

MOSES KOTTLER AND HIS WORK

By
H. Purwitzky

It will be patent to the most superficial observer that the work of Moses Kottler bears the stamp of the master-hand. It is strong, it is virile, above all, it is healthy. Arresting without being startling, individual without being freakish or outré, it has an abiding serenity about it which is like that of the mountains: there is something of the eternal about it—it is deep and very wise. A piece of work from Kottler's hand, whether it be a portrait bust or some beautiful sculpture, looks out upon the world with calm steady eyes: it carries with it that inimitable air of assurance, of tranquillity which immediately proclaims it the work of the man of genius.

His is the deeply penetrating eye which sees deep into the heart of things. All the flippancies, the superficialities he casts aside, he brings to light the hidden soul of a man, exposing its concealed beauties, baring to the gaze of mankind those obscure yet very real loveliness which constitute individuality. Fashioning his models from harsh stone, or from some yielding plastic material, he makes the most unsympathetic of mediums express the subtlest shades of human feeling and movement. His figures live; they are not merely outward physical forms. The soft tender skin of a child he creates, and the fierce aggressive soul of a man of mighty deeds. He calls forth for all to see and ponder over the strange half-sleeping mystery in the immature mind of a pensive native girl, and the sweet appealing beauty of a maiden's day dreaming.

It is all too rarely that Kottler brings his work out to the light of day. A man of very retiring nature, he is very reluctant either to show himself or his work. It is quite two years since he last exhibited in Capetown, and for this reason the display of his work at Ashbey's Gallery in Capetown during the last two or three weeks proved all the more interesting. It was a very small one, there being only twelve exhibits, but if anything all the more pleasing for that reason.

To my mind the finest piece of sculpture there was the portrait bust of Professor Radcliffe Brown. It is the embodiment of strength and virility. Of some dark brown material with the surface coarsely finished off to resemble the rough bark on a tree, it is a massive study, rather larger than life size. The head is beautifully poised, with that little upward tilt characteristic of the Professor when he is about to speak. The humorous twinkle almost sparkles in his eye, and that faint, almost imperceptible smile, so familiar to all students under him, hovers about his lips. . . . One almost expects to hear one of his delightful dry witticisms. . . . It is a magnificent likeness.

Lady de Villiers makes a very beautiful study. Composed in some soft grey composition reminiscent of a colour the lady always affects, the half-length model has about it an air of gentle repose, of calm unruffled day-dreams. One hand is at the long graceful throat, the other toys with a necklace. Altogether it makes a lovely study of a lovely lady.

I found the plaster cast of an old Malay least attractive of all the exhibits. There is none of the typical geniality of the old Malay in it, and the features despite the cap and the "doek" wound round the head were not at all characteristic. It must have been executed in one of the very few lapses in which Kottler indulges. On the other hand his native studies are extremely interesting. There is a very fine Hottentot girl in plaster, with the peculiar heavy primitive face, thick lips, narrow forehead, broad nose and small sleepy slits of eyes, and an arresting young Kaffir with the quaint peper-korreltjie hair cleverly portrayed

by means of flat disc-shaped protuberances each about the size of a threepenny piece. But the best of all the native studies is a girl carved out of a solid block of wood. With amazing skill the artist has contrived to utilise the grain of the wood in just the very directions in which the little blood vessels run about the face. They follow the contours of the different features with extraordinary exactitude, one hand is under the chin; the eyes are half-closed; the girl is obviously thinking. In that quaint attitude there is a suggestion of only half-developed growth; of queer concrete little desires; of slumbering primitive passion and an incomprehensible mournfulness. All the latent ferocity in the savage mind is there and the strange sadness one hears in their pathetic monotonous efforts at music. One stands for a long time before that Native Girl.

It is needless to say that the other exhibits are all of a very high standard. It is a pity that there were none with any bearing upon Jewish life or thought. The fact that Kottler is himself a Jew would appear to qualify him peculiarly for portraying subjects of Jewish interest. One would like to see a study, say, of the Rev. A. P. Bender, and of some of our other prominent men, while it is rather a pity that we have no concrete likeness of our honoured and well-loved friend Dr. Olsvanger. It is a lost opportunity. Perhaps in the near future he may be persuaded to undertake work of more direct interest to his own people. Who knows?

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