

Charles Ricketts

CHARLES RICKETTS: A COMMENTARY ON HIS ACTIVITIES. BY C. LEWIS HIND.

IN an article on Mr. Charles Shannon in this magazine, I remarked how difficult it was to avoid mentioning the name of Mr. Charles Ricketts, his companion in connoisseurship. Each of course, stands alone in his art. In the act of creation, art is, and must be, lonely; but when two artists add to their individual production an absorbing interest in the arts and crafts of others; when they collect—appraising, comparing, discussing each new treasure—such leisure hour relaxations unite those who share them. Is there a more lasting bond of union than a common hobby? But the name of Mr. Shannon must be excluded from this paper. I am here concerned with “clever and various” Mr. Charles Ricketts, to cull a phrase from an essay by a contemporary critic. Appraising his work as painter, this same critic discovers in Delacroix and Daumier the “twin origin” of Charles Ricketts. That may be; but it is as dangerous a thing to play with souls, as it is to trace a painter’s origin. With some it is easy; but with so versatile, quick-witted and eclectic a man as Charles Ricketts, who takes his art nourishment rapidly, everywhere, and in all seasons, I would not like to indicate any particular master as his forbear. Immense admirations for certain great painters and sculptors he has; but when you ask him the question point-blank, his quick brain runs so rapidly over the field, that before he has ceased speaking his appreciations extend out in long line, like a *queue* at a *matinée*. But I have noticed that in all our talks the name of Michelangelo has a way of dominating all other names, and I do not think that for Charles Ricketts there are greater monuments of pictorial and plastic art in the world than the Sistine Vault and the Medici Chapel. Yet when, recalling his book on “The Prado and its Masterpieces” I murmur to him the name of Titian, he is off at a gallop through the Titian

country. But he always draws rein at the *Bacchus and Ariadne*—“the greatest picture in the world!” Perhaps I agree in the heat of the moment, but after parting from him, I have regrets that I did not hazard the question—If the *Bacchus and Ariadne* of Titian is the greatest picture in the world, what is *Las Meninas* of Velasquez?

You perceive that I have some difficulty in coming to the point about Charles Ricketts, the artist and the man. I admit it. He is a difficult subject to discuss. When a man is a painter and nothing else, usual enough in these days, the pleasure of writing about him is simplified. But Mr. Ricketts has many activities, and his energy is so unquenchable, that he can turn from one to the other, always with zest and zeal. What do you say to a man who, after a long day’s work, can begin at eleven o’clock at night and write hard for three hours? “I wake up at night” is his brief explanation. Writing, to him, is just talking with the pen. And probably he has been talking hard



“THE BETRAYAL”

BY CHARLES RICKETTS

(By permission of Messrs. Thos. Agnew & Sons)

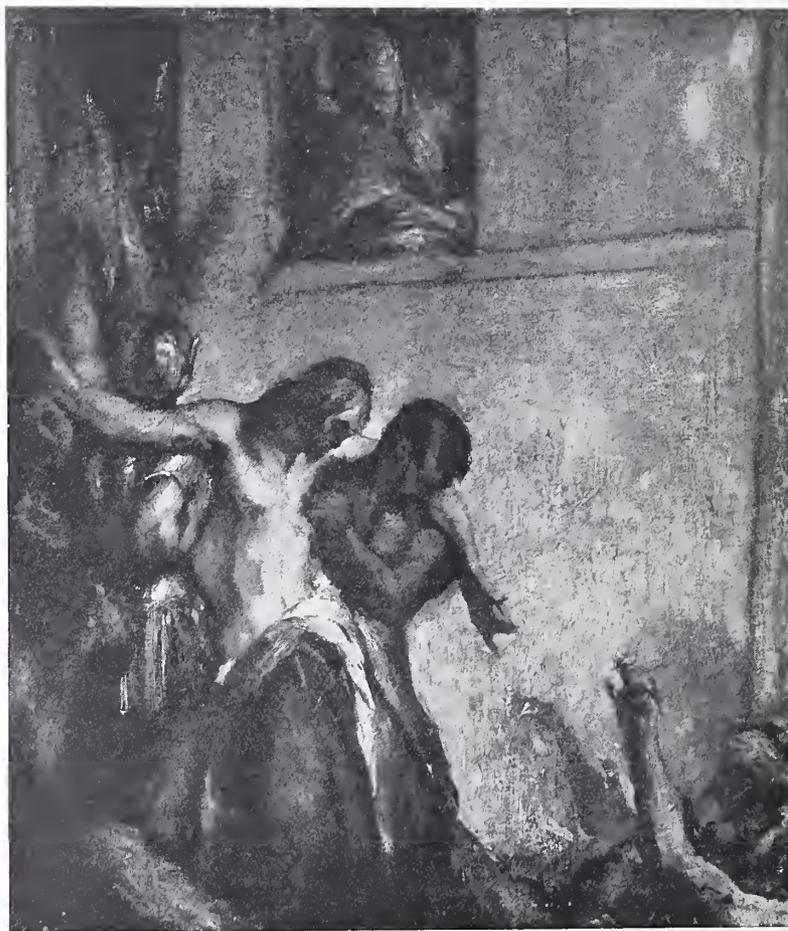
Charles Ricketts

from the moment he sat down to dinner to the moment he settled himself at his writing-desk at eleven p.m. Indeed, so good and copious and suggestive is Mr. Ricketts' talk, that I proposed to cast this essay in the form of a "real conversation." I tried to memorise a recent conversation—a conversation do I call it? Conversation it was, if it be conversation for one of the parties to deliver a monologue, rapid, gesticulatory, discursive, and the other to fire in an occasional question artfully designed to elicit opinions. But I do not feel equal to reporting that conversation, which began with doubts about the new Delacroix at the National Gallery and ended with dithyrambs about music; there were too many "mind this is between ourselves," too many flights of eloquence, that the pedestrian pen cannot attempt to overtake. One must be outrageously personal in talking to a man with a view to gathering material for an article upon him. Naturally I used the expression "your diabolical versatility," and naturally he objected to the phrase vehemently. I mentioned that in the great days of the Renaissance, the artist was an all-round man, and that painting was but one, and not always the most important, of his methods of self-expression. "If you are versatile, you are versatile," I said, "why conceal it? I have known you for some years, and I have encountered you as painter, modeller, illustrator, designer of stage scenery, writer, editor, connoisseur and collector—now if you were cast upon a desert island or ordered to take a rest cure for six months in the Chiltern Hills, upon which of your present pursuits would your mind most fondly dwell?" He answered the question promptly. Mr. Ricketts always has an answer, but there was no need to make this answer in words, for he held on his knee, caressing the surface with

his fingers, turning it, fondling it, examining it in different lights, one of the small bronzes he delights to make—the *Salome in the lap of Herodias*. "Ha!" I cried, "so modelling is the favourite child—eh? If you were cast upon a desert island, you would seek not gold or diamonds, but clay!"

Here, it would be proper to interpolate three or four pages of his answer, but if talks are long, magazine space is short. I gathered that in the hierarchy of the arts he places design first from which all the others should spring—design that was the root of the knowledge of Michelangelo as of Donatello, of Giotto, of Mantegna: design, whether it be the vault of the Sistine Chapel or a chair for a dining-room in a "little place at Tooting."

I have spoken of Mr. Ricketts as modeller, not as sculptor, for sculpture seems to denote something larger than the little bronzes which it is his delight to fashion. The penalty of producing



"CHRIST BEFORE THE PEOPLE"

BY CHARLES RICKETTS



"THE DEPOSITION." FROM THE OIL
PAINTING BY CHARLES RICKETTS

Charles Ricketts

works of this nature, so charming and sensitive to those who take the trouble to seek them out, is that in a large gallery they are apt to be overlooked by the cursory visitor. Mr. Ricketts exhibited four at a recent exhibition of the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers. Like his pictures, these plastic impressions are never inspired by modern life—his mind works for ever in the past on myth, legend, and scenes from the sacred story. He loves a centaur or a mermaid, anything fabulous and strange; but I think his deepest feeling is evoked by some poignant episode from the New Testament. One of the four shown at the International was *The Good Samaritan*, inspired by the passage "And set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn," which afforded an opportunity to present the slow, dragging movement of the burdened animal. Then there was *Faust and Chiron*, the centaur Chiron of Greek mythology renowned for his wisdom and skill in medicine, hunting, music and prophecy; and *Io and the Sea Nymphs*, and the ever new, ever pathetic, long-drawn agony of *Paolo and Francesca*. Of others, too, in other places I have vivid recollection, an *Orpheus and Eurydice*, a Christ before the people known as *The Tragic Man*, a modern version of the *Laocoon*, and a delightful fancy called *Centaur and Baby Faun*. The standing bronze citizen in frock coat, the bust of philanthropist or shipowner in marble, Mr. Ricketts does not attempt. He cultivates his own garden, an antique garden, shut off from the modern world.

The themes of his pictures are also inspired by history, legend and myth. Again he seeks the sacred story, and again it is with those episodes that he is the most impressive. But he does not paint a *Betrayal* or a *Calvary* in the spirit of a mediæval craftsman working under the guidance of the Church with set purpose. He is quite sincere; but a Crucifixion is to him, I imagine, a theme, not of grief and remembrance, but a subject for decorative treatment. Its effect upon the observer can be anything and everything. Those flying blue and rose banners in his *Calvary*, the centurion's blue

armour, the swaying ladder, the dim cross against the angry sky, the sense of movement and tragedy, affect me æsthetically and stir me emotionally; but they do not arouse any religious instinct. This picture originated in an artistic, not in a literary impulse. I happen to know that he saw that angry, tempest-driven sky on a night walk, and said to his companion—"Look, there's the background for my *Calvary*."

The pictures painted by Mr. Ricketts are so different from the productions of most of his contemporaries that Philistia, which likes the normal, may be pardoned for disliking the feeling of discomfort that they provoke. But those who like them, like them very much. His rhythmic figures, his prepossession for the silhouette, his love of a flying banner or a flaming torch, his memories of admirations in art of an older day, the reconдите learning of some of his subjects, and the uneasy arrangement of some of his compositions—such things are not the furniture of a popular painter; but when these attributes fuse into a dramatic conception, the result is memorable, as in *The*



"HELIODORUS EXPELLED FROM THE TEMPLE." BY CHARLES RICKETTS



"CALVARY." FROM THE OIL
PAINTING BY CHARLES RICKETTS

Charles Ricketts

Betrayal. This picture, at any rate, is plain to the eye at the first glance. I find in it great sincerity and great pathos, an idea, a decorative vision, visualised. It needs no explanation, and he must be hard of heart who can look upon it without emotion. Feeling is the note of his Biblical pictures, strongly marked in his *Christ before the People*, and in his sombre and dignified *Deposition*. An almost rabid passion for decorative movement marks some of his pictures suggested by classical themes, such as *Heliodorus expelled from the Temple* and *Messalina*. And sometimes, I, his admirer, falter in my admiration, as in the wild fantasy called *Walpurgisnacht*. But with *Don Juan and the Statue*, we are on firm ground again, a success of interpretation not illustration, something that is not extraneous, but that adds to our pictorial understanding of the legend.

You may like or dislike his decorative method that insists upon notice in many of his pictures, but at any rate it is personal. Originality, individuality are also the notes of the eight stage mountings he has undertaken. Those who saw *The Persians*, *Salome*, *Electra*, and *A Florentine Tragedy*, realised how much their enjoyment was



"SALOME IN THE LAP OF HERODIAS"
(BRONZE). BY CHARLES RICKETTS



"CENTAUR AND BABY FAUN" (BRONZE). BY CHARLES RICKETTS

increased by the Ricketts system of scenic arrangement, and the beautiful colour harmonies of curtains and costumes. Perhaps when the National Theatre is instituted, he will be given a "free hand." That free hand he had in the illustrations to the memorable "Dial"—an occasional publication edited by C. S. Ricketts and C. H. Shannon, and also in his woodcuts for *Daphnis and Chloe*, and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*. But that phase of his versatility has apparently ceased, outshoudered by the claims of modelling, painting, collecting and writing. Yet there are those who consider that of all his art activities it is in design that he takes the highest rank.

Although he writes extremely well, vividly and with *abandon*, if *abandon* can be used to describe a style that follows the classical models, I do not think that he feels any

Charles Ricketts

overmastering impulse to write. The demand for a book floats into his orbit, and the book is written, in a caligraphy so small that the picturesque chapter on the "Death of Aretino" in his "Titian" could be almost inscribed upon a postcard. Perhaps as I have shrunk from attempting to report Mr. Ricketts' talk I may be allowed to quote a few passages from his new work, that on "Titian," beginning with a passage on the technique of "Danaë": "The gold, rose, the mauves of the skin are the result of lucky revisions and 'over paints' by which the richness of texture and tissue are conveyed, for Titian's contention that flesh cannot be painted *alla prima* rests on a knowledge of the various layers of superimposed skin upon a varicoloured basis by which Nature herself constructs the bloom of human flesh, which emulates the gleam of a pearl, and the luminous grain of a camellia."

This on what he considers Titian's masterpiece :



"DON JUAN AND THE STATUE"

BY CHARLES RICKETTS

"The *Bacchus and Ariadne* has haunted Rubens, and Vandyck and Watts; and for three more centuries it will haunt the Vandyck and the Watts of the future. As mere painting no work equals it. We may prefer to this result the art of Michelangelo or the art of Rembrandt, but they are supreme in different fields of human endeavour, and might, as far as comparison is possible, be the denizens of some different planet."

And here is the conclusion of the matter following shortly after the penetrating statement that the tragic art of Michelangelo rules in the kingdom of the mind; to the great Venetian the aspect of the outer world counted for more.

"Greatness in art has been defined as strength tempered by sweetness, and if we recognise in the unrivalled art of Michelangelo (to whom this definition has been applied) a superhuman strength, tempered by a sense of something beyond power, and by a sense of compassion equal to his strength,

with Titian there is no such contrast in aim: we leave the abrupt mountain world of thought for happier tablelands spreading out beneath the light under which it is good to live; his art is rich as Italy, profound and tranquil as the Mediterranean, his strength has its roots in the wealth of a nature outwardly placid, yet varied and strong with the strength of perfect sanity and health ripened by the richness of the sun."

Few artists, I imagine, have such a knowledge of the history of art as Mr. Ricketts, or are able to visualise and describe eloquently, even to the cracks and re-paintings, pictures he has seen. This would seem to be an instinctive gift. He can recollect seeing his first Old Master at the age of three, and he remembers it. By the age of sixteen he knew the British Museum thoroughly. Have I said enough? It

Prince Paul Troubetzkoï

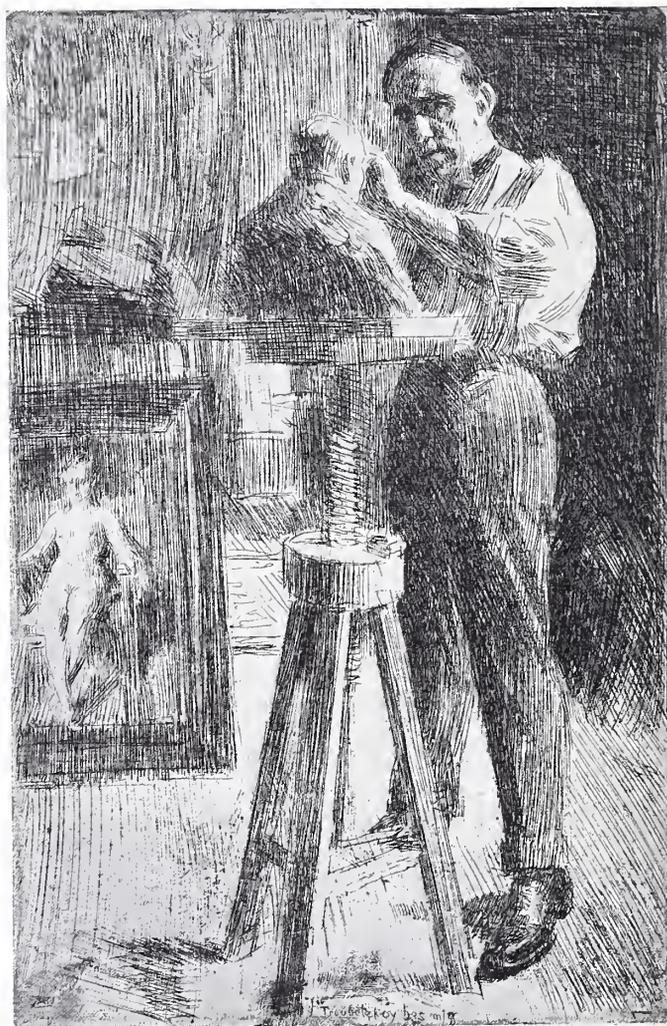
is difficult to write about a living man, particularly about a man so "clever and various" as Mr. Ricketts. As he has a quick and, when needed, a caustic opinion on everything, I wonder what he will think of my attempt to pin and catalogue him as if he were a butterfly. But, perhaps, he will not tell me. Perhaps he will be content to talk about it with Mr. Shannon, and Mr. Shannon will listen and smile.

THE SCULPTURE OF PRINCE PAUL TROUBETZKOI. BY ACHILLE SEGARD.

VERY tall, very thin, with large and powerful muscles, a long clean-shaven face, a high forehead, and smooth hair, with a very prominent nose, a strong chin, and eyes which appear small, over-shadowed as they are by heavy arched eyebrows—such is, in appearance, Paul Troubetzkoï. See him at work! The intense concentration of his mind upon the subject refines all the characteristics of his rugged features. His big and powerful but dexterous hand moulds the clay into shape—it is an expressive hand, the symbol as it were of a newly awakened sensibility in full and intimate concord with the living model. Now it is but a humble dog asleep—now this diminutive quadruped becomes the synthesis of all the traits of animal life, in the same way as to the eyes of a philosopher a single insect can be an epitome of all the terrestrial fauna. As moulded by the strong supple fingers of the artist, the dog's form bends and swells in faithful imitation of the contours of the real animal, and in perfect harmony with its lines, masses and curves, but all at the same time has undergone such subtle transformation in its interpretation by the brain and heart of man, that it becomes in truth a new creation, different from the other and imbued with another sort of life. By an instinctive action all that is unessential is eliminated, a simplification takes place, and a new style is evolved which is in accord with the inner

mood of the artist. The sculptor gets up, and the dog, knowing that this means permission for him to move, relaxes his pose. He comes forward and, like a good dog, puts his fine muzzle on his master's knees and looks at him with soft eyes beaming with devotion. Paul Troubetzkoï gives him a piece of bread as he would give it to a friend, and this action of the artist is full of affection and intimacy, for the animal is to him a companion a friend, and almost a brother.

After watching these final stages of the sitting, one is in a position better to understand the reason why Paul Troubetzkoï is unanimously conceded to be the leading portrayer of animals in his own country, and one of the very first in the world. Troubetzkoï has a natural affection for all dumb creatures; and this affection, which is at once



"PRINCE PAUL TROUBETZKOI IN HIS STUDIO." FROM THE ETCHING BY ANDERS ZORN