TWENTY-FOUR SITTINGS WITH TARBELL

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When the editor of *Bostonia* requested me to write of my experience as a portrait subject for Edmund Charles Tarbell, whose life work, as hinted in a hundred selected paintings and drawings, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts has just set forth in formal exhibition, I should have complied with better courage if I could have counted on a skill with words like his with form and color. Our first acquaintance as sitter and portrayer so went on into friendship that I cannot think of him only as an artist. Suppose the *Jericho Monthly Trumpet* had asked the victim of assault and robbery on the Jerusalem road to write an essay on being cared for by the Good Samaritan; or suppose the Amsterdam Gazette had asked Hendrikje Stoffels for an article on keeping house for Rembrandt. Compared with the actual experience, how slight and shallow each account would have appeared to its writer!

For the portrait, commissioned as a gift to Boston University by the alumni association of the College of Liberal Arts, with Professor Moody committee chairman, Mr. Tarbell, having his own studio at New Castle, New Hampshire, used one of the large rooms in the Hemenway building on Ipswich Street, [Fenway Studios]. The studio conformed to the orthodox Parisian standards in point of floor space, height, gallery with working-room under, and northerly light. It was Dwight Blaney's, No. 308, next but one to the studio of my esteemed teacher of life-class, Ernest L. Major. In fact, not merely as a neighbor but more as a personal friend of Mr. Tarbell, Mr. Major supplied some special draperies for the screen behind the sitter's chair.

The studio faced toward Ipswich Street and the adjoining tracks of the Boston and Albany railroad. Now and again the light in the room would brighten as a switching engine with its sunlit column of steam stopped opposite the tall windows. Perhaps it was this circumstance that reminded Mr. Tarbell of Van Loon's imagined account of the revelation of light-in-space to young Rembrandt, aloft in his father's windmill, where a swinging cage of rats cast a moving shadow and where the dusty atmosphere was alternately glare and gloom as the whirling sails cut the sunlight from the window. Whatever the reason, Mr. Tarbell brought me the book to read at home; and when I returned it, we had pleasant talk of Van Loon's plausible fancies, and Mr. Tarbell illustrated from the reproduced portraits this and that point in Rembrandt's way of painting.

The armchair for my use as a sitter occupied most of a platform eighteen inches high, facing northwest windows. At my right was the easel, not traditionally three-legged, such as Daumier, for instance, painted in his self-portrait, but heavily based, with the canvas held upright on a standard too massive to vibrate.

Close by, at the left, was a small salon-table. On it stood a Chinese jar of porcelain, apparently antique, certainly a worthy museum-piece. At a bargain, if I remember, it had cost $400. It kept me a trifle uneasy, for its irreplaceable charm was quite unguarded against a chance jostle from the main currents in the studio's work and cleaning. Mr. Tarbell did not draw this jar in any of the three portraits that he painted in the studio that winter; his real home, moreover, was not in his temporary apartment in the neighboring Hotel Somerset. So I think he had brought the precious porcelain to Boston and was keeping it in daily sight because he loved the standard-setting beauty of it and because he liked the companionship; in years gone he had searched and painted the jar, as Vermeer had painted his lion head chair, in more than half a dozen carefully studied canvases.

Mr. Blaney's studio had a few decorations of its own, among them an animal's bare skull, large and of a strange shapeliness that first taught me why the ancients had carved such fleshless craniums for architectural ornaments.

The front light admitted was high and rather narrow. Mr. Tarbell regulated the amount according to the shadow penetration by the daylight of the gray or brilliant weather we were chancing to have.

On the largest table top in the studio Mr. Tarbell kept at hand, whether for his own refreshment or to help in the educating of his sitter, half a dozen photographs of portraits that he counted among the best ever painted.—some of Rembrandt's, one of Lawrence's, just for the mouth, and particularly one of Antonio Mancini's portraits of his father. Thanks to Mr. Tarbell's shared liking, how I studied two years later Mancini's original in the Millbank Gallery; and how even the photograph of it moves me with a finer wonder than does the sight of human achievement in a George Washington bridge or a Radio City in the silver light of Manhattan morning.

The sittings were not physically irksome. They brought no such constraint as that of the posed model who must hold a given position and even try to keep his eyes from rolling. My pose was easy, and as Mr. Tarbell

walked back and forth between his view point and his canvas I could follow him with my look. On some days he preferred to work through the forenoon without a conventional rest period. One morning he painted for an hour and a half before mentioning that he was not quite in trim but that the doctor had told him he might undertake the sitting. His mind was always intensely on his work, yet not with visible strain or nervous clinch: he painted steadily as with a quiet confidence in the outcome. Whether at the bidding of a New England conscience or for sheer love of his art, it was his habit to try to make each new painting the best he had yet done. No wonder that I constantly felt, however vaguely, that some real transaction was moving forward in its own aim,—a feeling akin to that of young medical students watching a major operation in their first clinic. This sense of a slowly advancing accomplishment helps to reconcile a busy sitter to separation from his ordinary duties.

If the painting of portraits were like the painting of what the French oddly call *nature morte* and we, as oddly, call still life, the portrait painter would have a simpler task. As it is, he must use all the skill of the still life painter and a higher skill besides; for he must depict the animate, the corporeal with an inner life shining within it as the fire in an opal. The rivals of La Tour, the unsurpassed portrayer in pastels, could paint silk, morocco bindings, and cabriole table legs as well perhaps as he; they could not follow him in making form and color show forth the breath of life. If the portrait of a man is to be more than a kind of open-eyed death-mask, the painter of it must deal with visible face and figure as expressing invisible, power and habit, mood and humor, thought. feeling, and character. Leibl said he painted what he saw, letting the soul appear of itself; he did not add that when a Leibl sees the human form, he sees it not only as a thing among things but as expression of an unseen inner life. Is it strange, then, that every portrait painter detests a drowsy sitter? A sitter dead to his environment is as a dry waterfall or an unlit lamp.

Different artists have different means of keeping sitters' faces alight through interest. One artist employs music; another ekes out his own scanty and preoccupied remarks with a reading aloud by a third person; still another sets up a broad mirror in which the sitter may watch the painter's brush and see the portrait grow. Mr. Tarbell chose the hardest method of making the sitter look awake; he maintained without lapse what he would have termed in some other person real conversation.

How Mr. Tarbell could paint as he painted and meantime converse as he conversed, I cannot explain. A juggler can an nimbly shift his whole attention back and forth between two undertakings that he almost seerns to attend to both at once; the reading knitter can handle the yarn and needles so mechanically that the noting they demand is no more disturbing than the attention we steadily give in keeping our bodily balance; but Mr. Tarbell carried on at one and the same time two kinds of mental action and two of physical with apparently a full measure of attention to each.

I enjoyed those talks, while they were going on. I looked forward to them, one by one, with pleasure. I still renew them with the inner eye and ear, in fresh gratitude. Sometimes, in an entertaining spirit, he would share his sidelighting recollections of notable men whose portraits he had painted, of blunt-spoken Scotch golfers who had taught him, or of billiard players who had given him some better lessons than they themselves knew. He told me, for instance, an apologetic comment by one expert with the cue, chagrined at breaking a run in the seventies: "It ought to ha' went, I drawed it good". He had a liking, not infrequent in New Englanders, for twists of grammar, odd turns of speech, quaint or whimsical words and metaphors. "Blown in the bottle" and "Betting all the tea in China" were among his favorites. He knew too the disappearing terms like "bange" and "to heave". He enjoyed with Lewis Carroll's relish the words of wilful variation, like "spontanewity" and "absotively"; he was adept with comparisons, original or inherited in Groton and older South Boston: "stupid as a Dutch clock", "easy as falling off a house", "dark as the inside of a cow."

Sometimes, in professional vein, he would recount how this or that great painter had advanced his art, beyond the practice of his teachers. Again he would ask me, for instance, whom I considered the greatest modern French painter of landscape, astonish me with his own opinion, quite unlike mine, and then go on gently to tell me how with my own eyes I could prove his opinion right. The hardest questions I asked him (and it did not take a Solomon to make the well worn saying about the easier role in the asking and answering of questions), did not interrupt his searching look, his delicate blendings on the palette or his brush-stroke on the canvas. Only twice, as I recall, did he stop work and answer as if he had nothing else to do; and in each instance he wished to illustrate his answer with a movement or a diagram. I know that if he had itemized a bill for the committee of alumni the second largest item should properly have rend, "To entertainment and instruction of the sitter."

Mr. Tarbell's painting, whatever the subject. indoors or out, inanimate or living, dog, horse or man, seems to me to have had one controlling purpose. He always meant to represent some real thing as he saw it, both at first

glance and after searching study. He never left a difficulty to itself and called the result a “self-expression". One day he said of a certain important edge, “I have drawn in twenty times". Any of the nineteen condemned efforts could have passed as self-expression; but his standard was objective: did the edge of the area look as it appeared in the model?

Of course painting, like speech, has a place for the imaginary, for Saint George’s dragon and Tobias's good angel; we need not forget Dante or Watteau and William Blake. But art that is art has never been the outcome of hit-or-miss action in a vacuum. The painter, it is true, must be more than a living camera; but this is no reason why he should renounce or neglect perception. I think Mr. Tarbell meant to be excelled by no painter in resolve to make his paintings look like the best appearance of the thing painted. While never photographic, he certainly approved Bonnat’s rule: Make the painting as much like the model as possible; then make it still more like.

This first principle of Mr. Tarbell’s practice was well served by the technique he had adopted here in Boston from one of his earliest teachers, Otto Grundman, who himself had been trained in it by Baron Hendrik Leys of Antwerp. In itself this old Netherlandish method, like the Golden Rule, is easier to understand than to carry out. Its main point is merely to give each little area of the painting its own paint, right in hue and value. without further modification from or into adjoining areas. The method is akin to that of the mosaic maker. Half tones are to be painted as half tones, not mixed on the canvas by pulling a dark stroke into a lighter. When each area has been thus independently treated and any needed transitions have been made, not by wiping one color into another but by adding intermediate touches, the picture is finished.

Sometimes, a little loosely, the method is called painting by planes. You see it in its extreme effect in Franz Hals's canvases; he took too little care to join his planes as they are joined in nature; he pushed the “square touch" too far. Mr. Tarbell told me, as he must have told many another in his forty years of teaching, that he tried to paint as Rodin would have painted had he worked with pigment instead of clay. A good painting of a head, Mr. Tarbell thought, would enable a sculptor to discern the planes so clearly that from a study of the painting alone he could model the head in the round.

With such convictions,—that the great painting, however free in choice and arrangement of subject, must be true in its representations and that this truth of appearance is best attained by direct use of opaque colors, area by area, Mr. Tarbell had a natural fellow-feeling with the French impressionists and their followers in this country. Indeed he spoke of himself as having been an impressionist. He esteemed highly some of J. H. Twachtman’s paintings, done in the impressionists' way, but without their sacrifice of substance to the light that reveals it; particularly Twachtman‘s canvas in the Worcester Museum, showing light on sky and cliff and running water in a western river scene; this he counted a better work than the French impressionists's paintings hung on the neighboring walls. His own record of a striking light-effect, "The Venetian Blind", which also hangs in the Worcester Museum, Philip L. Hale called the best of American paintings produced up to its time.

Mr. Tarbell valued with enthusiasm the work of Wilhelm Leibl, the painter of Bavarian peasants, and took some pains to give me a chance to read about him and study reproductions of his best canvases. When the exhibition of German art was held at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1937, Mr. Tarbell thought the three most important paintings were Leibl’s.

For similar reasons Mr. Tarbell, who was always happier when within sight of the sea and of man’s affairs with it, considered Jongkind the best of marine painters, saying that Jongkind painted ships that looked like real ships. “I love it”, said Mr. Tarbell in making sure I knew Jongkind’s Harbor of Honfleur in the New York Metropolitan Museum. That painting, when compared, say, with the dramatized marines of Winslow Homer, means much to any one who knows how hulls and their massive shadows float in the water and not on it, how rigging, slack and taut, plays hide and seek with light, and how, harbor air shows visibly its feel.

Mr. Tarbell’s ways in judging other painters’ work seemed to me part and parcel of his character. For instance, while many critics are careful judges of artist compared with artist, putting Rembrandt, say, above Fabritius and then Fabritius above Dou, all for reasons duly or even acutely specified, Mr. Tarbell always seemed to me to bring his judgment closer to particulars: he compared Rembrandt's good work with Rembrandt’s best, and Rembrandt's worse with Rembrandt’s rather better. Mr. Tarbell liked Antonio Mancini’s painting of the peasant boy in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; he analyzed the boy's arm for my enlightenment as an example deserving study by artists who just “round it over" instead of searching out the means of modeling; yet of the same Mancini's painting hung near in the same Museum he remarked, “I wouldn't give five dollars for it.” In all his criticism he seemed more concerned with an artist’s abilities than with his weaknesses. And certainly he judged a work of art by its own beauty and truth or its own emptiness and error, regardless of the name and

standing of the artist.

His directness of appraising reminded me of the intended lesson in a special display in a recent exhibition of Japanese objects of art. Among the costly screens and ceramics and textiles one table showed an arrangement in form and color brought together to remind the visitor that beauty need not of necessity be sought at great distance or among relics of dynasties long vanished. The objects on the table were only three; a little reddish bean pot, soft-glazed and kitchen worn; a native oak branch, retaining its October leaves of silvery russet, sere and crisply warped in their drying; a tawny-gold field pumpkin, with long, cordy stem and tendril of green gray. Cheap and commonplace enough, but exquisite as arranged by an artist in flow of line and harmony of color. Mr. Tarbell was right. Beauty is beauty, regardless of provenience and record of award.

Mr. Tarbell's unexpected death last August has deepened for me as for many others of his own generation that undertone of sadness known to all who face a fast lowering sun and as Virgil’s Tityrus at close of day mark the lengthening of shadows from the great hills. Let me, as a friend grateful to a friend, record here that I have seldom come to know a man who shared with me so generously his hardest won knowledge or who set so telling an example of earnestness in lifelong pursuit of one high purpose.