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The Paintings of Martin A. Ryerson

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THE PAINTINGS OF MARTIN A. RYERSON

THE notable collection of paintings which the late Martin A. Ryerson has recently bequeathed to the Art Institute might be interpreted from any number of angles. One might speak of its variety and scope; how it begins with the Italian *dugento* and ends with the painting of today; one might mention the excellence of its objects; how almost every example ranks with the best which that individual artist has produced; one might stress (and this could never be over-stressed) its unique value and importance to the museum, and one might fill pages pointing out the fascinating historical connections that such a survey implies. But there is still another vantage point from which to consider it. Every collection is an autobiography, a revelation of the heart and mind which chose it. And from that position let us look at the paintings, trying to get at something deeper than mere description or historical appreciation.

Mr. Ryerson, collectors always remarked, had "taste." It is a pity that the word has come to so light a meaning today; "taste" is often only a negative affair, a matter of refusing the wrong thing, rather than choosing the right one. What he had was something deeper, a profound connoisseurship based on an

enviable combination of feeling and great knowledge. Few people realize the passion and study that went into the forming of this group of paintings. For over fifty years its collector was constantly *studying*; every trip away from home meant new impressions and new evaluations; a friend could say "There is hardly a cathedral in Europe that Mr. Ryerson did not know and hardly a private collection he did not visit" and such a statement is clearly reflected in the pictures which hang on the gallery walls.

This attitude on the part of an American collector of his period was all too rare. Compare the meagre gains of the typical picture buyer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States. Knowing little of the history of art (he had heard of course of Titian and Velasquez) the typical collector let himself be led into purchasing either wrecks of originally fine works, or school imitations of the great masters. Unfamiliar with the collections abroad (he had visited the Louvre and the Uffizi, but not the Prado or the Hermitage), he accepted what appealed to his naïve passion for display. Ordinarily if he entered the field of "primitives" he was lost. A few scarred and battered predella panels (invariably ascribed to Giotto),



"MADONNA," TUSCAN (?) SCHOOL, LATER THIRTEENTH CENTURY. THE MR. AND MRS. MARTIN A. RYERSON COLLECTION

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"YOUNG GIRL AT AN OPEN HALF-DOOR," BY REMBRANDT, DUTCH, (1606-1669).
GIFT OF MARTIN A. RYERSON, 1894.

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some large and ornate altarpieces (the larger the better) by a name that would begin as Simone Martini but would gradually shrink to the status of a distant "Amico" or a false Botticelli; these might be the high-spots of such an assemblage.

But Mr. Ryerson, equipped with a genuine sensibility and broadened by his experiences in seeing great works of art, had much more the attitude of the brilliant European collector. One must remember that when he began buying early paintings, comparatively little scholarship had been marshalled to their study. Today there is hardly a primitive artist of any rank who has not had a monograph, or at least a chapter or two, written about him. But thirty years ago every Van Eyck might be only a John Perrant in disguise. Through the intricate and much-debated field of Italian *ducento*, *trecento* and *quattrocento* painting Mr. Ryerson took his careful way, buying works which satisfied his historical as well as his aesthetic interest; in the province of Flemish and Dutch primitives (still only half-admired abroad and in America distinctly "unfashionable") he secured certain examples that are unique and matchless. (A great dealer was discussing the Ryerson collection only a few weeks ago. "You just can't get things like that today," he stated, a little sadly. "There aren't any left in private hands. The public galleries have them all.")

Naturally a man of Mr. Ryerson's judgment meant everything to the struggling young Art Institute. The more one studies the early purchases of the Museum, the more one is convinced that he and Charles Hutchinson acted in the capacity of astute and courageous museum directors; indeed in such a *coup* as the purchase of the four great decorations by Hubert Robert (which the Louvre seriously wanted) they were almost cast in the rôle of twin Wilhelm von Bodes, enriching Chicago at the expense of other cities. Even more significant was their daring but successful descent on the Demidoff collection. This famous group of

Dutch masterpieces was advertised for sale, but not content to wait for the auction, Mr. Ryerson and Mr. Hutchinson immediately took train for Florence; visited the Prince in his villa at San Donato, and purchased the twelve most important paintings from him for, in those days, a staggering sum. The Institute had little or no money, but they divided the responsibility between them, hoping to find public-spirited citizens who would assume the cost of presenting individual pictures. They were completely successful and as Robert B. Harshe says, this "astounding feat at once gave to the struggling young museum an international reputation and fixed for all time its future standards."

In the same way the magnificent "Assumption of the Virgin" by the then ignored El Greco was secured. For sale in Paris, no other museum would consider it; already a number had refused it when Mary Cassatt brought it to the attention of the two friends. Mr. Ryerson and Mr. Hutchinson saw the glowing, thirteen-foot canvas; they were deeply impressed, but they knew little of the painter. Cossio's book was unpublished; it would be several years before Meier-Graefe would make "The Spanish Journey." But they decided on a "Spanish Journey" of their own; again they took train, this time for Madrid. After studying the Grecos in the Prado, they pursued the search to Toledo. When they had come into the presence of "The Burial of Count Orgaz" and had seen the high-altar of Santo Domingo el Antiguo (where the "Assumption" had originally hung and where it was now replaced by an inferior copy) all doubts left them. Once more, they assumed the debt and this painting—frequently called the single greatest work in an American collection—was assured for Chicago.

This cautious way of comparing whatever he chose with the best—this was typical. Was it a Rogier van der Weyden he was considering? Then it was with the finest of his portraits that the new



"PORTRAIT OF A MAN," BY RIDOLFO GHIRLANDAJO, FLORENTINE, (1483-1561). THE MR. AND MRS. MARTIN A. RYERSON COLLECTION.



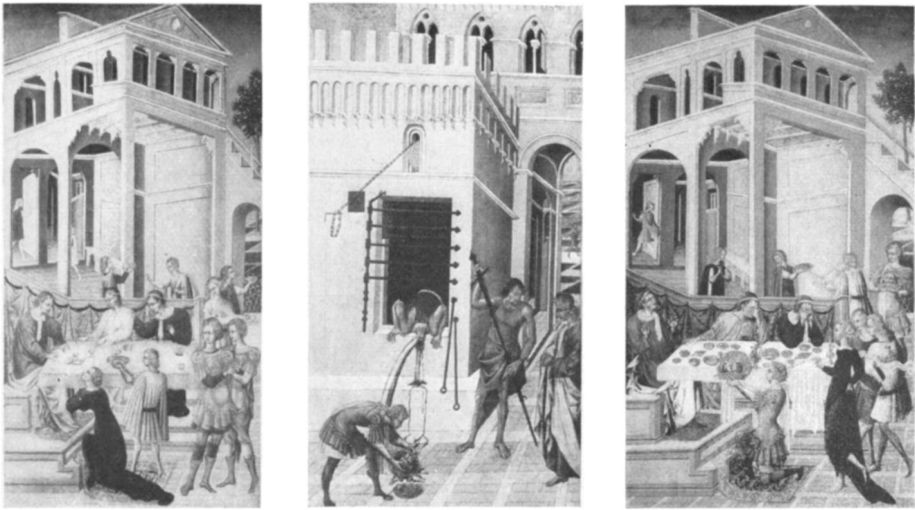
"SIX EPISODES FROM THE LIFE OF SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST," BY GIOVANNI DI PAOLO, SIENESE (1403?-1482).

candidate for admission in the Ryerson collection was compared. Concerning the history and attribution of a painting, he was conscientious to the extreme. If a panel appealed to him, he was interested, but, "Where did it come from? What were its antecedents?" In this questioning, there was none of the recent tendency to buy second-rate works of art, backed up by first-rate certificates. At various times, Offner, Berenson, the Venturi, Van Marle—to mention only a few scholars—were consulted, more often, however, *after* the work had been purchased. The result of this scrupulous care is now apparent; among the paintings now the property of the Institute, there is scarcely one whose authorship may be questioned. Too often a group of pictures come into the permanent trust of a museum, overlaid with wrong attributions, puffed up with false reputations. But Mr. Ryerson cared little for such things; he was always ready to change a greater name for a smaller, if the smaller seemed more just.

But if the field of medieval painting was fraught with danger, the ever-changing contemporary scene was equally so. Here again, he applied himself to the study of

newer personalities, trying to weigh their worth. He used to carry a small black notebook in which he entered data and impressions. Faced with a new name, out would come the little book: "Where was the artist born? How old was he? Where had he exhibited?" For in addition to Italian and Flemish primitives, Mr. Ryerson was deeply interested in nineteenth and twentieth century French and American painting; two of the four galleries at the Institute are hung with works of the Impressionist School and their followers. In a period when the American market was flooded with minor examples of the Barbizon School or the "popular" salon painters, he purchased Manet and Renoir, Winslow Homer and Arthur B. Davies.

All this brings us back to the special quality or combination of qualities which made Mr. Ryerson a great collector. We have said that such a group of paintings clearly mirrors the personality of the man who chose them. Can we go further and nominate certain definite tendencies which run through the whole story of his picture collecting, certain reappearing traits which bind together a *dugento* diptych and a canvas by a Post-Impressionist, making



THESE PANELS ARE GENERALLY REGARDED AS THIS PAINTER'S MASTERPIECE. THE MR. AND MRS. MARTIN A. RYERSON COLLECTION.

them both integral parts of one man's choice and one man's expression? I believe we can, for in surveying the Ryerson Collection with care, three such definite tendencies emerge. Doubtless there are others, but these three seem significant. In studying these, we shall come to see how gifted Mr. Ryerson truly was, for any one of them would have been sufficient endowment for more than an average collector; taken together they form the answer to a question which people have asked increasingly since his death, "Just how did Mr. Ryerson come to buy *so many* good pictures?"

First, there is the feeling for a painting as a "decorative" object. Let us say, first of all, that "decorative" in this sense does not mean "slight" or "pretty." The word here implies a strong sense of design and color, a conscious regard on the artist's part for that happy arrangement of line and pattern which charms and even thrills the eye. Much of the greatest art is in this meaning "decorative" and a recognition of this quality on Mr. Ryerson's part is responsible for many of his most beautiful works. Take for example the earliest panel in the primitive group, a hieratic "Madonna and Child" of the Tus-

can (?) thirteenth century, with its splendid forceful linear scheme and strong pattern of blues and scarlets. This same tendency pervades one of the most recent pictures, a little panel by Maurice Sterne, showing two young Balinese girls going to market.

Between these two extremes lie many of the most lovely examples including a great part of the Italian primitives. In the beginning, Italy was close to the Byzantine tradition and her artists not only tended to make their religious subjects interesting and dramatic but sought to give them the color and exquisite patterns of jeweled ikons. The thirteenth-century diptych in the Ryerson Collection responds to this purpose; the delicate Gothic traceries on the frame and nimbuses might be the work of a goldsmith.

Many of the later primitives also have this character; witness for example the brightly colored "Dormition of the Virgin" by the "Maestro del Bambino Vispo" and the "Crucifixion" by Spinello Aretino. Two schools which carried on the spirit of decoration under modified form were those of Padua and Siena. In the first, the quality of line became accented and sharp; the color took on a complexity that

is extraordinary. It was inevitable that Mr. Ryerson's interest in this side of art should draw him to Padua; and while there is no work by the rare Squarcione in the collection, panels by Zoppo and Butinone are significant of Paduan influence. Equally, in the large triptych by the Austrian, Sebastian Scheel, we may mark the influence of Mantegna's linear and highly decorative approach.

In Siena the medieval fondness for gold backgrounds, ornamented with tooled straps and splendid with brocaded patterns, prolonged itself far into the fifteenth century. Such typical Siense works as the "Madonna with Saints" by Sano di Pietro, and the similar composition by Neroccio illustrate the same side of Mr. Ryerson's collecting, but in the six marvelous panels by Giovanni di Paolo from the life of St. John the Baptist we find this decorative approach attaining superb heights. Mr. Ryerson was justly proud of this series, the masterpiece of

their painter. Particularly the first two episodes with their landscape backgrounds must rank with the most original and beautiful inventions in European painting. Here the collector's interest in design found its fullest expression and here his fondness for Eastern and Western art meet. In another part of this bulletin, Mr. Kelley describes Mr. Ryerson's sympathy with the art of the Orient. Behind the acquisition of the Giovanni di Paolo series lies the same understanding, for where in Italian art will you find a closer parallel to the expressive, fantastic art of the lacquer painter? Not only does the line, deft, sinuous, and rhythmic, recall the East but also the frankly unnaturalistic intention; the willingness on the artist's part to sacrifice the realism of the scene to attain strange and beautiful effects. It is no simple chance that a suite following the Prince Takamatsu of Japan stopped longest before this series and that His Imperial Highness admired them most of all the paintings in the Institute.

In the acquisition of two *cassone* panels we have another example of the same thing. Equally the "Bishop" of Allegretto Nuzi, in his full panoply of gold, cream and scarlet, is reminiscent—as several critics have pointed out—of the Chinese ancestor portrait. Again Koerbecke's "Annunciation," though of a different school and period, has much of the same appeal. Throughout his whole career as a collector, Mr. Ryerson kept this side of painting before him.

Its character pervaded his selections in the modern field. Gauguin's "Devant la Case" is a revival of the decorative simplicity of the primitives and it is significant that among contemporary painters Mr. Ryerson should have chosen Foujita and acquired a set of early water colors done on a gold-leaf ground. I believe that something of the same urge prompted his purchase of the large number of oils and water colors by Arthur B. Davies. In the works of this now-undervalued experimenter, he perceived a fondness for pattern-making and non-photographic



"ANNUNCIATION," BY THE "MAÎTRE DE MOULINS." FRENCH, FIFTEENTH CENTURY. THE MR. AND MRS. MARTIN A. RYERSON COLLECTION.

color, which he himself admired. In many of the Impressionist works in the collection the same feeling is evident. Monet was often only a step or two away from Japan, and in one of the finest pictures which Sisley ever painted, the "Tas de Sable," we have an arrangement of tans and faded blues accented by blacks, which derives unmistakably from Hiroshige.

But the Impressionists' passion for color was Mr. Ryerson's too. There can be no doubt that walking from gallery to gallery, the visitor is impressed by his sensitivity to this element. Let us name this his second important gift: a feeling for color and color harmony. Many collectors are drawn to painting in the first place by their fondness for color; otherwise they might have gravitated to etchings or drawings. Mr. Ryerson collected works in black-and-white far more rarely than works in color; one of his most important gifts to the Print Department was a set of colored aquatints by Mary Cassatt. He was deeply interested in textiles; their decorative side and color appealed to him at the same time. In painting he definitely preferred works in which the arrangement was subtle and perfect; water colors interested him deeply. He bought groups of Signac and Vlaminck (the examples by Vlaminck are among that artist's more colorful ventures) and a splendid series of Winslow Homer water colors which are almost all distinguished by their attractive color selection and range. There is a complete gallery of Renoir and Monet to show his preference for the iridescent schemes of the former and the atmospheric color of the latter. Included, too, are some of the earlier Monets, the sober and strong "Gare St. Lazare" and the fresh, restrained, "Garden at Argenteuil." Renoir's "Fruits du Midi," with its glowing, electrical greens and orange was not too bright for him; he frankly enjoyed the Impressionists' experiments in reducing painting to a moving, many-colored veil of light.

When he became interested in Inness he bought two of this artist's most Impres-



"THE LAST SUPPER," (ONE PANEL FROM A SERIES OF SEVEN), SCHOOL OF AMIENS (C. 1480). THE MR. AND MRS. MARTIN A. RYERSON COLLECTION

sionist works; one of them, "Moonlight on Passamaquoddy Bay," its artist never excelled in subtlety. Boudin and Jongkind represent part of the same viewpoint; so does the early Gauguin, the early Pissarro, the examples of Le Sidaner, Guillaumin, Loiseau, Mauffra, Albert André, and Marquet. Among the most ex-



"ADORATION OF THE MAGI," BY LUCAS VAN LEYDEN, DUTCH (1494-1533). THE MR. AND MRS. MARTIN A. RYERSON COLLECTION.

quisite choices in this class may be mentioned Vuillard's "Child in a Room" and among the most exciting the white-and-red-and-green Utrillo, "Rue St. Vincent de Paul."

Goya's vigorous series of little "tabloid" pictures, "The Capture of the Bandit by the Monk," may hardly seem to belong to this side of his collecting, but, in spite of their lively subject, there is a gayety of color and a fluent handling of paint that he admired in French art of the nineteenth century. In the same way the two Tiepolos—one of them a large and important altar-piece—and the lightly brushed-in pair of "Capriccios" by Guardi are forerunners in the same tradition.

Of course one can read a subtle feeling for color back into the primitives, but here the problem becomes more complex. And here a third quality—perhaps the most

important of all—is manifest. For if Mr. Ryerson had possessed only a decorative interest he might have ended by acquiring just one sort of pictures; if he had been led only by color his collection might have been equally limited but he was saved from these possibilities by his insistence on "good painting." The term needs definition; in Mr. Ryerson's case I take it to mean a feeling for the mastery of the painter's craft, a recognition, on his part, of the complete, fully made work of art. This quality in painting, which has been somewhat discredited in recent years, is not merely a technical one. Though bound up with skill and manual dexterity, it transcends these gifts, going infinitely deeper, back to the harmonious vision of the artist which must exist before he ever puts a stroke of the brush on canvas or draws his first lines on a gesso panel.

Almost every critic who studies the Ryerson collection comes away praising the series of Flemish and Dutch primitives. These paintings, they say, represent the height of the collector's judgment; there is hardly one that does not reach the same even standard of excellence. In one way, this series beginning with the two panels by Rogier van der Weyden and ending with Joos van Cleef are among the most difficult to appreciate in the collection; on more than one occasion I have seen the public, drawn to the brilliantly colored and designed Italian paintings, passing them quickly by.

But they are the center of Mr. Ryerson's collection, the very middle of his point of view, for more than most works they represent "good painting" in its traditional sense; a combination of the artist's power to draw, color and design with harmonious observation drawn from the world of real appearance. In com-

parison, some Italian works seem slighter; certain recent paintings, curiously one-sided. One may note as proof the restrained "Jan de Gros" by Rogier van der Weyden. This portrait of a secretary to Charles the Bold could hardly be more simple in its means or more strong and perfect in its statement. The minimum of color prevails; black for the hair and costume; green for the background; a light flesh tone, subtly modulated for hands and face. The design is severe, the oval of the head, the angles of the body. But throughout there is the artist's mastery of each element; nothing seems accidental, misplaced; nothing, too much or too little.

This sense of perfection, this tendency toward explicit control of the painter's medium may be felt throughout the other painting by Rogier (a "Madonna"), in the much more human "Mother and Child" by Memling, in the later and somewhat softer Gerard David. Even Colijn de



"GARE ST. LAZARE," BY CLAUDE MONET, FRENCH (1840-1926). THE MR. AND MRS. MARTIN A. RYERSON COLLECTION.

Coter, who usually disappoints by a tendency to dryness, does not so offend in the large "Coronation." The Lucas van Leyden, "Adoration of the Kings" is a further case in point. Passing over the beautifully detailed figures in the foreground, and concentrating on the landscape with figures, one comes upon a thrilling piece of painting; here with an almost miniature-like exactness, the artist has set down a tiny scene of great beauty; the three Kings and their companies sweeping through the moonlit countryside. And in Isenbrant and Joos van Cleef, usually minor followers of the Northern tradition, one comes upon "good painting," and one is made to realize again how much the collector prized this quality and how he sought to represent it in works he owned.

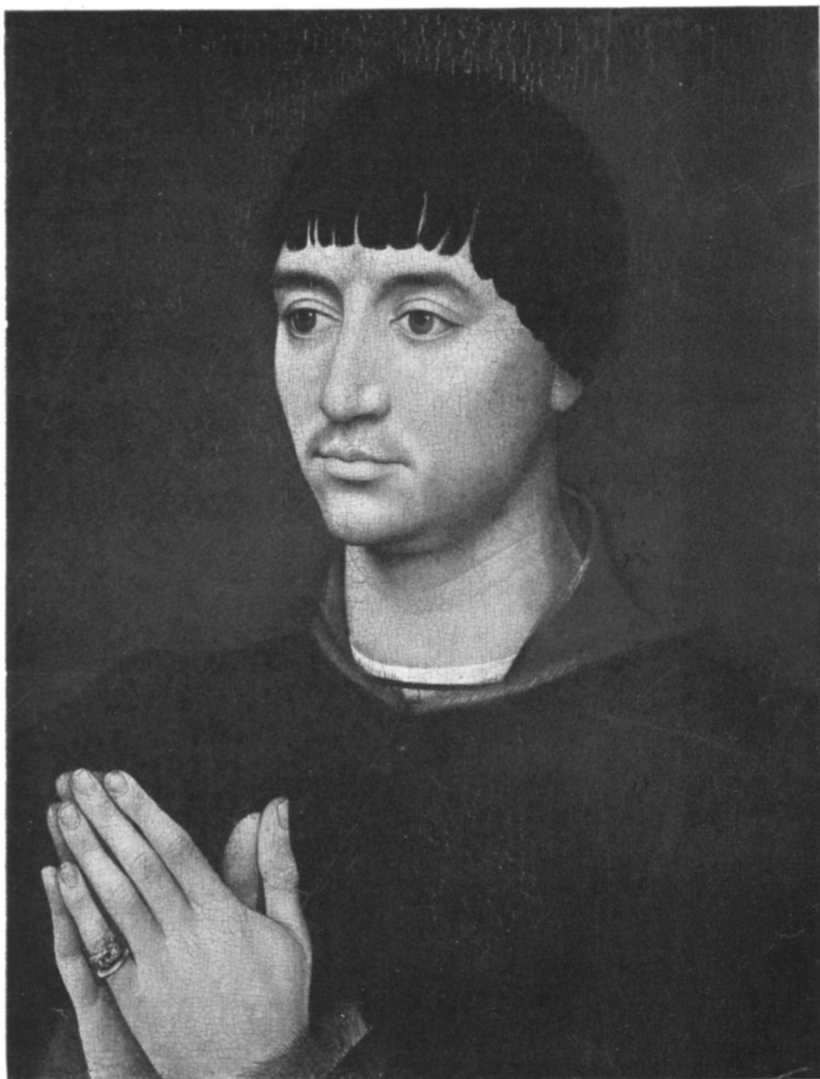
The same feeling is behind the French primitives. The "Annunciation" by the "Maître de Moulins" is full of a restrained and perfect draughtsmanship; French clarity is evident in the little portrait of "Louise Hallewyn" by Corneille de Lyon. And the seven panels from the great Amiens altar-piece with their remarkable balance between decorative structure and complete realism, are triumphant illustrations of this side of the collector's choice.

In Italian primitives we have remarked on his interest in the School of Siena, but it should have been made clear that he was never misled by the extreme mannerisms of her painters; nothing was further from his preference than some of her swooning Madonnas. I believe that he really enjoyed his Florentine examples more; at any rate they outnumber the Sienese. A Florentine portrait worthy to rank with the Jan de Gros is Ridolfo Ghirlandajo's sober but compelling "Unknown Man," a very Northern conception, painted with an almost Antonello-like power and economy. The two long panels by Jacopo del Sellaio, the episode from the life of St. Francis by Spinello Aretino are akin in spirit, if not in intensity. Four little predella scenes by Perugino are as near, perhaps, as Mr. Ryerson ever came to accepting the sweetness of the Umbrian

tradition; it is notable that their delicate emotion is balanced by expert painting.

Another case where "good painting" is more than obvious is in the Rembrandt, "Girl at an Open Half-Door." From among the pictures in the Demidoff collection, he chose this one as his own gift. To anyone who has had the good fortune to see this great canvas side by side with other works by the painter the choice is significant. Only think what was offered him; gaudy portraits of Saskia, crowned with flowers or late works in which the artist's eye only too often saw with an exaggerated effect. Between such extremes, Mr. Ryerson selected this work of the middle period; a picture of Hendrickje Stoffels, modest, unobtrusive but full of the deepest feeling, and once again, painted with a masterly perfection that even Rembrandt seldom achieved. The same love for the clear statement, the exact integration of all the elements that go to make up a picture, can be traced through many of his minor works of the Dutch seventeenth century.

Of course it is arbitrary to suggest such a division of the collector's view-point; to set off one group of paintings as appealing to a special side and probably Mr. Ryerson himself would have recognized no such separation of qualities in his own mind. Certainly, many paintings must have appealed to him on more than a single count; occasionally one came along that may have satisfied him completely. A painting like Cézanne's "L'Estaque" might have been one of these. At any rate this canvas—perhaps the center of his modern group—fulfills the three necessities that we have nominated. Decoration it certainly is, of a very high order; no one who has seen it across the gallery will deny that. Color it has, too, Cézanne's own strangely exhilarating palette. Now Mr. Ryerson already owned an early Cézanne, an Impressionist landscape of the Auvers period. But he bought the "L'Estaque," as severe and formal a piece of architecture as the artist ever planned, because it appealed to him, chiefly I imagine by its



"JAN DE GROS," BY ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN, FLEMISH (1400-1464). THE MR. AND MRS. MARTIN A. RYERSON COLLECTION.

quality of completeness, its sense of inevitable harmony. "Realism, but a realism full of grandeur"; Cézanne's own words come back to us before this work, and before a number of others in the collection.

For of course it was only because Mr. Ryerson possessed a balance between qualities that his collection is so important. His standard was high because a picture must needs satisfy a number of requirements before he bought it. Mere color, much as he may have enjoyed it, never conquered; mere skill, much as it was admired, was not enough. Careful, studious, quiet, modest, he went his way gathering one picture after another, building gradually without hurry or waste this notable series of paintings.

Naturally in so brief a survey much must be left unsaid. In his preface to this *Bulletin*, the Director has stated that he believes that Mr. Ryerson, particularly of late years, had in mind the idea of forming a collection which would serve as a general background to the paintings already owned by the Institute. Such an idea was thoroughly consistent with his wise and far-seeing plans. It is typical,

too, of his great generosity; for years, when another collector would have kept all his pictures round him, he sent the majority to the museum, where literally millions of people have profited by them. He was equally generous in lending his paintings; at the great Burlington House Exhibitions some of his outstanding examples appeared.

During the last year of his life he spent a great deal of time at the Institute, going over his collection, putting everything in excellent order, working out final details. The will which provides for their disposal is in itself a model of exactness and clear judgment. Like everything else, it is significant. For every collection is a self-portrait, a gradually evolved picture of the personality behind. Quite unconsciously Mr. Ryerson has made that self-portrait full-length and complete.

DANIEL CATTON RICH

NOTE: *Many of the paintings in the Ryerson Collection have already been discussed and illustrated in past Bulletins. In the future a series of special articles is planned to treat certain groups and outstanding pictures in more detail.*



"AFTER THE TORNADO, BAHAMAS," WATER COLOR BY WINSLOW HOMER, AMERICAN (1836-1910). THE MR. AND MRS. MARTIN A. RYERSON COLLECTION.