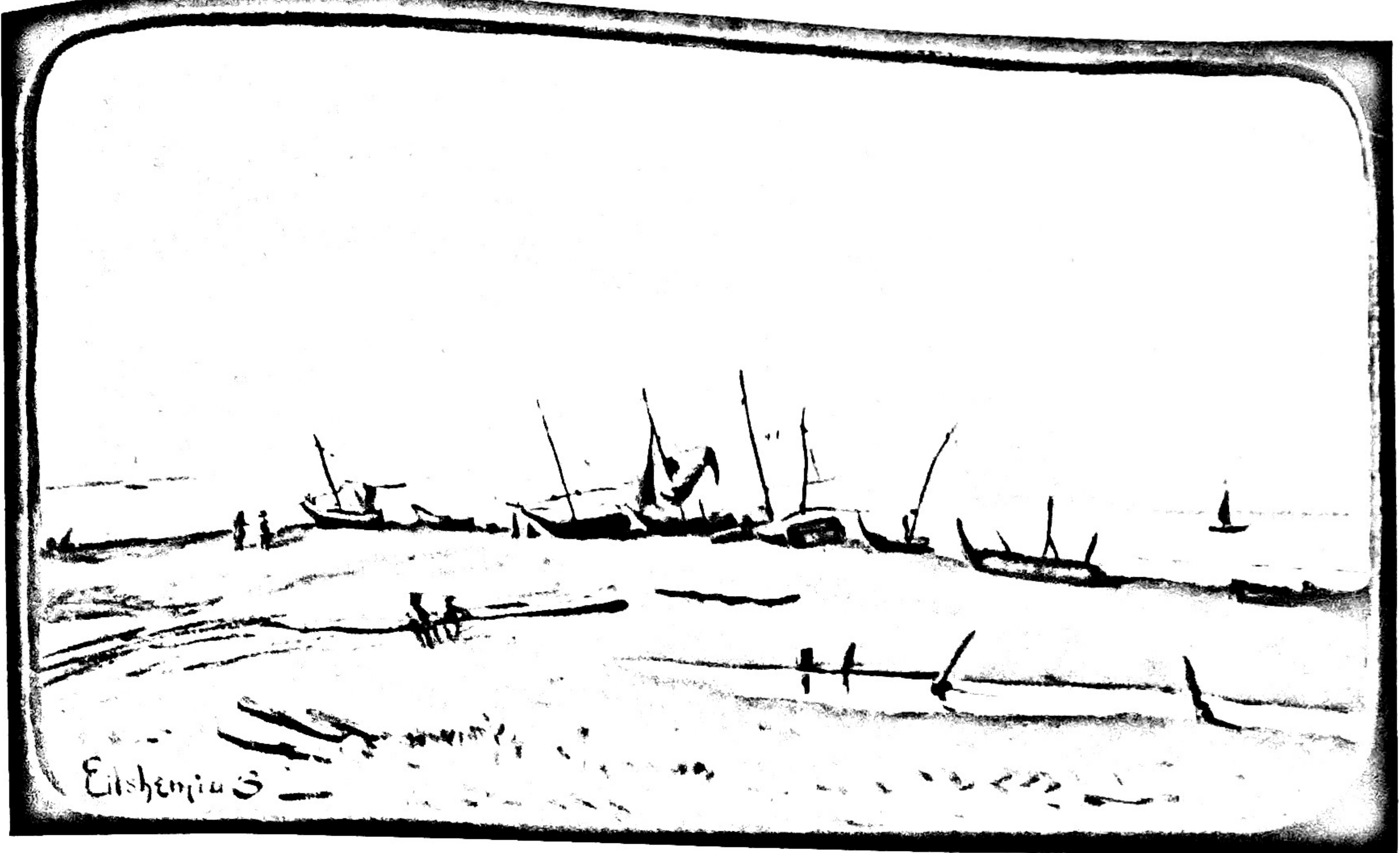
traditions and apparent inconsistencies. We come to know the conspicuous *duality* in both the life and art of Eilshemius. Since his paintings were always as spontaneous as birdsong and since all their felicities of observation, of transcription into a chosen scale of values, of dark accents excellently placed, of linear rhythms and of improvised and descriptive brush strokes were matters of the moment's inspiration, the critic has had less to say about the art of Eilshemius than about his life, his heredity, his environment and his experience. It is far easier to write about the men of plan and purpose, the painters of intellect who change their styles to accord with their latest taste, who develop progressively, accumulating wisdom and growing in power. Eilshemius possessed a very limited endowment, but apparently he had, even in boyhood, an unlimited ambition. He did not try to enrich his talents and to refine his sensibilities. Consequently he deteriorated under the trials of discouragement. He had never really submitted to schooling and discipline, even in his promising youth when his wealthy father, the descendant of Dutch pastors, generously supplied him with the means to travel extensively and to study art in Dresden, New York and Paris. The sheltered egocentric boy confidently dreamed of achieving immediate popularity and acclaim. Although he responded to the immediate influence of the painter Robert C. Minor, he rebelled in art schools against the imposed pattern and was stubbornly an individualist, not so much in subject or in style as in unconscious quaintness, unself-

critical versatility and inexpert nonconformity. Those days before expressionism were intolerant of what were called mistakes in drawing and they noted with disapproval a little evidences here and there that this man was different. They set it down as proof that he was an amateur and a conceited eccentric. Although wanting to stand well with the Academy the young Eilshemius antagonized that august institution as much by his gauche self-assurance as by his originality and whimsical high spirits. The dualities of Eilshemius are to me the outstanding truth about him which Mr. Schack might have stressed with more explicit analysis. For instance, his paintings may be divided into two periods of mature creation; if we can use the word mature for a personality which never really developed much beyond the unripe moods and the emotional values of adolescence. However, there is a marked difference between the pictures of 1895 and 1910, when he traveled alone all over the world (returning frequently to paint his favorite American haunts: the Adirondacks, the Delaware Water Gap, the banks of the Hudson) and those done between that year and 1920 when he laid down his brushes in frustrated anger and exhausted imagination.

The lovely and lovable blonde landscapes of about 1905 with their pearly skies, their thinly and directly painted woodland dells or translucent open spaces, their dark and slender trees, and their tiny little people, usually ladies and children, who might have stepped out of some nursery per-



LOUIS M. EILSHEMIUS: THE QUEEN'S FAMILY, SAMOA. OIL. 1908. COLLECTION STEPHEN C. CLARK, ESQ.



LOUIS M. EILSHEMIUS: MALAGA BEACH. OIL ON BOARD. C. 1915. COLLECTION MR. AND MRS. LLOYD B. WESTCOTT

odical of "the age of innocence," remind us of our own childhood. We recognize the freshness of seeing and feeling which never come again with the same ecstasy as in the years when we were free to play and dream from morning till night. Judging from the photograph on page 7 of Mr. Schack's book, Louis was a winsome little boy when he was eleven. It must have been taken only a short time after the happy days when he romped with his brother Victor on the extensive lawns of their stately home at Laurel Hill Manor. There is a little painting in the Rockefeller Collection of the terraced gardens on different levels and it is full of the tenderest nostalgic revery. Mr. Stephen Clark's *Croquet* is another idyll of the same type, as is also the *Bridge for Fishing* and the little canvas of children playing in the shallow water on the banks of the Hudson near Newburgh. Sometimes the work of this decade was unintentionally humorous as when he depicted in rich pigments a chorus girl in tights. I remember a little gem by the Eilshemius of the 'nineties. A Spanish cavalier serenades his senorita in the moonlight and reminds us curiously of the exotic sensation we experienced on first opening a fragrant box of Havana cigars. Sometimes, on a woodland path or in a city park I come upon little children out of an Eilshemius pastoral. That was a theme which recurred throughout his thirty years of painting. Mr. Schack makes an important point when he says "There were hits and misses in his art rather than periods." Early and late the same subjects were chosen and the same moods returned. The prevailing moods were two. There was the sunlit happy-hearted mood of rural romanticism in which he remembered good times out of doors in familiar places and there was the mood of weird imaginings or of fantastic conceptions out of books—both variations of one state of mind. If anyone thinks

that such subjects were the prerogative of the last tormented years, let him look at the *Don Quixote* of 1895 and the *Demon of the Rocks* of 1901, painted the very year when he voyaged to the South Seas and laid up stores of memories which served him for the finest and most exhilarating work of his career: the *Queen's Family, Samoa* of 1908. The sensational imageries were of course more unendurable in his period of decline, when they were subconscious and more or less pathological, than in the early period of literary and theatrical ventures. But the point was worth making that the man had his alternations of morning dew and blasting storm, his oscillations of playful spirits and bitter passion, so characteristic of the manic-depressive type.

"The latest paintings," writes Mr. Schack, "are torn between two freedoms, the freedom of the artist at ease in his medium and the freedom of the mind no longer responsible to anyone but itself. The first freedom finds expression in a heightened lyrical vein and is the natural outgrowth of his early works." The *Malaga Beach* of 1915 is composed of subtly varied horizontals and diagonals with the dark silhouettes of sloping masts and sails designed across the harmoniously related tones of blue and tan in the sky, pools and sand. It is the finesse of a seasoned artist of high talent, the consummation of the admirable patterns of 1908 when he painted the tranquil, luminous *Kingsbridge*, the beautifully balanced and calligraphic *Cabs for Hire* and the dramatic *Approaching Storm*. Even finer perhaps than the beach scene is the *Haunted House* of 1917 which Leo Stein considered the best picture in the American section of the Metropolitan Museum. But with the "second freedom" it became all too evident that the brooding, irresponsible mind had turned in upon itself and would occasionally vent its rage in sickly yellows and

(Continued on page 724)

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painters and sculptors into a determined effort to resist foreign influence and create a national expression.

So strong is the feeling of being cut loose from Europe that many believe our American Renaissance—long overdue—has arrived. The present exhibition shows one main situation: the impact of European styles upon our artists. We see how some have gone down in the flood; how others have risen to take part in world movements; how still others fought stubbornly for independence. Much is expected of America and much will come forth—particularly if our artists heed the counsel of Thomas Eakins to “peer deeper into the heart of American life . . .”

When Chicago stages its “Century of American Art” in 1988 what a different story it will tell!

For the opportunity to publish the foregoing article by Daniel Catton Rich we are indebted to the generosity of the Art Institute of Chicago. The essay also appears in the catalog of its exhibition, Half a Century of American Art. The show remains on view at the Institute through January 7.—EDITOR.

THE DUALITY OF EILSHEMIUS

(Continued from page 697)

greens and in frantic figures symbolizing his despair. There is nothing wholly new, however, in this morbidity, only the degeneration of an old trend. And even the lurid paintings entitled *Jealousy* and *Found Drowned* are the logical end results of a recurrent, ever darkening mood which first appeared in the *Don Quixote* of 1895. In 1915 the *Rejected Suitor* combines qualities from each of the “two freedoms.” It has a consistent and an apparently deliberate unit of design, reiterated in the ovals of the post Civil War chair backs and picture frames, in the young man’s derby hat, and the stern mother’s bustle. This organized pattern not only saves the picture from unintentional comedy but carries its inspiration into a sombre tonal scale of olive green, grape blue and amber. The picture is like an unchangeably perfect scene in a grim and dismal play by Ibsen. It is perhaps the memory of a deep personal hurt, of a rankling humiliation in that musty room, which might have had a determining influence in converting the once debonair Eilshemius into a thwarted, bitter, antisocial crank.

Curiously enough, it was a painting of that last period of disillusion and disgust, a nude entitled *Supplication*, which was found and hailed with delight by the Cubist Marcel Duchamp in an exhibition of the Independents in 1917. This discovery led to Katherine S. Dreier and two shows at her Société Anonyme, in 1920 and 1924, to Henry McBride and several hearty, generously appreciative articles acknowledging his previous mistake and ranking Eilshemius just below Ryder and above Fuller and Blakelock, to Valentine Dudensing and a series of exhibitions in his popular gallery of fashionable French moderns. As Henry McBride

fully observed as early as 1924, "Expert opinion had to be freed of conventional seeing by many revolutions in taste before it could be expected to feel the genuine, living qualities" in unpremeditated painted poetry which its own generation had despised. The cumulative evidence of a great change culminated in the purchase of many pictures by museums and discriminating private collectors both in America and in Europe. Finally the art historians accepted him as one of our best romantic artists. Shortly after that the old painter was knocked down by an automobile and confined to his chair for the rest of his life. His rescue from oblivion might have occurred in time to give him some pleasure and to cure him of his now incurable habit of scolding the world if only he had sent to the Independents his lovable and skillful early landscapes instead of his barroom nudes and melodramas!

The biographer's often repeated question in his book can be condensed to read, "What on earth was the matter with the Academy juries?" For many years they turned away from their halls of mediocrity those early lyrics of light and color and perfect atmospheric values which are worthy of comparison with George Inness and even with Corot, especially the early Corot. The Academicians had found something *different* and that is always a matter for grave suspicion. Perhaps they did not like the anticipation of modern short cuts to expression in those simple and blonde, but mellow and sweetly old-fashioned pictures. There have been several explanations, none better than that of Henry McBride. Mr. Schack quotes it with only partial satisfaction: "The artist's ideas, feelings and manners were hopelessly American at a time when American artists were struggling to be European. There was nothing fashionable in poor Mr. Eilshemius." His Venus was "faded, dingy and countrified" compared with the Venus of Paris. He had none of the virtuosity of Sargent and Chase, winners of instant success in their generation. His place was with the failures, with Ryder, Fuller and Blakelock, the seers, in their rare moments of exaltation. But Mr. Schack points out that although Blakelock was a tragic failure the solitaires, Ryder and Newman, had a few devoted friends and patrons and they were strong men and needed and expected only a little praise. Eilshemius had no sponsors at all and he was helpless in the world and needed celebrity. His great expectations for himself and his total failure were crushing to a mind debilitated from the outset by self-deception. Sensitive people have told me that they see signs of latent queerness even in the exquisite sunny landscapes of the youthful Eilshemius. I have asked them what these signs might be and they speak of insistently dark accents in the midst of values more accurately observed. Or perhaps, they point out in the middle distance a child that is too diminutive in scale or a curious effect of amateurish drawing and uncouth conception in an otherwise expert and civilized painting. But no, they were only innocent and inconsistent,

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those early pictures. They were never even incipiently insane. Such impish conceits as the *Vaudeville Frolic* were more whimsical than mad and even the earlier *Demon of the Rocks*, which is quite delirious and horrific, is only a child's nightmare. In my opinion the duality of the man was responsible for his many rebuffs by his profession. His baffling unexpectedness and irregularity were more than the academicians could tolerate. His personal quality was too new and various and variable. He was either lazy or crazy or both and this was not to be encouraged. It was not done at the National Academy of Design.

Long ago Forbes Watson summed up the enigma and the essence of the Eilshemius fascination as follows: "The strange intangible spirit of these pictures arises from their combination of reality and the spirit life. . . . His unconscious instinct prompts him when his painting is good. When consciousness comes in, he is lost. He is a mystery. His achievement is as the gods please."

Today he sits in a chair close to his bed with his back to the light. His legs have been crippled by his accident. He cannot go out on the street where only a block away from his door there are two exhibitions of his work in progress at the same time. His dual states of being continue to oscillate. If he has been incoherently abusive he will soon be limp and gentle. There are quiet moments when he is not in ferment, "quiet hours too when he sits still, moving his head a little like a bird on a twig, for no reason at all but to show a sign of life. He has these quiet moments, not only when he is alone, but also when the visitors are familiar. Then he reminisces gently, even voices his resentments gently. He can smile a shadowy smile, brokenly echo his youthful chuckle. Behind the ghost one sees for an instant the high-spirited young man and one feels the tragic justice of his complaint, "Why didn't people come to see me when I was forty?" "But now they do come, mostly dealers to buy his pictures *en bloc* with an eye for their rising values. He lacks money now for his daily needs—now when he is famous—now when his works hang in carved frames on the walls of great museums! He was really rich once and traveled everywhere but that was when the world shunned him and his canvases collected dust in their disrepute. It is little wonder that William Schack thought of Job for his title. To be sure, the Book of Job had a happier ending. But that title for Eilshemius was not bad. "And he sat among the ashes."

In one of the latest paintings by Eilshemius he symbolically depicted himself as adrift, all alone, in a fragile bark rushed along by the fierce currents of wild, rapid waters which swirl around and around an island under a witching moon. It is a symbol of all futility and frustration under the tantalus of beauty and romance. It tells of his endless efforts to land on the island of desire. Today he should not feel that way about his life. For all his heartaches past and present he has painted enough good pictures to make good with pos-

ity. His fame came too late and his happiness never came
all, but let him take some comfort if he can in the thought
at his pictures will give pleasure to generations yet unborn.

HERCULANEUM AND TASTE

(Continued from page 693)

at we come across the offspring of the Herculaneum
tripods. Each one of us has seen their like in places devoid
any artistic pretension: in the bedrooms of little provincial
hotels or of cheap lodgings, in the dormitories of old-fash-
ioned boarding schools, in the dusty cloakroom of some
melancholy public office or barrister's chambers; and one
calls them not by the solemn name of "tripods," because the
thing has entirely degenerated. These are the cast-iron
wash-stands, white enameled with thin blue edges, chipped
and shaky, with a towel-rail supporting a damp and dubi-
ously clean rag, and a minute jug whose contents, poured
into the spiteful basin, inevitably drench the pourer's feet.
This is the last humble and subdued echo of the elegancies
inspired by the discovery of Herculaneum.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ See L. Fröhlich-Bum, *Parmigianino und der Manierismus*, Vienna, 1921, pp. 148, 149, etc.
² See M. Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery*, London, The Warburg Institute, Chapter III.
³ *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, ed. Dalloway and Wornum, III, p. 58.
⁴ Reproduced in *Le Style Empire*, Vol. V, ed. by P. Marmottan, 1930, pl. 19.
⁵ See Julius Lange, *Thorvaldsen's Darstellung des Menschen*, ins Deutsche übertragen von Mathilde Mann, Berlin, Siemens, 1894, p. 116: "Will man eine einzelne Gruppe von antiken Monumenten hervorheben, von der man sagen könnte, dass sie einen besonderen Einfluss auf seine Anschauung von der Antike gehabt hat, so müssten dies wohl die Gemälde aus Pompeji und Herculaneum sein. . . . Die antiken Gemälde boten seinem tieferen Wesen auch Nahrung durch ernste, ja sogar tragische Motive, fassten jedoch alles in einer Stimmung überwiegend idyllischen Friedens und seelenvoll ästhetischer Musse auf. . . . Zum Studium der Durchführung der Form im Einzelnen forderten die flüchtig ausgeführten und dekorativen pompejanischen Gemälde nichts auf."
⁶ See G. Morazzoni, *Le porcellane italiane*, Milan-Rome, 1935, pp. 129 ff., plates 90, 93, 101.
⁷ See E. Dacier, *L'athénienne et son inventeur*, in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, August-September, 1932.
⁸ Reproduced in *Der Wiener Congress*, ed. by E. Leisching, Vienna, 1898, p. 143.
⁹ Reproduced in *Le Style Louis XVI*, by Seymour de Ricci, Stuttgart, Hoffmann, s.a., p. 79.



Headpiece of the description of Plate 5, Volume I, *Antichità di Ercolano*. Drawn by Casanova, engraved by Mangini. Even small details from the royal volumes influenced European taste greatly.



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