# ARTISTS OF CHICAGO

## Past and Present — by C. J. Bulliet

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**No. 30 Edgar Spier Cameron**

EDGAR S. CAMERON is a reformed art critic, reclaimed and reconditioned as a creator of pictures instead of a mere newspaper commentator. For ten years at his desk at the Chicago Tribune he sat in judgment on his fellow artists, meting out praise and blame. He was successor to Harriet Monroe, destined to greater fame as a poet and a nurse of poets, and his reign included the period of the World's Columbian exposition, wherein the middle west became, for the first time, "art conscious."

Before 1893, he recalls, most people out here had an idea that "art" was something seven inches wide and twenty-one inches long, bound round with a frame and hung on the wall. His theory is that this conception arose out of the fact that the framed mottoes that were to be seen everywhere—"God Bless Our Home," "Home, Sweet Home"—were of those dimensions, and that when "pictures" came in they had to conform. He knows whereof he speaks about the mottoes, for as a boy he worked at a glass factory at his native Ottawa, Ill., where they made colored glass for the working out of these primitive "works of art."

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Cameron in 1890, not long back from Paris and the studio of Cabanel, applied for the job of art critic on the Tribune lately vacated by Harriet Monroe, a family friend. Robert W. Patterson himself examined his "credentials," which were clippings of articles he had contributed from Paris to an Ottawa paper. Mr. Cameron recalls with amusement how Patterson read the clippings from the bottom up, something near Chinese fashion.

When the world's fair came on his newspaper sensed its art importance, and through the whole period of the fair Cameron laid aside his brushes and devoted himself to writing. He wrote several articles about the whole show, then treated the exhibiting countries individually—France, Holland, England and the rest. His was a pioneer art job, bringing the pictures that refused to conform to the 7x21 scale into the comprehension of the multitudes.

But after another seven years Cameron decided he couldn't serve two masters, so he reluctantly gave up writing. He considers his career as a critic invaluable, however, because it made him bring his ideas and theories to a definite focus and gave him the myriad of stimulating contacts that doom perpetually most newspaper men to a life so nearly parallel to that of the "snow eaters." Mr. Cameron retains his "newspaper slant" in conversation, striking directly at the heart of a situation.

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Born in Ottawa in 1862, Cameron had his first experience with color before he could talk. But he could yell, and he did. He spied a bright red lid on a pan where buckwheat cakes were frying and reached for it. He carries the marks still on three fingers.

As he grew up his stepmother and a good-looking school teacher encouraged him to be an artist. The teacher allowed him special privileges at the blackboard. His more practical father grumbled, and so Cameron went to work in the glass factory. However, he got more and more his way and succeeded in putting in two summers at the old Chicago Academy of Design.

Saving his money at the glass works and in a machine shop, he got to New York in 1882 for a year at the Art Students' League. There Thomas W. Dewing took him under his wing on observing a drawing he made of a Roman bust, arranged for him to skip "drawing from the antique" and go directly into the "life class." Cameron, later in Paris, had to draw from the antique to get into the Beaux Arts, but he was so well advanced by then that he recalls the experience as a pleasure rather than as the deadly bore beginning students of art experience.

During his year at the league a lecturer one night was the great Inness. Oscar Wilde, being shown the sights by a friend, dropped in. After the lecture there was an informal discussion, the students crowding around Inness, who continued to expound, in answer to their eager inquiries. Oscar Wilde was scarcely noticed. "But there are facts in art——" Wilde would start every so often, only to be interrupted by Inness or a student. Rather, Wilde appeared in the role of the interrupter in matters more important than himself!

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From New York Cameron went to Paris. Shortly after his arrival he noticed the "marvelous sunsets," so superior to the sunsets of Ottawa, New York and Chicago. But Krakatoa had only recently exploded and the sun was setting in an unaccustomed glory all around the world.

Boulanger, Lefebvre, Laurens and Benjamin Constant were his early teachers in Paris. Later on a return visit he studied in the studio of Cabanel. His Paris life culminated in the winning in 1900 of a silver medal in the Paris exposition. In Paris, too, he won his wife, Marie Galon, a talented painter of portraits, his fellow student.

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Cameron's early art activities in Chicago were identified with the old Chicago Society of Artists, which met at the Athenæum. In the society's show of 1891 there were lively discussions among the members as to whether his painting, "The Bivouac," or a painting by Oliver Dennett, Grover should win the prize. Before the awarding, however, the Athanæum burned down and all the pictures were destroyed. Cameron repainted his picture, as did some of the others. Grover entered one that he had intended to send in the first place, but hadn't had time to finish. Grover's new picture outclassed Cameron's repainted "Bivouac," in the estimation of the judges.

Cameron's first Chicago "commission" was a military painting. He had in his studio a reproduction of Aimé Morot's "Battle of Reichoffen," Maj. E. C. Moderwell, civil-war soldier, saw it. He lamented that the soldiers pictured were European, not American. Cameron assured him American civil-war soldiers were easily paintable. The discussion resolved itself into an order from the major to paint his own heroic exploit at Stoneman's Mound, where, wounded and his horse shot from under him, after a gallant charge, he had been taken prisoner by the "rebels." This painting, still in the Moderwell family, enjoyed a wide celebrity among civil-war veterans.

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Cameron was one of many young Chicago artists employed just before the Columbian fair to work on the huge cyclorama, "The Chicago Fire." This experience started him painting murals, along with his easel pictures, with the result he has become one of the most successful muralists in the middle west.

An early job was the decoration for Jones, Linick & Schaefer of their pioneer "movie palace," the Orpheum, still operating on State street, but under other management and with Cameron's original murals obliterated by newer decorators. Cameron painted two big panels in accepted French salon style, "Music" and "Dancing," represented by beautiful, seminude ladies. He also did a ceiling reciting pictorially the romantic exploits among goddesses and nymphs of Orpheus (Orpheum, Orpheus).

For McVicker's, also Jones, Linick & Shaefer auspices, he painted an old Italian comedy scene with Pantaloon, Columbine and the rest, developing an idea that the new art of the movies, like the old Italian comedy, was in pantomime following a scenario.

The design for the Randolph theater, another Jones, Linick & Shaefer house, was particularly daring. It was a long, horizontal panel, with a big female nude—entirely nude—in the center, flanked by the ocean and ships on either side. Mr. Cameron had made the design for a Greek restaurant. But the restaurant man, short of money, wanted him to "eat it out." Cameron wasn't that hungry. Aaron Jones, by accident, saw the design, liked it and ordered it into the Randolph theater.

Many more theaters in Chicago, out in the state and in other towns of the middle west are adorned with Cameron murals. So is an Oklahoma City bank, the last big job Cameron did; the courthouse at Flint, Mich., and various other public buildings.

Another link between Cameron and the theater is a series of portraits he did of Richard Mansfield in character. Mansfield liked his Shylock Cameron painted, for his own amusement and ordered the others. Paul Wilstach's biography of Mansfield reproduces as illustrations two of the Cameron paintings, "Shylock" and "Baron Chevrial."

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A philosopher in religion rather than a devotee, Mr. Cameron on one of his visits to France did a Christ picture that has had a unique history. It is "The Youth of Christ," picturing a dreamy, barefoot, big-eyed boy in a carpenter shop, but without a halo. The shop Cameron found by lucky chance in Picardy when his conception was taking shape. Shavings on the floor from different-colored woods supplied a variety of hues for his design. A liberal religious sect, pleased by the lack of halo and the informality of the boy, planned to buy the picture for one of their Chicago meeting places. But funds ran low and the deal fell through. Then there appeared as buyer with sufficient money an avowed atheist!

Cameron, despite his training under Cabanel and the other severe "academic" French masters, has not allowed either his talent or his inspiration to congeal. In his criticisms of the Columbian exposition he sought out the "progressives" of the show—Besnard and Israels. He has experimented in the "isms" as late as "Cubism," though he hasn't exhibited his experiments. He has watched nature with not only a trained eye but an understanding sympathy. Shortly before the world war he exhibited in Germany a picture that brought favorable comment from the crown prince, with resulting international publicity for the artist. It was called "Traeumerei" and it was a painting of sheep in the Michigan woodlands beside a small lake. But the peculiar feature was an atmosphere that had settled over the region several days after a huge forest fire. The soft haze Cameron caught was what aroused the German prince's admiration.

**Next week—Romolo Roberti.**