Light on Adobe Walls

by Willa Cather

Every artist knows that there is no such thing as “freedom” in art. The first thing an artist does when he begins a new work is to lay down the barriers and limitations; he decides upon a certain composition, a certain key, a certain relation of creatures or objects to each other. He is never free, and the more splendid his imagination, the more intense his feeling, the farther he goes from general truth to general emotion. Nobody can paint the sun, or sunlight. He can only paint the tricks that shadows play with it, or what it does to forms. He cannot even paint those relations of light and shade—he can only paint some emotion they give him, some man-made arrangement of them that happens to give him personal delight—a conception of clouds over distant mesas (or over the towers of St. Sulpice) that makes one nerve in him thrill and tremble. At bottom all he can give you is the thrill of his own poor little nerve—the projection in paint of a fleeting pleasure in a certain combination of form and colour, as temporary and almost as physical as a taste on the tongue. This oft-repeated pleasure in a painter becomes of course a “style,” a way of seeing and feeling things, a favourite mood. What could be more different than Leonardo’s treatment of daylight, and Velasquez”? Light is pretty much the same in Italy and Spain—southern light. Each man painted what he got out of light—what it did to him.