

70 URUGUAY Pedro Figari, painter

The article on Pedro Figari by Lincoln Kirstein, published in the Magazine of Art in March, 1946, is the most exhaustive work on the artist which has appeared to date.

Only excerpts from the article are quoted here.

It is good, in approaching Pedro Figari for the first time, and in estimating his work, to know a little of Uruguay. Uruguay is often called the Denmark of South America, and it bears certain historical resemblances also to Holland and Switzerland. Montevideo is traditionally a haven for political exiles. Its ancient French colony has insured close ties with Paris. Its strategic position commanding the estuary of the Plate is symbolic of the country's independent watchfulness, between Brazil and Argentina. The little country of the Banda Oriental (the Eastern Bank, from Buenos Aires) has a sturdy tradition in the arts, letters, and jurisprudence,--three branches of activity in which Pedro Figari distinguished himself.

Figari was born in Montevideo in 1861, from a dominantly Italian-Riviera heritage. He was strictly trained in the law, and, as far as most of Montevideo might know, the greater part of his life would certainly be spent in her service. In 1886 he received his degree as Abogado, was accredited Defender of the Poor in the Civil and Criminal Courts, married, and sailed for France. It is commonly repeated that Figari did not commence to paint until he was forty-seven. Actually, he seems always to have painted. His early, tight water-color and oil sketches have more than an academic charm. His double portrait of himself and his young wife at the easel, recalls the expert domestic intimacy of Manet and Degas. It is true that, in the early part of his life, he considered himself a professional jurist and an amateur painter. But from 1918 until 1938, he certainly painted to the exclusion of the practice of law, or of writing.

Finally, however, his honors were restored to him, and he served his country in France as Cultural Commissioner, founded with his son, the National School of Fine Arts in 1911, and two years later published 'El Arte, la Estetica y el Ideal' the summation of his philosophical and critical thought...

He was, primarily, the painter of a time and a place. The time was the epoch of 1830 to 1860...

Figari painted in series of subjects. First of all there are his landscapes, with a tall powder-blue sky, the large vibration of the pampas' wide aerial room, landscapes with a single ombu, or an oasis-like clump of this huge pithy plant, so well described by W. H. Hudson, enormous in its overbranching expansion, which somehow gathers into its shadows the loneliness of the plain's arid nostalgia. There are landscapes with gauchos working, their painted ponies spotting the grass with leathery white and russet accents. . . . There are landscapes given their human scale by the placement of zinc-white estancias, the square-cut, low ranchhouses, like sugar-blocks against the unlimited horizon, alone and locked.

There is a beautiful series of dances, traversing the wheel of the pericon nacional, in butterfly dusk or moth-like moonlight . . .

Another rich sequence is devoted to intimate domestic interiors, some from the colonial epoch, but the most impressive laid about 1840, panels of musical evenings with ladies of the Epoca Federal in crinolines, shawls and high tortoise-shell combs . . .

Some have thought of Figari as a Latin-American Gauguin of the local negroes. Indeed many of his finest compositions are occupied with the manners of the black people who had wandered down into Uruguay from Brazilian slavery, even before the days of the early Republic, and who stayed on as a doomed, fantastic, enclosed colony, domestic servants for the rising class of shippers and merchants of the port. Their brilliant clothes and strange private rituals at their weddings

and wakes are mocked in a half-tamed jungle shadow, the elegant provincialism of their exiled masters. Now, one can search for a dozen negroes in all of Uruguay. There cannot be two hundred left in Argentina; the climate completed what disease and slavery began. But their world is immortalized in Figari's sardonic series. . . . Figari's negroes are less static than Gauguin's South Sea people; in a way less decorative, less exotic, more actively real. Their dyed plaster walls are splashed with intense semi-transparent washes. Figari always painted on an absorbent carton, or cardboard panel, not in gouache but in oil, a dry richly flaked impasto, thinly laid on but entirely satisfactory. The Negro series approximates, in its fierce clash of orange, purple, pink and coffee, the almost aromatic vibration of the transplanted African atmosphere. . . .

Certainly his pictures are nostalgic, but it is not merely their nostalgia that moves us. . . . Figari manages to convince us of the validity of his time and place by his pictorial insistence, and he makes an alien antiquity live for us in the intimacy of his specific, assimilable fragments. Through him, we absorb history not in anecdote but by atmosphere. . . .

He has been likened to Constantin Guys, but perhaps a North American would think of him more as a southern parallel to Prendergast, who was his contemporary. Both sought a mosaic vibration of textures, close values, textile color and a rich powdery surface. . . .

- 1 70A El Palito -- Gaucho Dance
- 2 70B Colonial Party
- 3 70C The Funeral
- 4 70D Cabaret
- 5 70E Pericon Dance Under the Orange Trees

Set 70 Continued

- 70F The Proposal
- 70G The Insinuation
- 70H Negro Funeral
- 70I Candombe
- 70J The Visitors