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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. ...

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An Introduction to the Continuation of the Essay on the Art of Engraving, &c. containing a short Examination of the Difference, in the Style of Drawings between the Artists of the Italian and the ...

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C H A P T E R I.

An Introduction to the Continuation of the Essay on the Art of Engraving, &c. containing a short Examination of the Difference, in the Style of Drawing, between the Artists of the Italian, and the Artists of the German School, at the Commencement of the sixteenth Century.

BEFORE I proceed with the Essay on the Origin and Progress of Engraving, I wish to make some few general observations upon the different styles of the German and Italian schools, at the commencement of the sixteenth century; and I mean to confine myself entirely to the engravings of that period, and principally to that part of them, which refers to the expression of general forms, or what may properly be called drawing; for with respect to the invention, composition, expression, and the other essential requisites in painting, they do not immediately concern the present design.

On examining the works of the German artists at this period, the eye is disgusted by the stiffness and inelegance of the general forms. If we look at the draperies, the folds are either long and narrow, or subdivided into a multiplicity of small parts, intersecting one another at right angles, and resembling the crumpling up of paper, rather than the flowing lines, produced by the easy fall of any species of cloth. And the pains, which they took to express each fold with such laboured minuteness, proves, that this defect proceeded not from want of attention, but from a vitiated taste, formed from long habit upon a Gothic original. It is indeed by endeavouring to produce something superior to nature, that they have sunk so far below her. There is another fault, which strikes us, equal in magnitude to the former; especially when we consider the female figures, and such as required beauty and elegance in the composition; and this is the frequent neglect of expressing the indication of the limbs, as they must occasionally appear beneath the drapery; which gives them the appearance of the wax dolls, dressed up by children. The heads and the hands are perhaps moulded with some pains; but it will require the exertion of a fertile imagination, to substitute any tolerable shape for the body or dimensions for the limbs; for the spectator has commonly sufficient scope allowed him for the employment of his ideas.

Albert



Albert Durer, and the succeeding ancient German masters, took great pains in the study of the human figure; but it appears to have been a theoretical, rather than a practical study; and we may justly be surpris'd to find the naked parts of their figures so very incorrectly drawn, not only with respect to the outlines, but also with respect to the muscular markings. Indeed the muscular parts of the limbs are, in general, so poor and thin, that they have the appearance of belonging to persons emaciated by sickness; while, on the other hand, the extremities are large and the joints protuberating and heavy. It seems as if they paid little attention to the appearance of nature; or, if they did, copied her under her worst forms. For large extremities are not only inconsistent with beauty and elegance, but always convey to the mind the idea of weakness. Another fault in the works of the artists of Germany, at this period, is the great want we discover in them of diversity of character, with respect to the drawing of the naked parts of the human figure. The same meagre style of outline appears in the representation of a Sampson or a Hercules, that prevails in an Adam or an Adonis; but this defect is particularly striking in the female figures. Henry Aldergraver, who was probably the pupil of Albert Durer, seems to have been aware of this, and in his best works he has, in a great measure, avoided it. John Sebald Beham followed his example; and George Penz, with Barthelmy Beham, his contemporary, who both of them are said to have studied at Rome, in the school of Marc Antonio Raimondi, quitted almost entirely the Gothic style of their countrymen, and adopted that of the Italians.

Simplicity of outline and beauty of form were as much studied by the Italian, as they were neglected by the German artists. The antique sculptures, which the former had continually before their eyes, were, without doubt, the sources, from which they derived those ideas of beauty and elegance. Raphael, with the other eminent artists of this period, obtained so great an advantage from the study of them, that the succeeding masters not only followed their example, but laid it down as a rule to their scholars, to consider such a study, as a very essential part of their education, if they meant to excel. Hence it is, that the great Italian artists have so uniformly preserved the same style of design. They were taught from their infancy to look with admiration upon the antique sculptures, and to consider them as the most excellent models to form their taste upon; by this means the study of them became habitual, and as it were a thing of course.

The simplicity of style, which so evidently marks the best Italian prints of this period, has been censured, with no small severity, by the modern French artists. They speak of the studying of the antiques as carried too far; and remark, that the swellings of the muscles, and markings of the joints are too equally round and uniform, wanting the flat parts, which appear in nature, and not only give a beautiful variety to the form of the outlines, but add greatly to the spirit and expression of the drawing, especially in strong and muscular figures.

It is certainly true, that the study of the antiques should be blended with the study of nature. Where the latter is wholly neglected, in preference to the former, the works of such an artist, though correctly drawn, have always much of the coldness and inanimation of marble statues. And where nature alone is attended to, without the study of the antiques, the defects, in general, will be more exceptionable than in the former case. For, as we have seen in the works of the German artists, a bad, vitiated manner is contracted, which impoverishes the compositions even of the greatest masters. And this arises from the great difficulty of meeting with nature, truly fine and perfect in all her parts. Fine forms have been selected by the ancient statuaries, from variety of different subjects, and united by a proportion, which has generally been considered as very excellent. To these forms, and to this proportion, we should carefully turn our eyes; but nature surely ought not to be neglected.

These observations, it is presumed, are just in themselves; but the objections, upon which they are founded, cannot be applied to the best works of Marc Antonio; and whenever they have been so, it must have arisen from the critic's not having carefully

examined the engravings by that great master. It is granted, that his outlines are sometimes harsh, and the terminations of the shadows defective in harmony, and want those gradations of light and shadow, which produce an agreeable effect; but whoever will give himself the trouble of tracing those very prints, will find the outlines correct and beautiful; he will observe, that the form of the muscles are just; and that the knitting of the joints, and the markings of the extremities, are very finely expressed. They will hold far better with George Ghissi of Mantua, and those who followed his style of engraving. Ghissi, though a man of abilities, was a great mannerist, and certainly paid little or no attention to the beautiful variety of forms, which are found in nature.

Bernard Picart, a French artist, who flourished at the commencement of this century, may be placed at the head of the party, who have set their faces against the works of old masters; and those, in particular, of Marc Antonio and his scholars. "The outlines of their figures," says he, "when they worked from the designs of Raphael, are hard, equal lines; the engraving part is neat, but meagre, and without roundness, or gradation of light and shadow, which the connoisseurs pretend to applaud, and call improperly the *gout de Raphael*. But," adds he, "when the prints are compared with the drawings, they are found, not only to be very inferior, but by no means perfect copies; the engravers, in many instances, having taken unwarrantable liberties, such as adding back-grounds, where there are none, and working over parts, which are left clear and light in the originals." But in this instance he either was not informed, or had forgotten, that Marc Antonio and the greater part of his disciples worked immediately under the eye of Raphael; and those alterations were most probably made by the painter himself. So also, if we look at the *Saint Cecilia* from Raphael, as engraved by Marc Antonio, and compare it with the engraving by Strange, from the picture at Bologna, we shall find the composition considerably varied; and some of the figures, that especially of *Mary Magdalen*, totally changed. But the reason is evident, the print by Marc Antonio was taken from the original drawing; and the alterations took place, when the artist painted his design upon the canvass. Indeed not only he, but his disciples, also, worked, in general, from the drawings of Raphael, and very seldom from his pictures.

By way of softening the severity of his other remarks, he adds, "Give Marc Antonio and the old masters their due, for they claim indulgence. It is extraordinary, that they should have pushed the art so far as they did, at so early a period. But," continues he, "when the advocates for them pretend to say, that the art of engraving has not been improved since their time, they talk absurdly." Without doubt, if any one did pretend to assert so manifest a falsehood, it would be absurd; but till the old masters do meet with so extraordinary an advocate, no arguments on the contrary are necessary: the fact is too generally known, even by people, who are not judges, to need them. Therefore, so much of his discourse, at least, might reasonably have been spared. He writes, he informs us, to remove the prejudices, which many of the admirers of the ancient masters had formed against the modern artists. But I cannot conceive that it is necessary, in order to elevate the fame of the moderns, to strip antiquity of all its laurels, and blot out, with a stroke of the pen, the merit of many very great artists, only because that merit was become the object of admiration. Neither is this violent method of proceeding by any means well calculated to remove the prejudices, which any might have imbibed; nor even to prevent the effects of the prevalence of custom, which has led and does lead many to venerate the productions of the ancients; though, in reality, they have never discovered one of the beauties, for which alone they are intitled to respect. Certainly when we speak of the mechanical part of engraving, the taste and beauty of finishing, the judicious distributions of light and shadow, the works of the old masters will bear no comparison with those of the modern ones. But perhaps it may be added, that the mechanical part of engraving is too much the object in view,
in



in the present day; while the more essential parts, namely, correctness and purity of drawing, in which the ancients excelled, are often hastily overlooked.

It would perhaps have been more advantageous to Picart, if he had never entered the field against the ancients, or, at least, if he had ceased hostilities, when he had laid down his pen. But not contented with abusing their works, his vanity prompted him, in an evil hour, to take up the point and the graver, to convince the world how much it had been imposed upon. For this purpose he imitated the etchings and engravings of various masters, and called the collection *the innocent impostors*. But they sufficiently prove his want of abilities to execute the work in such a manner, as to deceive an experienced judge. The two following engravings are all I shall take notice of. The first is a *Venus and Cupid*, copied from a drawing by Raphael, in the King of France's cabinet. This drawing was engraved by Marc Antonio. The second is a *Bacchanal*, from a drawing by the same master, in the same cabinet; and it was first engraved by Agostino de Musis, the Venetian, who was the scholar of Marc Antonio. Having discovered the original drawings, he gravely tells us, that he thought he could produce something better, than what had excited so long the admiration of the curious; and with this laudable resolution he set to work, and appears to have been well satisfied with the productions of his graver. But can the voice of candour say he has been successful? I apprehend not. I have not, it is true, seen the original drawings, from which the prints are engraved; but if they are faithful transcripts of those drawings, I should not hesitate to declare, that Raphael learned the art of design in the French academy; and, what is more extraordinary, drew in the very style adopted by Picart himself. It appears to me, that Picart, like his countryman Nicholas Dorigny, has so much frenchified the Italian painter, that he would find it a difficult task at first sight to know his own composition.

Picart was certainly a very able artist in his way; but not being fond of the graver, his prints are never highly finished. His great excellence lay in designing and engraving small compositions for vignettes and other book plates; and his works in this line are exceedingly meritorious. In justice to him we ought to observe, that he did not live to publish the above-mentioned work; but being approved of by his friends, it was given to the public after his death. It is much to be lamented, that they had not judgment sufficient to suppress it. His misfortune was such as many other great men have experienced through the zeal of their friends, to publish all their productions, which zeal has often been more prejudicial to their fame, than all the malevolence of their enemies.

It is probable that Picart's judgment was misled by his vanity; but this motive can hardly be attributed to a writer of our own country, who possessed of very little more knowledge in the arts, than what is displayed by a list of technical terms, and a few theoretical observations, has taken a decided part with Picart, and levelled his anathemas against the old masters, in general, through the medium of Marc Antonio.

Picart was not the first artist, who attempted to deceive the unwary connoisseurs. Henry Goltzius, a German master, and a man of superior abilities, being disgusted at the preference which was given to the works of Albert Durer, Lucas of Leyden, and other artists of those schools, when compared with his own, (for he had attempted to improve the taste of his country, and this attempt was not immediately relished) undertook in a decisive manner to prove, that his talents were not inferior to those of his predecessors. In order to divest his contemporaries of so unreasonable a prejudice, he engraved a plate representing *the circumcision of Christ*, in the style of Albert Durer, which we are informed, and, indeed, we can easily credit the information, being printed on foiled paper, and torn to give it the appearance of antiquity, was really sold as a curious performance by that master. He then proceeded to engrave *the adoration of the wise men*, in the style of Lucas of Leyden, and was equally successful. These prints, which consist of six, are called his masterpieces, and they are by no means undeserving of that appellation. The last of them represents a *holy family*, and is in his own style. This admirable print is greatly superior to any of the others; and, without doubt, it was the original intention of the artist, that it should be so.

But

But to return from this long digression. In order to illustrate more clearly the observations I have offered to the public, respecting the correctness of outline, which is so distinguishable in the works of Marc Antonio, I have attempted to copy *the Adam and Eve*, engraved by that artist from Raphael, which is a very scarce and valuable print. (See the frontispiece.) I have not imitated the style of engraving, in which the original is executed; but have finished it as neatly, as I conceived was consistent with the design; and have caused the back-ground to be covered with a light aqua tinta, in order to bring the figures more forward, and to produce a greater degree of harmony. If these liberties should be thought to require an excuse, I could wish that it might be recollected, that the sole purpose, for which this plate is given, is to show the style of drawing, which prevails in the best engravings by Marc Antonio. I have therefore considered the print as a drawing only, the effect of which I was to produce in the neatest and most agreeable manner I could. And I hope those defects, which may be discovered in the copy, are such only, as naturally must arise from the difficulty of imitating the beauties of one of the finest prints, by one of the greatest masters of the early Italian school, assisted by Raphael himself. The outlines of the figures, and such parts as respect the drawing only, are, I believe, expressed with some degree of correctness, sufficient, at least, to demonstrate the beauty and elegant flow of lines, which so evidently distinguished the works of the Italian schools, when compared with the mannered representations of nature by the Germans, under such forms as are by no means agreeable to the eye. In order further to confirm my observation upon the simplicity of style, adopted by the Italian artists, I have copied a second print, originally engraved by Marc Antonio from Raphael; which is still more rare than the preceding. (See plate IV.) The same liberty is taken with the engraving of this plate, as with the other, and for the same reason. It represents *St. Jerom upon his knees*, devoutly meditating upon the fatal consequences of the fall of man. The figure has all the simplicity of nature herself, without the least appearance of art; and yet, on examination, much art may be discovered in the judicious contrast of the several parts one with another. The reason, indeed, assigned by the most skilful writers upon the beauties of painting, why the works of Raphael make so little impression upon the mind, at the first sight, is, they resemble nature in that pure and simple state, in which the eye is constantly accustomed to see her; but, on re-examination, they improve upon the spectator; and the beauties, which at first were hidden, develop themselves by degrees, and excite in the end the highest admiration. These observations have been made, with respect to the wonderful performances by that great master in the Vatican at Rome.

If we look at the mechanical part of the engraving, whilst we are speaking of the comparative merit of the German and Italian artists at this period; the decision must be made entirely in favour of the former. Albert Durer, Lucas of Leyden, Henry Aldegrever, and some few other artists of this time, have produced such performances, as cannot be viewed without admiration. The first of these masters, in particular, handled the graver with so much facility and judgment, that his best works, in point of neatness and precision, have rarely been equalled, much less surpassed. Marc Antonio and his scholars appear, in general, to have made this branch of the art, a second consideration only: it was kept in subordination to the drawing and expression. Not but that it must, in many instances, be acknowledged, that if more neatness and precision had been added to their engravings, they would have been much less objectionable, to the common eye especially.

The result of these observations therefore is, that if we look for beauty of form, or correctness of outline, in the works of the old German masters, we shall not be likely to succeed in our researches. Neatness and precision was the characteristic of this school, as beauty and elegance of form was of that of the Italians.

