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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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Chap. III. The Examination of the Works of the Italian Artistes, from the Commencement of the sixteenth Century, with a short Account of the Improvements, made by the French Engravers.

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beauties of the paintings by that great master. And in this school Paul Pontius, Lucas Vorsterman, Peter de Jode, and other excellent Dutch and Flemish artists, whose works may justly be esteemed as an honour to their country, completed their studies. After the death of Rubens, the arts gradually declined, not only in Germany, but in the Low Countries. For as those admirable engravers, which he had brought forward, disappeared, there were none found of equal abilities to succeed them, especially in the historical line. Houbraken, indeed, as an engraver of portraits, has excited our admiration; and his works justly deserve the attention, which has been paid to them by the experienced collectors.

C H A P. III.

The Examination of the Works of the Italian Artists, from the Commencement of the sixteenth Century, with a short Account of the Improvements, made by the French Engravers.

IN order to show more clearly the difference between the two styles of engraving, adopted by the first Italian artists, mentioned in the sixth Chapter of the Essay on the Origin and Progress of Engraving, prefixed to the first volume, I gave two plates: one, a copy from a print in the celebrated edition of the works of Dante, printed at Florence 1481, which was engraved by Sandro Boticelli, or by Baccio Baldini his associate, from his design; see plate VII. The other, a copy from a print engraved by Andrea Mantegna; see plate VI. With respect to the former, plate VII. it must be observed, that the original plate was not printed upon the leaf of the book itself, but on a separate paper; and was afterwards cut close, and pasted upon the blank space of the leaf, left for that purpose. And it has been remarked to me, that, for this cause, the originality of the engraving copied might be disputed. Now it appears, that two only of the original plates were printed upon the leaves of the book; and those are the first and second. The others, which, in the most perfect edition of this book, amount to seventeen, making nineteen in the whole, are pasted upon the blank spaces, at the beginning of each canto. The reason why no more than two engravings were printed upon the leaves might be, the inconveniency they found in placing the plate properly upon the blank designed for it, and the difficulty in taking the impression with the rollers, without damaging the leaf itself, which is of the largest folio size. In taking the impressions of the plates separately, the difficulty was not so great; neither was it of so much consequence, if they happened to spoil a few of the prints in the course of the operation. Upon examining the prints pasted upon the blanks, and comparing them with those printed upon the leaves themselves, I think it is sufficiently evident, that they were, in both instances, the work of one artist. But in order to remove every possible objection, I have, in the present volume, given a copy of a second plate from the Dante, which is printed upon the leaf itself, at the head of the second canto. See plate III.

It was evidently from the works of Boticelli, or of his scholars, that Marc Antonio formed his first style of engraving. And it is highly probable, that at Venice he might meet with several of the engravings on copper by Albert Durer, as well as with his wood cuts, though he chose to copy the latter, rather than the former, for the sake of expedition. The neatest and best performances by this great artist are certainly from the designs of Raphael: under his tuition he completed his studies.

It is true, indeed, that the engravings by Marc Antonio are often defective, in point of harmony, and the skilful management of the light and shadow, which gives them an unfinished and, sometimes, disgustful appearance to the common eye. On the other hand, a graceful flow of outline, joined with purity and correctness of drawing in its greatest latitude, are found in the best works of this master; but these beauties rarely attract the general notice, without the assistance of neatness, or what is more properly called high finishing, especially in the present day.

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The eye, long accustomed to neatness and delicacy of finishing, especially where the judgment is not capable of distinguishing the greater essentials of the art, will necessarily consider that neatness, as the criterion of excellency. Hence it is, that the works of the old masters are fallen into such general disrepute, their beauties are overlooked, and their faults are viewed through a magnifying medium. And it is perhaps because Marc Antonio stands the first among the old masters, that he has received a greater share of censure than the rest.

The excellency of this master consists in the correctness of his drawing, the character of his heads, and the pure idea his works convey of the simplicity and elegance of the originals they are taken from; and they may be considered as admirable drawings, not highly finished indeed, but sufficiently so to preserve the design and spirit of the masters, from whom he worked.

That persons, possessed of little judgment in the arts, should not discover the merits of this engraver, cannot surprise us; but that artists themselves, and experienced collectors, should join in the common censure, is much more extraordinary. In these instances we may conclude, he has been too hastily, as he certainly has been unjustly, condemned, without a proper examination of his works in their native state. Such as generally appear at sales, and too many of those in the hands of collectors, are either worn-out impressions, or, what is still worse, retouched ones. In these the primitive beauty is entirely lost. Let any one, for instance, examine the common impressions of that admirable engraving by this master, representing *the martyrdom of St. Laurence*, from Baccio Bandinelli, which is the largest of all his prints, and he will find the outlines darkened with black strokes upon the lights, and the demy tints upon the flesh increased, so as nearly to equal the deep shadows; by which means all the breadths of light are destroyed, and cut into a variety of disagreeable divisions, which produce a disgustful and unharmonious effect. But in a fine impression of the same plate, there are none of these disagreeable crudities to be found; the shadows are judiciously softened, and blended into the lights, and harmonized with each other; the outlines are neat and correct; and the characters of the heads admirably well expressed. In short, he would scarcely believe it possible, that the same plate should furnish impressions, so beautiful in one state, and so truly execrable in the other. But the wonder ceases, if he be told, that the plate, passing through a variety of hands, has been frequently retouched, and that by careless and unskilful men. We may further add, that as the name of Marc Antonio stands high among the curious collectors, the ignorant are too frequently imposed upon by bad copies, or spurious productions. It is indeed become customary to write the name of Marc Antonio with a pen, at the bottom of any old print, which bears even the least distant resemblance to his manner of engraving; and, in several instances, I have seen both his cypher and tablet ingeniously copied upon prints, that are a disgrace to any master.

The great reputation, which Marc Antonio acquired by his works, in some measure eclipsed the fame of the German schools. Young artists from every quarter flocked to Rome, being desirous of studying under this excellent master; and the improvement which they made was so evident, that it was soon afterwards considered as necessary for an engraver, as for a painter, to visit Italy. So that, by degrees, the Italian style of engraving became the standard of excellence; and upon it the greatest artists formed their taste; and that manner, which had been considered in Germany, as most excellent, under the auspices of Albert Durer, Lucas Jacobs, Henry Aldegrever, and Hans Sebald Beham, declined by degrees, and was almost totally disused, at the conclusion of the sixteenth century.

The scholars of Marc Antonio followed his style of engraving, with very little variation. Among them, Agostino de Musis and Marc de Ravenna were the most successful: the former principally excelled in neatness, and the latter in a more bold and open manner.

Agostino de Musis was the inventor of a new species of engraving, which was performed



formed with dots only; but for what reason he did not carry it to a greater extent, cannot easily be ascertained. He introduced it into one or two of his first productions only; and there it was confined to the flesh. In the account of this artist, given in the body of the work, a plate, with the head of an old man, finished with dots only, is described. Probably this might be seen by Giulio Campagnola, who adopted a mode of engraving, much resembling this, upon a more extensive plan than that of de Musis; but not with sufficient success, to render it an object worthy of the imitations of the contemporary artists. Stephen de Laulne, a native of Germany, and a very ingenious man, followed the steps of Campagnola; and many of his slight works are executed in dots only. Professor Christ, speaking of De Laulne, and mentioning this mode of engraving, calls it improperly *Opus Mallei*, or *the work of the hammer*; but it differs greatly from that style of which Janus Lutma appears to have been the inventor, and is properly named *Opus Mallei*, being performed with the point, held upright upon the copper, while the impression is made by a slight stroke of the hammer. These blows are repeated, and the point moved backwards and forwards, till a sufficient depth of colour is produced. A very sharp scraper is passed gently over this work, to take off so much of the barb raised by the repeated percussions upon the copper, as would prevent the dots appearing distinctly upon the print. In some instances, and in etching particularly, two, and sometimes three points, joined together, have been very successfully used. Desmarteau at Paris practised this mode of engraving, and carried it to great perfection. It is admirably adapted to the representations of drawings in red chalk, and slight academical studies. The head of the old man, in the print by Agostino de Musis, is executed with the point of the graver; but the prints by Campagnola and Stephen de Laulne, were done with the dry point, or some instrument of similar construction; and the dots have all the appearance of being made by hand, regularly one after another. John Boulanger, a French artist, who flourished in the middle of the seventeenth century, improved greatly upon this mode of engraving, and practised it with much success; while his contemporary, Nicholas Van Plattenberg, finished *a dead Christ* almost entirely with dots, made with the point of the graver, in a very powerful manner.

After the dispersion of the artists, educated in the school of Marc Antonio, which happened upon taking of the city of Rome by the Spaniards, the Ghisli of Mantua made a very considerable figure, especially George, who laying before him the Neptune of Marc Antonio for a model, improved upon the mechanical part of engraving, and harmonized the light and shadows with dots, judiciously inserted and intermixed with the strokes.

In the mean time, Cornelius Cort, a Dutchman, who resided a considerable time in Italy, and worked in general from the Italian painters, followed by Agostino Carracci, Cherubino Alberto, and Francesco Villamene, introduced a style of engraving entirely new. It was bold, powerful, and masterly; and, at the same time, demonstrated much more freedom of execution, than had been attempted before. Henry Goltzius approved of this style, and introduced it into the Low Countries, and many excellent artists were formed under his instructions. From this time the boldness and freedom of execution with the graver became an indispensable requisite; and, in many instances, correctness of drawing, character, and beauty, were sacrificed to the twisting and twirling of the strokes, and the clearness, with which the artist could cut the copper. But one very great defect, in the works of all the artists, from the commencement of engraving, to the time we are now treating of, is, their want of attention to the proper distribution of the light and shadow. They do not seem to have formed to themselves the least notion of harmonizing the effect, by the subordination of the lights upon the distant objects, in order to bring out, and give consequence to the principal figures. On the contrary, the lights are just as powerful and glaring upon the distant mountains, as upon the objects nearest to the eye in the fore-ground. This, of course, prevents the gradation of the masses, and gives a harsh and unfinished appearance to the most excellent performances of that age.

