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## PAUL PEEL, R.C.A. Reminiscences

Reid, G. A.

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PAUL PEEL, R.C.A.

Reminiscences by G. A. Reid, R.C.A.

After a short career as a student at the Ontario School of Art in Toronto and a subsequent experience as a painter of portraits, I entered the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 1883. Among the selected works by previous and the contemporary students stored in the Library I found some by Paul Peel, who I was informed, was a Canadian from London, Ontario. My interest was great enough to give them close study, and also to compare them with the other works which had been honored by a letter E put on with red paint on a lower corner. This sign was the master's initial and indicated that Thomas Eakins, idolized by his students of the Academy, had marked his approval of that particular piece of work. The student was not supposed to sign the work but was expected to write his name on the back.

Thus I came to know the name of Paul Peel, a Canadian Painter who lived his short life in Paris and made his name in an international sense, and who is now set high among Canadian Artists.

Coming back to Toronto after my first year in Philadelphia, I saw in Spooner's Gallery Peel's first works sent over from Paris. One was a portrait head of himself which had served as his entrance of admission to Gerome's Studio at the Beaux Arts Academy. The story told of it was that Peel had presented himself with an introduction from Eakins who had been a Gerome student, and Gerome asking to see some of his work, Peel replied he had brought none with him. Gerome said you must paint something for him to see. Peel asked what would be necessary, and Gerome turning him about before a mirror said, "Paint that." The portrait head showed Peel to be a very handsome and romantic looking young man.

About six years later I went to Paris for a year of study, and with our Philadelphia Alma Mater as a bond I went to his Studio and introduced myself. We were friends at once, and during the year in Paris we were together a great deal. As an Eakins enthusiast I enquired at the outset why he went to Philadelphia to study, and I found that he had read the same article in a magazine about the Academy and Eakins' method of teaching, and was attracted for the same reason, that ~~was~~ that the students all painted from the outset, and never used pencils or charcoal, but drew with their brushes, even more radical than that as Eakins told the students to forget about the work as drawing, and to express form as the a fairly large brush led them. This was further accented by the requirement as part of the study, that every student should give, if possible, half his time to modelling in clay.

<sup>at that time</sup> Peel had only come back to Paris from Pont Aven in Brittany where he had been working for some years, and was entering the Studio of Benjamin Constant for a period of study. He had selected Constant's Studio because Constant taught painting as Eakins taught, and Peel was still a painter in the Eakins manner. This suited me and I also joined the Constant Studio, so that every morning we set out together on the bus going from the Latin Quarter where we had our studios to the Constant Studio at Montmartre, a distance of four miles.

We talked of methods of painting, and all aspects of Art we knew of, how Rubens and Velasquez painted directly, without stiff and formal outlines. During the time of our studentship at Constant's, he was appointed to succeed Boulanger at the Julien Academy, and Peel and I were transferred there with his other students; because of this we were admitted without the usual formalities, (a mild type of hazing) and created something of a sensation by a complete roughing in of our studios, including a background, in the first hour. Near the close of the season there



was a competition called a "Concours" among all the Julien Academies. There were three or four centres in Paris, including the women's Academy, having about four or five Studios in each with about 1,000 students altogether. Peel and I decided to enter this, carrying on our work in the regular way. I was a winner in equal place with Dessar, an American, much to my surprise. This I ascribed to my having painted the effect of the Studio, a smoke filled room through which the students appeared dimly in the background, the model standing in shadow with the light touching the edges of the figure. I felt sure that Constant liked the effect and had made it his choice.

<sup>note</sup> <sup>being the story</sup>  
This, however, although ~~partly~~ of Peel, seems too much about myself. Although great friends we were in some degree rivals, and the next innings (so to speak) were Peel's. We were both working on pictures for the Salon, quite large canvases. We went together and ordered our frames, Peel, being almost a Frenchman, interpreted for me. We both were well hung and although some said I would get an honorable mention, it was Peel's "Venetian Girl" ~~now in the National Gallery~~ that got it. Both pictures are now in the National Gallery at Ottawa, the title of my picture being "Reverie".

Peel was feeling the stress of the times when I left Paris the latter part of 1889, and I advised him to get together 50 or 60 of his paintings, bring them to Toronto and make a sale by auction. He was taken with the idea, as I had made such a sale before going to Paris, with fair success. I made the preliminary arrangements and his sale brought him about \$3,000. This was sufficient to allow him to paint his later and most successful pictures. At the next Salon he received a medal and sold his picture, "After The Bath", to the Hungarian Government, and so came success.

<sup>two</sup> <sup>Paul Peel's</sup>  
In the ~~few~~ years he lived after this ~~a number of~~ finest works were painted, <sup>and</sup> After his death some high prices were obtained when his pictures changed hands. The Salon medal picture "After The Bath" was purchased from the Hungarian Government by a Canadian collector, and then resold to R. S. McLaughlin of Oshawa. Queen Alexandra was the purchaser of one of his pictures.

His wife and two children posed as the models in many of them.