Spotlight

BY WINIFRED JOHNSTON, ’24

“TIME GOES, YOU SAY?”

Norman, October, 1930

Physicists have recently started the world by declaring that time is relative. But some two thousand years ago Herakleitos had implied that truth in his crypic saying “All things are flux.” And some three hundred years ago with poetic intuition John Donne voiced for all ages the thought that time and distance were but dependent on the heart.

To most of the Cavalier poets time was a living thing. It is significant that to most of them time went on wings. “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,” sings Herrick, “Old Time is still a-flying.” And Suckling, priding himself on the constancy exhibited in a devotion lasting all of three days, boasts:

“Time shall not away his wings.
Ere he shall discover
In the whole wide world again
Such a constant lover.”

In the exalting of youth and the enjoying of the moment the twentieth century hardly surpasses the seventeenth. Yet in the Cavalier’s eulogy of youth always there was subtle warning of the transiency of beauties and glories of the flesh.

“Go, lovely rose,” Waller bids the flower sent his lady,
“Then die! that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee.
How small a part of time they share
They are so wondrous sweet and fair!”

The poet of today in the main has been too busy burning the candle at both ends to take heed of time. It was left to a sculpture to voice for this age all that is implied in “the common fate of all things rare.” This Lorado Taft has done in the Fountain of Time placed some years ago at the western end of Chicago’s Midway.

One of the high points of Taft’s lecture during the university summer session was his discussion of this fountain. It was interesting to know that he took his inspiration for the work from that couplet of Austin Dobson’s, a variation on Ronsard, which discards the classical concept of time as flying. Reading the poet one night he chanced upon those lines:

“Time goes, you say? Ah no!
Alas, Time stays, we go.”

Immediately he laid down the book, already fired with a conception of a monumental group in which individual after individual appears, passes, and disappears before Time, the inscrutable.

The birth of such a conception in itself is humanity’s best hope of ground “beyond time, place, and all mortality.” The story of it brightened a lecture grown somewhat frayed and faded with much use—a lecture which the speaker confesses to having given more than a thousand times.

If some of the audience were conscious of the wear and tear to which the lecture had been subjected, and a bit disappointed in the sculptor’s too successful adaptation to popular taste, few failed to appreciate the speaker as a man. He had been introduced by Professor Jacobson with an ironical remark on the economic value of art. Most of the audience knew something of the speaker’s own value to his community: his passionate belief in the future of Chicago, his sincere endeavor to create beauty, his generous eagerness to assist talent in finding itself. Some had been fortunate in seeing his statue of Black Hawk; more had seen his Fountain of the Great Lakes, which stands on the south side of the Chicago Art Institute.

As an artist Taft has not escaped criticism. Once the Fountain of Time became a reality of stone it suffered various stricture and revilements.

Taft himself said when he was in Oklahoma that it was doubtful if any artist ever felt satisfied that his execution had equalled his conception. The most legitimate criticism to be made of the fountain of Time would perhaps rest in its lack of the rugged power needed to overcome its trying landscape setting. A bolder execution might have withstood the long sweep of that approach. Here Taft’s long apprenticeship to portraiture is against him. For any appreciation of the sculptor’s accomplishment a setting is needed which would bring the spectator immediately nearer to these individual figures.

Time is after all a subordinate item in Taft’s fountain. It is on humanity that the sculptor has lavished his efforts, that group of men and women that rises in a great crested wave to the pomp and power represented in the soldier only to fall away again to nothing. Each individual has been carefully, perhaps too finely modelled. Looking from the south full into these faces one realizes what their maker meant when he said he loved faces—all except those that, having been schooled in expression, express nothing. There are babes in arms, children clinging to their mothers’ hands, small compact family groups. Beyond the crest there are some ancient ones outstretching empty, futile hands. Again and again there are lovers: no two couples meeting the wave alike but all showing the same ecstatic translation; though some walk calmly toward the fall and others break the onward sweep with delaying embraces.

There is no need of the affirmation promised by the sculptor in another stately group to be placed at the Midway’s eastern end. There is no pessimism in this conception. Humanity goes its own way and gait. Muffled and dumb as one of his daughters, the hypocritic Days, like them Time disturbs no man in his choice of bread or stars. Whether there be scorn under his solemn cowl no man may say.