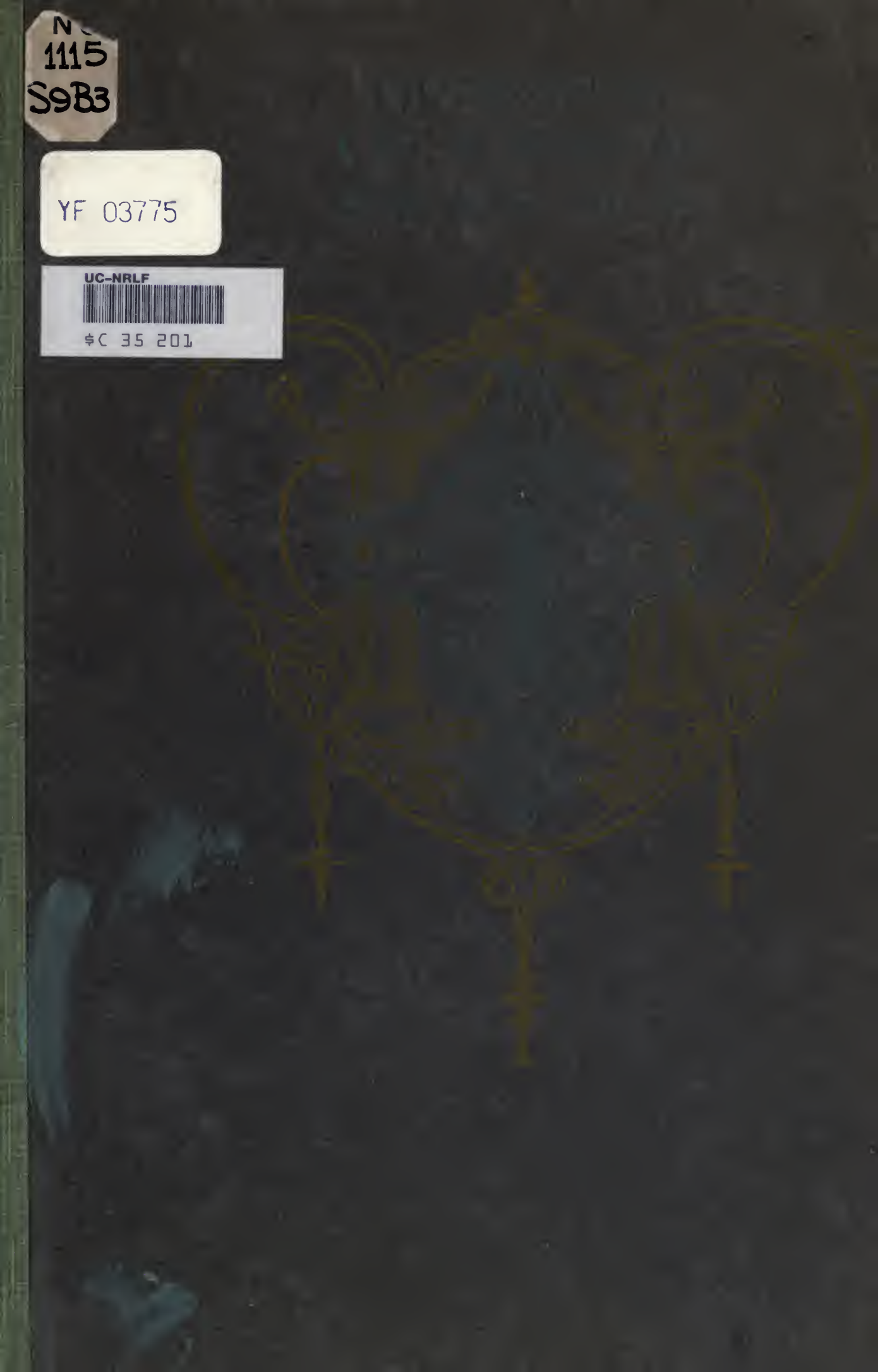
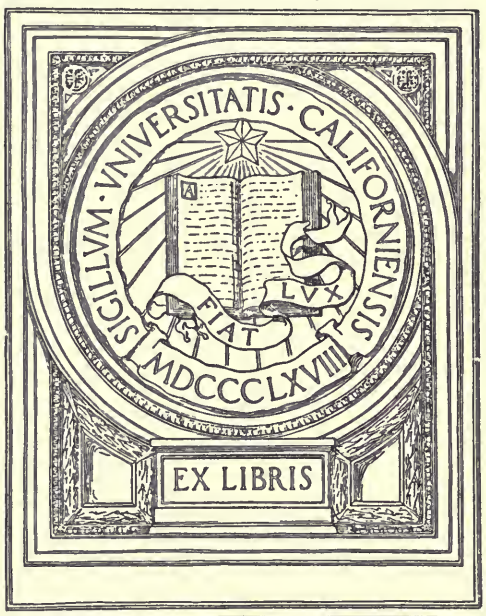




Leslie Van Ness Denman -

DRAWINGS OF JOHN M. SWAN R.A.

MODERN MASTER
DRAUGHTSMEN

FRONTISPIECE

AFRICAN ELEPHANT

DRAWINGS OF JOHN M. SWAN R.A.

LONDON. GEORGE NEWNES LIMITED
SOUTHAMPTON STREET. STRAND. W.C
NEW YORK. CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS—*continued*

THE DRAWINGS OF J. M. SWAN, R.A.

BY A. L. BALDRY

THERE is perhaps a little difficulty in defining the place which Mr. J. M. Swan occupies among the artists of our times. He excels in so many forms of art, and he turns from one to the other so readily and so often that it is impossible to label him with the exactness which would satisfy ordinary people who regard versatility as a disconcerting defect. A very large section of the public seems to consider the adoption of a set pattern by the art-worker as an essential condition to which he must conform before he can expect to be recognised as one of the leaders of his profession. If he changes his methods and varies his production he throws upon the popular intelligence a strain that is too exhausting to be endured, and he makes demands upon the attention of the lover of tradition that are too exacting to be quite permissible. In fact, he outrages one of the most solemnly accepted of all artistic conventions, that the man who has once made a success by a particular type of performance must adhere to this same type without perceptible variation to the end of his career.

To quote instances of artists who have arrived at the widest popularity by this simple device is certainly unnecessary, they can be supplied easily enough by every student of modern art history whose experience extends over a few years. The interesting point about Mr. Swan's position is that he has attained it, not merely by avoiding the broad road which so many of his fellows have been content to tread, but actually by straying in any and every direction where his fancy has led him. He has confined himself within none of the recognised bounds; he is a painter and sculptor; he works with equal facility in oils, water-colours, and pastel; he paints figure subjects, portraits, and animals; and in sculpture he treats the human form and animal life with impartial power. He has kept an open mind and has never dulled his observation by cultivating narrow preferences or by dwelling too closely upon the trivialities of his profession.

Yet he has not paid what is usually the penalty of independence

He has not been ignored because he has refused to work as others do, and from this fact can be judged how real is his mastery and how dominating is his artistic personality. The general public has accepted him as one of the leaders of the British school, and by art lovers of the better sort at home and abroad he is hailed as an artist rarely accomplished and possessed of exceptional understanding of his responsibilities. He has a host of admirers who are quite ready to follow him in his excursions over the wide field of art practice. His influence is a healthy one, for its tendency is to widen the popular outlook and to prove that narrow specialising is not the only, or even the best, way of obtaining recognition. Mr. Swan, indeed, can be taken as a standing example of the possibility of securing it in full measure by an exactly opposite course of procedure, by the cultivation of a catholic taste and by the acquisition of an executive equipment which would serve him equally well in all the phases of his activity.

It can be admitted, however, that there is one particular direction in which he has established himself as pre-eminent not only among modern artists but also among those whose names are preserved in the record of the world's achievement. He has made a very exact study of animals, and has exhaustively investigated their pictorial possibilities and their adaptability to the sculptor's purposes. The results of these investigations he has set forth in a splendid series of works in various materials, in pictures, drawings, statues and statuettes; and in the execution of these works he has brought into operation all his resources of thought and craftsmanship. The note that he has struck is in many respects new; he does not harp on the convention which has satisfied so many other painters who have occupied themselves with kindred studies, but chooses and follows a line that is almost entirely his own.

To have found a new way in a form of art which has already engaged the attention of such numbers of able craftsmen is an achievement for which he deserves the fullest credit. As animal painting has flourished through so many generations, and has indisputably been very popular with both artists and the public, he might not unreasonably have been content to deal with it in the manner sanctioned by custom and by the practice of his predecessors. But wisely he has preferred to see for himself what are its more or less untouched possibilities, and to develop them in a judicious spirit of indifference to tradition. With the rarest powers of observation to help him, and with his highly cultivated originality, he has reverted to minute examination of Nature at first hand, and has taken up the study of his subject at a period antecedent to its becoming involved in a cloud of conventions and formulated methods.

The value of the example he is setting is all the greater because this tendency to obscure with formulæ a type of art which depends for its real success upon its truth and accuracy of interpretation has had results which are visibly pernicious. Under the influences by which it has been affected the pictorial representation of animals has become artificial and unintelligent, and has lost the significance which is one of the most vital essentials in all seriously artistic effort. Animals are introduced into pictures as accessories in some sentimental story, as incidental objects of interest, and are treated as the minor characters in dramas with which they may or may not be legitimately connected. In art of this sort they are made to play parts which are, as a rule, not natural to them, and they are degraded by the painters to the level of the performing beasts which provide such saddening spectacles in the circus or music hall. The dog, for instance, as the friend of man, is given more than his fair share of the follies of his master; he poses and attitudinises, he smirks self-consciously, or he assumes an air of exaggerated sentiment that sits on him uncomfortably and that is absolutely foreign to his nature. In all this art the crack of the trainer's whip is too plainly heard, and the results are more ridiculous than persuasive.

Things are, perhaps, even worse when a painter turns from trained dogs, sentimental horses, or photographic cattle, to the great wild beasts which have not been offered the indignity of domestication. He will not or cannot understand that these splendid savages have characters of their own, and that they steadfastly refuse to ape the tricks and graces of humanity. So he strives to make them, as he conceives it, interesting to the people who go to menageries and enjoy the excitement of stirring up caged lions with a stick. He flatters these lovers of wild life by presenting to them an animal that they can understand, either cowed and tamed by solitary confinement or furiously rampant in some moment of despairing protest against the indignity of its position. Worst of all he chooses, on occasions, to suggest that the dwellers in the jungle are subject to human emotions, and he depicts them with expressions that they are absolutely incapable of assuming. The lion in love, wearing the sheepish smile of a courting rustic, is a painfully familiar spectacle, and its familiarity has bred a well-deserved contempt among thinking people for art which can be so futile and so misconceived.

Where the blame lies for the existence of these conventions, whether it should be put upon the public which enjoys these travesties or upon the artists who produce them, need hardly be discussed; probably it can be equally divided between the producers and con-

sumers of art work. People who have never studied the realities of animal life have failed to perceive how untrue such pictures of semi-human beasts really are; and most of the painters, finding that they could gain acceptance without attempting more than this very large section of the public was prepared to admire, have not troubled to properly master their subject. But anyhow the result of these lapses of taste and conscientiousness has been decidedly demoralising; it emphasises in the clearest way the need for a new influence, and proves plainly how much there is to gain by the introduction of healthier ideas and saner methods into a phase of artistic expression which has been allowed to become stereotyped.

No better man than Mr. Swan could have been found to head a rebellion against a harmful tradition, no one more thoroughly qualified by dominance of character and shrewd insight into æsthetic problems. Moreover he has had the advantage of a very thorough training which has enabled him to overcome completely all executive difficulties and to realise his intentions in an unhesitating and significant fashion. This training was more serious and prolonged than usual; it was directed throughout by a deliberate desire on his part to master the details which are of vital importance to the artist who is aiming at the highest kind of achievement, and its duration was determined by his resolve to come into the professional arena only when he was amply equipped for arduous undertakings. He wished, it would seem, to postpone his public appearance until his wings were fully fledged and well able to support him in his most ambitious flights, until he could command success by the indisputable quality of his work. There was in his case none of that experimental practice by which most artists gradually build up a popular reputation as they pass slowly and visibly through the successive stages of their immaturity; he began with his powers perfectly developed and with the tentative period of his career already behind him. He has ripened since; his art has become more impressive in its masterly confidence; but it has changed not at all in its purpose or its meaning.

Mr. Swan was born in 1847, and it was not until more than thirty years later that he made his first appearance at the Academy with a picture of *Dante and the Leopard*. In the interval he had gone through a great variety of educational experiences. He began his systematic study at the Worcester School of Art, and thence he passed in succession to the Lambeth School and the Schools of the Royal Academy. Like many other artists of English birth, he discovered that the teaching at this last institution was not sufficient for his purposes at that time, so in 1874 he migrated to Paris in search of ampler know-

ledge and more helpful guidance than he could obtain at home. The master under whom he decided to work was J. L. Gèrome, whose academic precision was exactly what such a sincere student would most appreciate; and in the studio of this famous teacher he found the atmosphere of serious striving after complete achievement which he specially desired for the development of his own capacities.

With a characteristic resolve to make the most of what he recognised as his best opportunities he spent a much longer time in Paris than English students usually care to devote to the finishing stage of their education. Although Mr. Swan was in 1874 so far advanced that he was admitted to the life classes at the Beaux Arts immediately after his arrival, he remained at work there for some years, gathering knowledge not only from his teachers but also from fellow-students like Dagnan-Bouveret and Bastien Le Page, with whom he was brought into intimate association. He extended, too, the scope of his study, for, on the advice of Gèrome, who interested himself keenly in his progress, he began to occupy himself seriously with modelling, a branch of artistic expression for which he showed a special aptitude. The master he chose to guide him in this fresh subject was Frémiet, the sculptor whose splendid representations of animal life are ranked now among the masterpieces of the French school. By the teaching of Frémiet, and by close and prolonged examination of the works of Barye, another artist of masterly originality, Mr. Swan was soon enabled to command as much attention by his sculpture as he had already earned by his notable efforts in painting and draughtsmanship.

As an immediate result of his study of modelling he was induced, partly by his own inclination and partly by the suggestions of Frémiet, to enter upon a course of anatomical investigations. These he carried on with an amount of care and precision that would have done credit to a man who proposed to make surgery rather than art his profession for the future. He went as a pupil to the best authorities on the subject, to anatomists like Gervais and Duval, and worked long and assiduously in various dissecting-rooms. To give his art a firm and stable foundation he sought scientifically for exact and practical information about the details of anatomical structure and about the character of the construction by which the surface forms in the bodies of human beings and animals are determined. Against the danger of allowing exact science to dull his responsiveness to visual impressions he guarded by frequent artistic exercises, by recording pictorially or in the round the results of his dissecting-room researches, and by applying in accordance with a well-considered system the formal knowledge which he was gathering from surgical experts and anatomists.

When at last his stay in Paris came to an end and he returned to London to work out his artistic destiny, he was in no hurry to pose as a man to whom all the secrets of his craft had been revealed. Indeed, he has never been guilty of assuming any such attitude; a student he has remained to the present day, and an earnest seeker after completeness, though at the same time he has not hesitated to set himself tasks which made the greatest demands upon his powers. For some while he continued his researches in anatomy, and he also became a regular frequenter of the Zoological Gardens, where he had opportunities that he knew well how to turn to account of perfecting his knowledge of animals. Though at first he produced comparatively few exhibition pictures, he sent to the Academy from 1878 onwards canvases in which he summed up convincingly the results of his many years of exhaustive study, and in which he asserted what was generally recognised as an exceptional right to attention.

Yet he waited some years before he received those official honours to which artists of unusual ability are held to be entitled. The first of these distinctions came from abroad, in 1885, when he was elected a member of the Dutch Water Colour Society—he was, indeed, famous in Holland long before he was regarded in England as anything more than a man of possible, but by no means certain, eminence—but public acknowledgment at home of his special claims was deferred until 1889, in which year his picture *The Prodigal Son* made something of a sensation at the Academy and was purchased by the Chantrey Fund Trustees. Five years later came his election as an Associate of the Academy, and in the spring of 1905 his promotion to the rank of Academician. In 1896 he was made an Associate of the Royal Society of Painters in Water Colours and a full member in 1899. During the period of a little over five and twenty years, to which his activity as an exhibiting artist has been confined, he has shown nothing that has been in the smallest degree unworthy of an artist with his high ideals, nothing that has not been carefully considered and brought into conformity with the demands of a fastidious taste. He has always been the severest critic of his own achievements, and has never abated his desire to satisfy himself under any misapprehension of the value of the popular acclamation with which his works have latterly been received.

So well, indeed, has he maintained his standard that it would not be possible to make any exceptions from the list of performances which have appropriately represented him in the various exhibitions. Canvases like the *Prodigal Son*, *Orpheus*, *The Syren Ship*, and *The Young Bathers*, can be quoted as illustrations of his fanciful invention;

others like his *Tigers Drinking*, *Polar Bears Swimming*, and the magnificent *Ceylon Leopards* now in the National Gallery of New South Wales, as examples of his insight into animal character and of his power of realising accurate observations; and statues like his *Boy and Bear Cubs*, and the *Puma and Macaw*, as instances of his admirable application of the technicalities of sculpture to the expression of his artistic creed; but these are not to be taken as abnormal successes which overshadow all the rest of his practice; they rank rather as types by which the whole of his work can be judged. Even the most casual observer can see that the common vice of working for the market has never affected him; he gives to the world only his best, only what he believes to be wholly explanatory of his intentions and thoroughly logical in its assertion of what he holds to be vital matters.

In this, it is true, he does not stand alone; there have been, and there still are, conscientious artists who are willing to make sacrifices, if necessary, for conscience sake. But the kind of æsthetic devotion which will risk everything for a principle is always rare, and the conscience which is proof against the temptations of popularity is rarer still. The man who has made his reputation has not the same stimulus as the one who is still struggling for recognition, and, consciously or unconsciously, is apt to relax his effort because triumphs come to him easily. Therefore, in Mr. Swan's case, some comment is permissible—for the sake of example—on the fact that the wide acknowledgment of his right to be considered one of the chief of modern masters has rather spurred him to greater exertions than induced any inclination towards mannerism or any belief in his own infallibility. The student-like enthusiasm has remained the guiding idea of his maturity and has kept vividly alive in his mind the desire for progress. It has saved him from the too common delusion that less pains need be taken to keep a position once secured than are necessary for its attainment; and it has made impossible any trading on his reputation. He is as completely convinced as he ever was of the vital importance of constant and strenuous labour for his own satisfaction and for his own information; and whatever he thinks worthy to represent him in public exhibitions can be accepted without hesitation because he has thought it fit to show.

Nothing perhaps throws more light upon his working method than the series of his drawings, a series which sums up the observations of a life-time. When an artist is painting a picture purely mechanical exigencies compel him to spend weeks or months upon the canvas, elaborating touch by touch and detail by detail a comprehensive pictorial scheme. No matter how rapid he may be, or how direct and

unhesitating his manner of handling, some of the first freshness of his inspiration must inevitably be lost in the gradual evolution of the idea that he wishes to convey. That he adds during this process of evolution other things which compensate for the loss of spontaneity can readily be admitted; he amplifies the main intention of his picture and strengthens the thread of his story by attaching to it various subsidiary interests, until at last he produces what is as much an intellectual effort as it is an illustration of an æsthetic creed. But the carefully devised and finished picture is necessarily, from the very circumstances by which its production is attended, less forcible in its revelation of the artist's personality than those slighter preliminary works which he has done simply to please himself. If he is sincere, his sketches and studies from Nature are wholly unaffected by any consideration of popular judgment, or by any concession to exhibition conventions, because in carrying them out he has had no intention of allowing them to pass from the privacy of his studio. They are notes of his impressions, reminders lest he should forget certain things with which it is essential that he should keep himself acquainted; but they concern him only and they may quite possibly be unintelligible to anyone else.

When they have been carried far enough to give to other people the same suggestion which they convey to the artist, they are often more fascinating to the sincere art-lover than the most ambitious and impressive pictures. Their directness, their simple statement of plain facts, and their freedom from pictorial circumlocutions are qualities which appeal convincingly to everyone who looks rather at the manner of art work than the subject-matter with which it deals—to everyone who has the taste to admire the artist's craftsmanship more than his ingenuity as a teller of stories or as an inventor of dramatic situations. The real sketch, so long as it is something more than a mere shorthand note, is doubly persuasive, because none of its meaning is veiled by artificial graces of execution or by unnecessary technical elaboration. What it has to say is said clearly, abruptly perhaps, but with so much point, that only the dull or demoralised intelligence can fail to grasp what it signifies. If the sketch is the work of a man whose facility of expression is guided by shrewdness of observation it is a thing of the utmost value and worthy to be ranked among his greater achievements. To treat it, as the unthinking do, as a slight thing, a trifle easily thrown off, and therefore to be lightly estimated, is but the manifestation of a vulgar prejudice—a concession to the commercial instinct which appraises the worth of a work of art by the number of hours of labour expended upon it by the artist.

What people who make this common mistake habitually forget is

that the fine sketch or the rapid but intimate study is only within the reach of the master. Only a great artist who has solved the most baffling problems which his craft presents can express in a few brief touches the complexity of the subject before him, and the more profound his knowledge the more apparently careless and summary will often be his record; but if his drawing be examined with proper attention, and with a real desire to understand what was his aim, the extraordinary appropriateness of every mark which he has impressed upon his paper will be perfectly apparent. He has not to fumble and hesitate like the beginner or the man of untrained insight; he knows exactly where to start and, most important of all, where to stop, but in the short interval between the beginning and the ending of his work he has gathered all that is necessary for the purpose he has in view and he has sifted out all superfluities; what remains is no more and no less than he knows to be artistically essential. But this perfection of knowledge, this capacity to economise labour, are gifts with which few men are endowed, and they are gifts which by their very rarity are entitled to more respect than they usually receive even from professed lovers of art.

Decidedly, if there were nothing more than the series of his drawings to fix Mr. Swan's place in the history of artistic achievement, he would still have a right to the highest honours which can fall to any member of his profession. This series, as has been already said, embodies the observations of a life-time, and therefore, as so many years of his life have been given up to peculiarly minute and exhaustive studies, it is more than ordinarily instructive. But with an amazing amount of understanding of the subjects with which he deals he has also acquired in ample measure the certainty of hand and the gift of rapid selection which are among the distinguishing qualifications of the great master, so that his drawings are not only memorable as illustrations of scientific research but they are as well models of easy and consummately skilful accomplishment. Examined one by one they reveal a sustained purpose to arrive at the truths of nature by a system which is compounded of logic and impressionability in exceptionally correct proportions. His receptive faculty, his power to see instantly and exactly what is most worthy of record, has been trained until it will respond perfectly to nature's promptings—until he can trust it to guide him always in the direction where there is the promise of great results. His logical sense has been refined and educated until he can depend upon it to save him from mistaking a vivid impression for a sane and solid conviction. This balanced temperament controls his hand and keeps the whole of his executive method from straying into

ineffectiveness or into that exaggeration of manner which is worse than ineffectiveness. He never hesitates in his statement of the facts that he chooses as artistically appropriate, but equally he never goes outside the technical limits which are prescribed by sound tradition and good taste.

The great majority of these drawings are of animals, a few only of the human figure. As a figure draughtsman he is distinguished by a fine sense of character and by a very accurate judgment of the qualities of line and modelling which make interesting the various types of humanity. He has a preference for the long, slender forms of youth, for the flattened curves and gentle angularities which are found in male and female figures before they have reached their fullest development; and these forms he treats with admirable discrimination. His knowledge of anatomy is never displayed unnecessarily, never insisted upon as it is by some painters who seem to have no other object in their work than to advertise the fact that they have gone through a course of education which they do not know how to apply. The figures he draws are those of normal beings, of boys and girls whose natural grace does not need to be over-idealised, and whose picturesque immaturity is attractive enough to be left unspoiled by the addition of elegant artificiality or by being forced to conform to the mannerism of this or that school. In a word he is a realist, but his realism is intelligent and used with proper perception both of its advantages and its dangers.

He is certainly not less a realist when he turns from human beings to animals, for in this latter branch of his practice he has carried the study of nature to its furthermost limits. But here again his fidelity to fact is altogether without any touch of pedantry; he does not laboriously insist upon stating minutely every insignificant detail of his subject, but sets down with masterly conciseness no more, and no less, than he wants to make his drawing convincing in its actuality. A few lines often suffice to convey this meaning, and at no time does he attempt more elaboration than the artistic motive legitimately demands; brevity is possible to him because he knows exactly what he can do with his materials and what it is that he has to visualise with their assistance. Here it is that the value of his years of anatomical and artistic research is most triumphantly demonstrated; he can fix in an instant on the vital things, and, with his mind made up, can confidently record just those realities which have the highest claim to attention.

It is this capacity that shows so strongly in all his drawings of animals. It enables him to seize at once upon the individuality of the beast he wishes to portray and helps him to suggest vividly its moods and emotions. Every turn of the lithe bodies, every pose and

attitude signify something which is quite comprehensible to the man who has more than a superficial understanding of animal character; and Mr. Swan, who has gone far below the surface and learned the significance of each seemingly chance movement, can interpret this character in all its varieties. He never makes the mistake of crediting his four-footed sitters with feelings or sentiments by which they could never be affected; he shows them as they really are, and reads with unhesitating accuracy the signs by which they reveal themselves. With the same accuracy he depicts their complexities of structure, the wonderfully constructed bodies that enable the great beasts of prey to play so successfully the parts assigned to them in the scheme of creation. His drawings, slight, summary, careless almost, as they often seem to be, are exact enough to be taken as scientific diagrams. The massive forms of the bones, the interlacing of the elastic muscles, the folds and creases of the skin, are all understood and properly accounted for; no physical characteristic is missed or judged at less than its full value. Yet the science of it all does not draw away attention from the splendid quality of his art. He knows too much to fail in adjusting the various parts which have to be pieced together to produce the final result, and he is too true an artist to turn away from the right path into byways which would lead him to denial of the principles that he has professed and practised throughout his memorable career.

ILLUSTRATIONS

HYDERABAD TIGRESS WALKING

LION AND LIONESS

TIGRESS

JAGUARS EATING

BEAR ON FLOE

HEAD OF AFRICAN LION

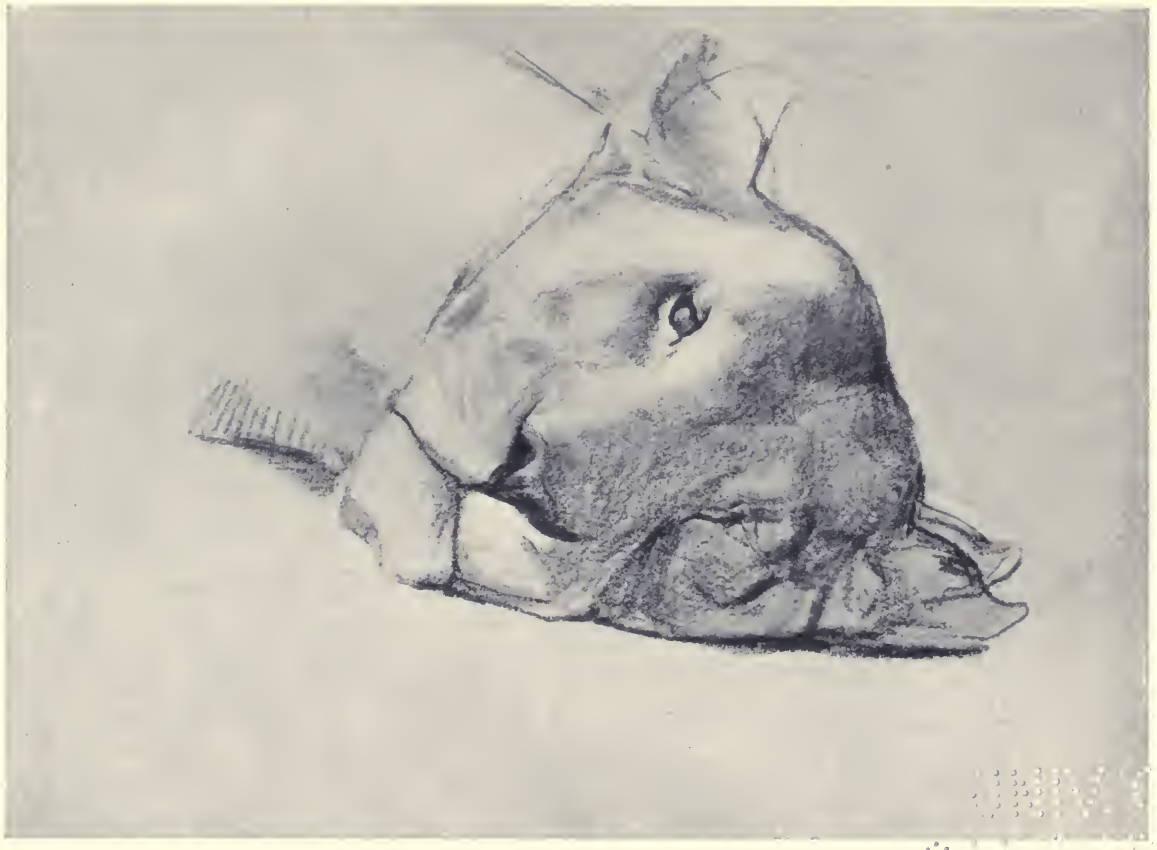
LIONESS DEFENDING HER CUBS

COMPOSITION FOR "GLADIATORS" OR "BESTIARII IN VIVARIUM"

HEAD OF AFRICAN LION IN PROFILE

JAGUAR WALKING

MALE JAGUAR



HEAD OF A LIONESS

JAGUAR

LIONESS WALKING

GROUP OF LEOPARDS

STUDY FOR COMPOSITION "DELUGE"

TIGER OF COCHIN CHINA, ASLEEP

INDIAN LEOPARDS IN REPOSE

PUMA

LIONESS EATING

LIONESS WALKING, A STUDY AT THE ZOO

GROUP OF INDIAN LEOPARDS

HEAD OF MALE POLAR BEAR

TIGRESS DRINKING

PLATE XXV

TIGER SEATED

PLATE XXVI

LIONESS WALKING, FRONT VIEW

GROUP OF TIGERS

POLAR BEAR WALKING, AMSTERDAM

A GROUP OF LIONS

CEYLON LEOPARDS EATING

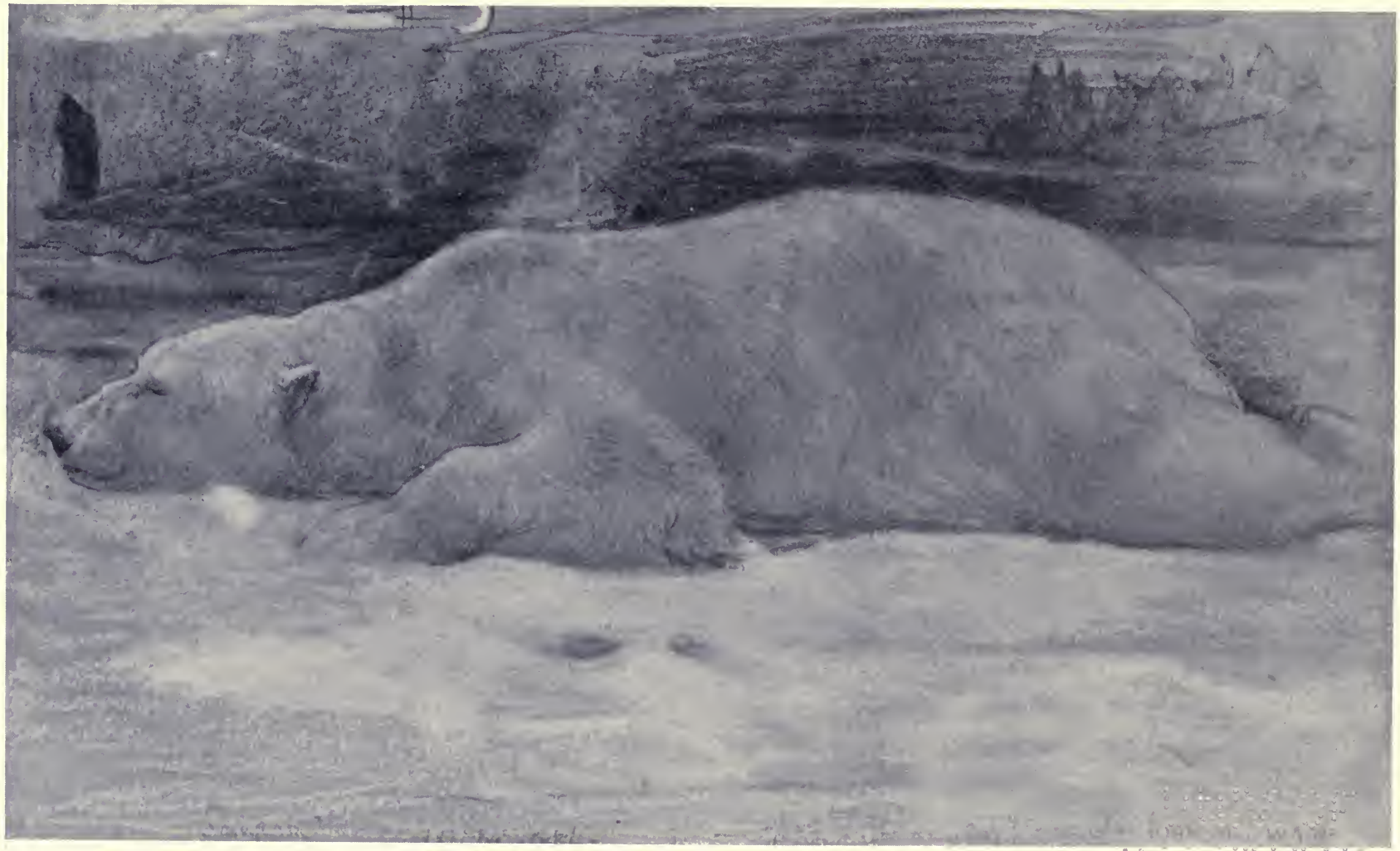
AFRICAN LION IN REPOSE

FOUR STUDIES OF TIGERS' HEADS

LION DISTURBED

CEYLON LEOPARDESS EATING

STUDY OF LEOPARDESS IN REPOSE



POLAR BEAR ON FLOE

STUDY OF FEMALE FIGURE FOR "FATA MORGANA"

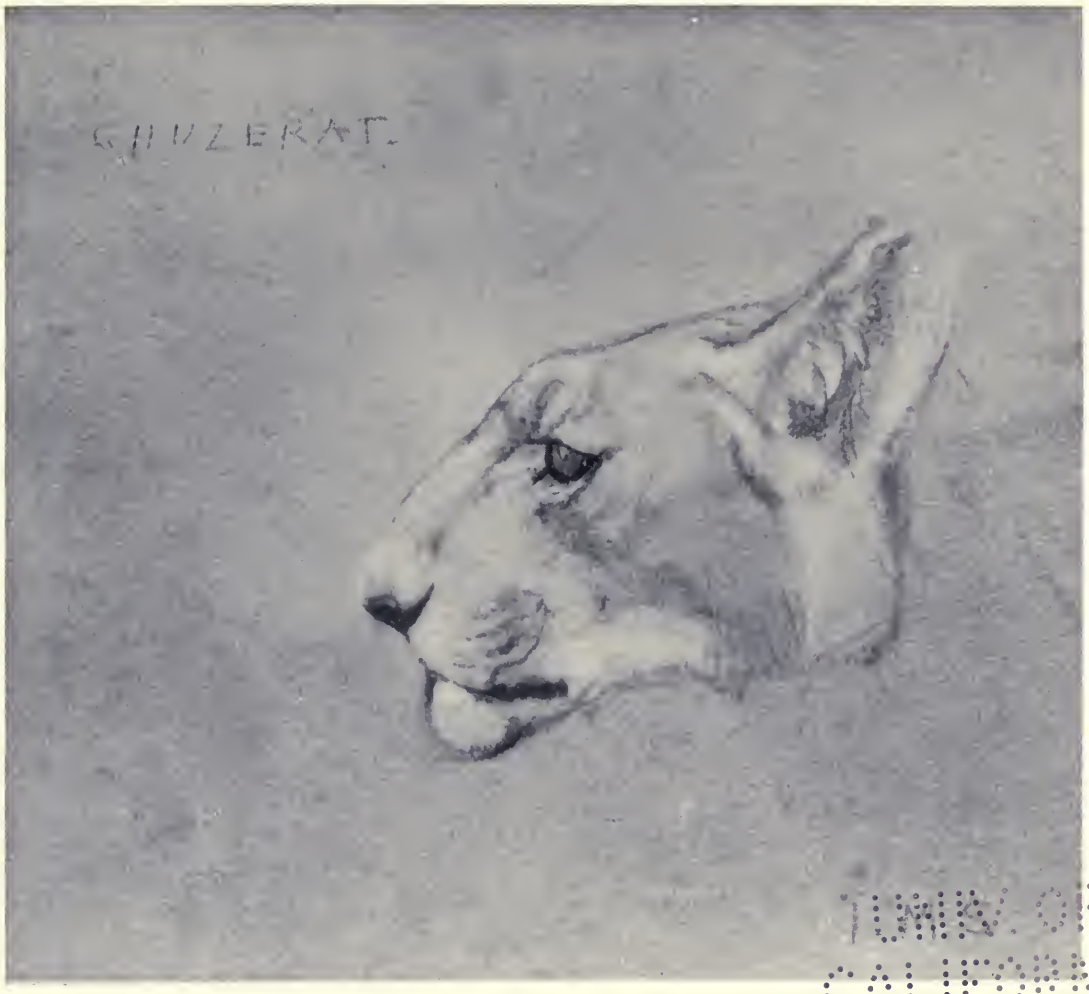
MALE PUMA ON TREE-TRUNK

PUMA ROLLING

AFRICAN LION WALKING

PUMAS

STUDY OF ADULT LION WALKING



HEAD OF YOUNG LION OF GHUZERAT

STUDY OF FIGURES FOR "THE EXPULSION"

PLATE XLV

TIGER EATING

PLATE XLVI

POLAR BEAR WATCHING SEAL HOLES

THREE STUDIES OF NUDE FOR "FATA MORGANA"

PLATE XLVIII

POLAR BEAR "SAMSON," ZOO, 1904

PLATE XLIX

HYDERABAD TIGER

PUMA ON A TREE

Paul Elder
& Company
San Francisco