

Light on Adobe Walls

by Willa Cather

5 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
pain 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
10 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
15 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’s? Light is pretty much
20 the same in Italy and Spain—southern light. Each man painted what he
got out of light—what it did to him.