

An Artist in the House

by

John Herbert Marr

Two rows away, Andrea Firestorm watched the newest M.P. curiously. He had a lean, almost gaunt look which, she decided, came not from sport and fitness but from suffering and hardship. She noted how uncomfortably he moved amongst them in his loose, thick cotton shirt and sober tie, clearly new for the occasion, and guessed what he must be thinking, remembering her own first day.

The newest M.P. was in fact overawed by the bustle and clamour of voices, and by so many hundreds of people constantly entering and leaving the chamber. The old leather of the benches was worn and cold, and uncomfortable where it had been pressed into so many previous shapes. The ever-present television eye unnerved him, leaving him furtively glancing to spot the tell-tale red light and wondering if he dare scratch his nose or wriggle to be more comfortable. He was not by nature a seeker after publicity, which made it seem the more incredible that he should suddenly be mixing with so many famous faces; he had little knowledge of business or the world outside his work and was nervous of ever speaking in public amongst these champions of liberty and experts of finance and the law.

He had struggled for a living all his life, and now was being paid big money for just sitting here - he wondered how much time he ought to put into the chamber to justify it; and did they need his P45 tax sheet? The little details niggled him; it would be just his misfortune for some pressman to get hold of his ignorance and splash it across a tabloid: "M.P. Dodges Tax". He guessed that helpful girl in the office upstairs would sort it out, and explain when his first salary would go into the bank; he definitely needed that, but suspected it would go much quicker than he had first imagined, now he required a flat near the House. He decided to find her office and collect his thoughts. Andrea watched him stand and work his way uncertainly to the gangway, remembering to bow to the Speaker as he exited.

He had been shown round the House earlier by his sponsors, but was now unsure of the route they had raced round so briefly; the back of the chamber was a jumbled warren of small passages and stairways, with many unmarked doors off them. He took one which looked familiar

and suddenly found himself in a long passageway, lined with pictures along both sides. He was entranced - so many, and spanning such a wealth of talent, from priceless portraits to almost childish pencil sketches. Many of the pictures were of former members, and as he took them in, the background voices of living members still debating could be heard on the discrete speaker system giving the portraits a life and presence which was eerie in the dim room.

He stopped before one particular one. It was of a Spanish woman, with a proud even arrogant upturned face, and large demanding eyes, her dark hair cunningly peeping from beneath a tight-drawn gold-embroidered shawl. It was a beautifully drawn portrait, not large, and in a modest frame, but that did not matter; for somehow to his artist's eye the picture was not right.

"What do you think of our Dona, then?" The voice startled him and he spun round. A woman stood behind him, slightly to one side, looking at the picture over his shoulder. Andrea wore a thick-knitted black jersey with ruff collar, pulled into her neat waist by a heavy loose belt, complemented by a long, plain black skirt which smelled of quality. Her hair was dark and quaffed like the picture, and she carried a shoulder bag which hung in straight and efficient lines, emphasising her composure. He recognised her from the chamber, and knew her as one of the 'older', meaning longer-established, members though she was younger than he.

"She's beautiful!" he said. "Such glowing detail. No one does work like that now."

"You recognise it, then?" she queried.

"No-" he hesitated - "it looks like a Goya, but not a well-known one ..."

"Very clever!" she murmured. "Not many people could guess that so quickly - you're very good. So why the doubt?"

He waited, thinking. "It's not the picture that's wrong," he decided. "It's the position. It's hung too low."

She looked startled. "What a strange thing to say," she answered with a hint of puzzlement in her voice. "This picture is the star of our collection, and we deliberately moved it there for more effect! This gallery is open to the public during summer recess," she explained, "and we need to draw crowds in to help finance our running costs."

"It needs to be higher," he persisted doggedly.

“You may be right,” she said slowly, looking at him thoughtfully, “but it’s not me you need to convince, it’s Donald. He’s in charge of the art collection in the House.”



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“Well, he must be stupid to arrange them like this. Anyone can see it’s wrong.”

“Oh, can they, indeed!” a voice cut in from his other shoulder. Donald Levington was an impeccably dressed older man, with greying hair set in long waves. He wore gold-rimmed glasses, a dark striped suit set off with a deep blue club tie and a large white pocket handkerchief. He spoke with a soft Scottish accent. “And just how would you arrange it, then?”

Arthur thought rapidly. This man clearly wielded a lot of power, and no doubt he would not take lightly to criticism. But Arthur knew his subject and was prepared to stand his ground. “Yes,” he answered. “It should be higher. This picture was painted to dominate. Do you see the eyes? They should be looking down on you. The master knew about horizons - here it is a low horizon, but it should be at least at your eye level to draw you into the picture. It is a small picture, but he uses the Golden Ratio to set his features; the proportions of the frame, the proportion of sky to ground, the proportions of her face; all give classical form and demand a classical setting. It needs to be higher to retain the Golden Ratio to its surroundings - set like this, the ratio is broken and the eye subconsciously protests. Also, you’ve swamped it with small pictures. This can easily sit amongst some of your largest portraits; they won’t detract from it or dominate it, but will be paying homage to this great woman, as though submitting to her will.

Besides, I can see the patch on the wallpaper where it used to hang higher.”

Donald laughed. “If there’s one thing I admire, it’s an expert in his field,” he said. “Don’t worry, you’ve not insulted me - I was only given the job because I’m known to have a heap of pictures at home, and they think I’m a connoisseur - but I’m no artist. Go on telling me why it’s wrong there.”

“We’ve lost so much of what the masters knew,” continued Arthur. “They used classical lines because they found their power from experiences in life; they noted strong forms and used them. Look at the set of her head, the firmness of the chin, the character of the eyes; every detail adds to the whole; unless it’s set right, you detract from the master’s intention. It needs to go back where it was.”

“Alright, you’ve convinced me,” Donald said.

Andrea was delighted with herself, and probed him further. “And what about our two pencil boys?” she asked.

Arthur looked across to the side wall, where there were a number of pencil sketches, some going back several centuries. Two in particular stood out - a pair of boys, full length, almost full size, in dark detailed drawings. “They’re fantastic,” said Arthur, searching for words, “they’re Flemish I’d guess-”

“Yes, but why do they dominate so much?”

“It’s the detail,” said Arthur. “That and the depth of black he uses. You see, these modern sketches and pastels only hint at detail; it’s all thrown down in a hurry. But in these two, the detail is the drawing: the subject is irrelevant, but you seem to see every hair on their heads, almost the stitches in their clothes. He conveys colour through a hundred shades of pencil. It overwhelms you; no artist does such work now, it’s considered too photographic - and too time-consuming.”

“Aye,” cut in Donald, “but what will you do about it?”

“Move them,” said Arthur, newly emboldened by the sudden appreciation. “Move them to the other end of the gallery by themselves. They stand apart. Let this side be devoted to your light-weight and your flim-flam. It makes a pretty wash of colour, and people are interested enough in the famous faces.”

Donald chortled. "He's right you know, Andrea, We'll get it done at once." And he left in great glee.

Andrea was delighted. "You've scored a hit there," she said, and reached up to kiss him on the cheek.

Arthur stiffened. "You know," he said prudishly, "that's very sexist. If I kissed you you'd think I was being fresh."

Her face reddened and lit up with surprise. "It was meant to be a complement. There are hundreds of men out there would give anything for me to kiss them, you know."

"Well don't." He was petulant now. "I'm a believer in old values in behaviour as well as art. Our whole lives have moved away from classic lines, and look as wrong as these pictures, not because we're wrong inside but because the setting's wrong. We need to re-stock, to revalue ourselves and the world we're in."

Far from being angry, she seemed delighted and almost clapped him. "What a performance," she breathed, "I can see why you've become a politician."

"I don't feel like one. To be honest, this is the last thing I wanted to be doing. I'm supposed to be an artist."

"You chose to stand, nobody made you. 'The Art Teacher made good'," she quoted. "We do read the papers here you know. Your bi-election was headline news for days. How in Hades did you ever get selected?"

"Social commitment. I was the one bringing education into the inner cities; make the kids feel useful, you know? The problem is, I don't feel useful. What can I add to the great debates of our time? 'Pollution' - litter and smut are what's normal now; who remembers clean air and green trees? 'Nuclear Proliferation' - since the Gulf War, every tin-pot state's been scrabbling for do-it-yourself Big-Bang kits; arms reduction's joined the junk heap of hopeless causes. 'Poverty' - what hope is there for children's minds when we don't even feed their bodies? I hoped I might be able to influence events if I accepted; you know - represent the poor sods out there who are always the losers. Some chance."

“Well, a real Mr. Givenin aren’t we? Look at you. You’ve been here one afternoon, smelt the power of this place and you want to head for home. How the shit do you think things get done here? You use influence. You talk to people. You make suggestions. It isn’t all tub-thumping and electioneering, you know.”

“And what influence do you think I’ll have? I don’t know anyone. Even our party’s still in opposition.”

“You know about art. Perhaps that is what we need right now, more than ever. And you do know someone; your first day, and already you’ve taken on the Lion of the Chamber and won: you’ve influenced the layout of pictures in the House gallery. It may not seem much to you, but Donald Levington happens to be chairman of the Scottish Affairs Committee and of the Arts Council. Those pictures he mentioned are from his own gallery; and he’s Director of the Board of Scottish Galleries.”

Arthur looked puzzled. “But he’s on the other side, isn’t he? Why’s he been so friendly to me?”

“Oh there are no real sides here,” she answered. “That’s just in front of the cameras. Behind the set, so to speak, most people get on with the business of keeping the House moving smoothly, and all the committees are made up from representative members from all the parties. Donald will be more than grateful for your suggestions - I bet he gets them changed by tomorrow. I shouldn’t be surprised if you’re not offered a place on the Art’s Committee in the near future; believe me, your art has earned you a place in this world already.”