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A Biographical Dictionary

Containing An Historical Account Of All The Engravers, From The Earliest Period Of The Art Of Engraving To The Present Time; And A Short List Of Their Most Esteemed Works. ... To Which Is Prefixed, an Essay On The Rise And Progress Of The Art Of Engraving, Both On Copper And On Wood. ...

Strutt, Joseph

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Chapter II. The Antiquity of the Art of Engraving, and by whom it appears to have been first practised.

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part of the art deserves every possible encomium. Upon this principle, a person, fond of a powerful effect, would throw aside the works of Henry Goltzius, because they are not equal, in that respect, to those of Rembrandt Gerretz, disregarding, at the same time, the superior excellence, and correctness of drawing, which they possess, and the astonishing freedom of execution with the graver, by none out-done, if ever equalled by any.

CHAPTER II.

The Antiquity of the Art of Engraving, and by whom it appears to have been first practised.

THOSE productions of art, by which the mind is delighted or improved, naturally interest our affections. We feel, as it were, an obligation incumbent on us, and are solicitous of tracing out the man, to whom we stand indebted for the gratification we have received. And it appears to be a tribute justly due to him, to rescue, if possible, his name from oblivion, and place the laurel he deserves upon his brow. If we fail in this, the art itself becomes the object of our researches. We wish to know, at what period it was invented, and where it originated. If it should be said, this knowledge does not contribute to the improvement of the art, or add to the merit of its author, yet the desire of attaining it proves, at least, the decided part we take in their favour, and is a convincing argument, that our hearts are sufficiently warmed with gratitude to repay the obligation we conceive ourselves to lie under, if it were in our power.

But researches of this kind, especially with respect to an art, which has gone through so many changes as that of engraving, and may be divided into so many different branches, are by no means to be neglected; for they may not only be pleasing to those, who interest themselves in its cause; but by showing the variety of modes, which have been practised, in its gradual advancement from its infancy to its present maturity, may be usefully considered by the artists themselves, and prove perhaps productive of improvements hereafter, which at present are not thought of.

There is no art, that of music excepted, which can positively claim a priority to that of engraving; and though its inventor cannot be discovered, there is little doubt of its existence long before the flood. Tubal Cain, the son of Lamech, according to Moses, was the first artificer in metals. It is said of him, in the original, that he was,

למש כל-חרש נחשת וברזל

The whetter or sharpner of all instruments of copper and of iron. And these words imply great skill in metallurgy; for the working of iron, and setting an edge upon copper, so as to make instruments fit for use, are proofs, that Tubal Cain was no small proficient in that art. To what degree of perfection he carried the mechanical part of his profession, cannot be discovered; but we may reasonably suppose, his performances were rude, and simple in their forms, and that he consulted use, rather than elegance or beauty; and probably had no leisure to ornament them with unnecessary decorations. But as his descendants increased, and the number of workmen was multiplied, new inventions were naturally brought forward, and comparative merit, of consequence, would enhance the value of one man's performances, in preference to those of another. Hence neatness, and even elegance, progressively became necessary; and the love of finery, so generally prevalent in the human mind, easily led men to prefer those works, which were most handsomely decorated. The ornamental parts of dress, as clasps, buckles, rings and diadems; also cups, and other household furniture, together with the arms of military chieftains, were probably enriched with the first specimens of engraving. These, in the remotest periods, appear to have been ornamented in this style, even among the most barbarous nations: rude portraits are mentioned, as carved and engraved upon the shields, and other accoutrements of war.

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The immediate descendants of Tubal Cain may lay a claim to the invention of the art of engraving, which appears to me to be well founded, and certainly prior to any exhibited in profane history, unless the Grecian Vulcan really was, as some have thought, no other person than Tubal Cain, distinguished by another name. To what length the exercise of this art was carried by our Antediluvian progenitors, is totally unknown. Soon after the flood, if ancient records are to be credited, it had, as well as sculpture, made a considerable progress. I shall however pass over the works of the old Greek and Roman writers, concerning the history of these early periods; for the facts, as related by them, are not only exceedingly doubtful in themselves; but convey no certain intelligence.

Terah, the father of Abraham, lived in the days of Nimrod, and he is said to have been the first man after the flood, who fabricated carved images; and the carving of that remote æra, in many instances bore a great resemblance to engraving, and frequently is not distinguished from it. These possibly might be the very images, which Rachel afterwards stole from her father Laban, and are called תרפים *Teraphim* by the sacred historian; and by Laban himself distinguished by the name of Gods; for he says to Jacob,

למה גנבת את-אלהי

Why hast thou stolen away my Gods? And these are supposed to have been personal representations of the Deity.

Moses, when he speaks particularly concerning the art of engraving, does not mention it by any means as a new invention, but seems to consider it as too well understood among the Israelites, to need any previous description. For though Bezaleel and Aholiab are the first names, mentioned professedly as engravers, and by way of commendation of their excellence, it is said, that *God filled them with wisdom of heart to work all manner of work of the engraver, &c.* Yet this does not by any means apply the invention of the art to either of them; for indeed, prior to the commencement of the workmanship for the tabernacle, it is said of Aaron, that he fashioned the calf he had made *with the graving tool.* It is highly probable, that this art, among a variety of others, as, casting of metals, forming of images, carving in wood and stone, working embroidery, &c. was learned by the Israelites in Egypt. The Egyptians were certainly famous at that time for their knowledge; for which reason St. Stephen, speaking in praise of Moses, says, *he was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.*

There are several words, used by the sacred historian to express the works of the engraver; among which the following are more particularly applicable to my purpose. The first occurs, Exodus xxviii. verse 9. פתח signifies *to make an opening or incision*; and hence comes the noun פתח with its plural פתוחים engravings; in the Septuagint it is rendered by *κοιλια*.---In the 11th verse of the same chapter we have also, חרש the name of the engraver, one of the original senses of the root is *to plough up*; so that he is called *the plougher*; and frequently the word אבן *a stone*, is added for distinction, and both together may be properly translated *the plougher or engraver in stone.* No word can express more perfectly the operations of the engraver on copper or other metals in the present day, when performed simply with the graver, (which is of all modes the most ancient,) than the verb *to plough*; though it is true, the word חרש is principally applied to the mechanic in general, but his way of working is usually distinguished. To these we may add, קלע which occurs in the 6th chapter of the first book of Kings, and is used to express the hollowing out of the carved work upon the cherubim, palm trees, and open flowering in the sanctuary, which were afterwards filled up with gold. This word in the Latin Vulgate is rendered *sculpsit*; by others *cœlavit*: and by Junius *incidit*.

The tables which God delivered to Moses are said, Exodus xxxii. 16. to be *the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God* חרות engraved upon the tables. In the Chaldee and Syriac versions the word is used in the same sense. The Seventy render it *αερολαμμεν*, engraved; and the Latin Vulgate *sculpta*; and St. Paul, 11 Cor. ii. 7. *ιστιοποιημεν*, engraved. Both פתח and קלע are expressed in the Syriac version by the words גלה or גלה from whence evidently the Greek word *κοιλια*. I shall only add the following remarkable passage from the book of Job, ch. xix. ver. 23, 24. which Mr. Evelyn says, comprehends and alludes to all the sorts of ancient writing and engraving, both plates, stone, and style.