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It has often been said that Goethe's claim to be considered, not only one of the greatest poets, but also one of the greatest men who have ever lived rests on his astounding many-sidedness, a many-sidedness which surpasses even that of Leonardo or Michelangelo.

In the literary sphere alone his range and diversity are surely without parallel. Many would maintain that he is the greatest lyric poet in European literature, certainly he is the widest in range; he was also a dramatist, novelist, autobiographer, essayist and critic of outstanding originality and power.

In addition, he was passionately interested in the natural sciences – especially in botany, geology, anatomy, meteorology and optics – on all of which subjects he thought deeply and wrote extensively, even making a minor discovery or two.

Then there were his practical activities as the Duke of Weimar's right-hand man in running almost single-handed for many years the little Duchy of Saxe-Weimar. At one time or another he fulfilled the functions of Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Mines; Minister of Education and Transport; War Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Minister for Foreign Affairs. Finally as Minister of Culture he was responsible for the management of the Weimar theatre and Court entertainments, and the lay-out of the Weimar park. All these functions he performed, it seems, with exemplary energy and efficiency.

But long though this list may be, it still leaves out of account a whole area of Goethe's interests which played an enormous part in his intellectual and spiritual life – namely his preoccupation with and his practice of the visual arts. It is this aspect of his manifold activities and interests which forms the subject of this book.

Goethe himself was in no doubt about, and was never tired

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of stressing, the supreme significance of the visual arts in his life and thought. His published writings – especially *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, the *Italienische Reise* and his many essays on artistic subjects – and his letters, diaries and conversations provide a vast amount of material for the study of this aspect of his genius. His interest in the contemplation and practice of the visual arts dates from his earliest years and remained a source of stimulus and happiness to him throughout his life, though this book is concerned only with the part they played up to and including his journey to Italy. Goethe acknowledges what they had meant to him in memorable words in the eighth book of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, where he expresses his gratitude to his years in Leipzig for having provided him with the basis for that preoccupation with the arts ‘in which I was to find the greatest satisfaction of my life’.

Goethe’s first experience of the visual arts is described by him in Book I of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, when he is recounting his earliest memories of the old house in the Grosser Hirschgraben in Frankfurt before its renovation in 1755–6: ‘Inside the house I was particularly fascinated by a series of views of Rome with which my father had decorated an ante-room, and which had been engraved by some skilful predecessors of Piranesi . . . Here I saw daily the Piazza del Popolo, the Colosseum, St Peter’s Square, St Peter’s Church from without and within, the Castel Sant’ Angelo and much besides. These scenes made a deep impression on me and my normally very taciturn father would from time to time regale us with a description of the object depicted.’ Thus was laid the first foundation of that passion for Italy and for Classical art which was to accompany Goethe through most of his life.

It must be remembered of course that these words were written more than fifty years after the period they describe, but there is no reason to suppose that they are not an accurate account of Goethe’s feelings at the time. Moreover, they are corroborated by a letter to his friends in Weimar on his arrival in Rome some thirty years later (1 November 1786): ‘All the

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dreams of my youth I now see come alive; the first engravings which I can remember (my father had hung an ante-room with views of Rome) I now see in reality.'

Johann Caspar Goethe, himself a remarkable man in many respects, deserves some consideration in this study as being the earliest factor in the development of his son's interest in the visual arts. For he himself was also a connoisseur of the arts, and through his collection of pictures, his passionate love of Italy and all things Italian, and his personal contacts with contemporary artists he exercised a profound influence on Goethe's aesthetic taste in his childhood and youth.

The great event of Johann Caspar's life was his journey to Italy in 1740, concerning which he wrote his own 'Italian Journey' in Italian. The *Viaggio per l'Italia*, in forty-two fictitious travel letters, was first written down some thirty years later on the basis of notes, memory, printed guides and probably letters to his mother, but it remained in manuscript until 1932.² Unlike his son forty-six years later he spent only a comparatively short period in Rome. Venice was the city that most attracted him and to which he devoted most of his time. For his son Italy meant above all the art and architecture of the past, of ancient Rome and the Renaissance. Johann Caspar on the other hand was interested mainly in the present, which meant the Baroque, and to him it was Venice which primarily represented this present.

On his return from his travels, instead of entering, as might have been expected, the diplomatic or administrative service of the Free City, he elected for a variety of reasons to adopt the life of a gentleman of leisure – for which through his father, Friedrich Georg Goethe, successful master tailor and later inn-keeper, he had sufficient funds. But he was far from idle. He was a man of keen intellectual and artistic interests and became one of the best-known dilettanti and book and picture collectors of Frankfurt – and this is where his main interest for us lies.

Johann Caspar probably began collecting pictures about

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1745. In the first place these were Dutch paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this preference for the Dutch masters he was following the example of his fellow collectors and carrying on a tradition that had long existed in artistic circles in Frankfurt. This tradition went back a very long way. During the religious wars in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century many Dutch families emigrated to Frankfurt, bringing their picture collections with them. Indeed some of the Dutch painters themselves settled in the Free City. Martin van Valckenburg, for instance, left Brabant in 1566 and duly became a burgher of the city in 1586. Fellow exiles of the same period were Valckenburg's pupil Hendrik van der Borcht, Hans Vredemann de Vries and his pupil Hendrik van Steenwyck, and in the later seventeenth century Jodocus van Winghe and the Roos family of painters.

Thus by the seventeenth century an artistic tradition, of mainly Dutch origin and character, was firmly established in the Free City. This was continued in the eighteenth century, and was reinforced by the Frankfurt Fairs. The sales of books, engravings and paintings made Frankfurt an art market of the first importance. In addition the fashion and habit of collecting pictures was extraordinarily widespread among the well-to-do burghers of the city. In 1780 Heinrich Sebastian Hüsgen, the historian of Frankfurt's art life in the late eighteenth century, estimates that there were no less than eighty private collections in Frankfurt with pictures from the Dutch, German and Italian schools – eighty collections in a city of thirty-five thousand inhabitants! Hüsgen describes the fourteen most important of these collections, including that of Goethe's father.³

Johann Caspar then began, like his fellow citizens, by collecting pictures of the Netherlandish schools of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But after the renovation of the house in the Grosser Hirschgraben he turned his attention, and henceforth devoted himself almost exclusively, to the work of contemporary local artists – the so-called Frankfurter Maler. In this he seems to have been virtually unique among all the

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Frankfurt collectors. This is how Goethe describes it in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*:

In the first place the pictures, which had been hung around the old house in a haphazard fashion, were now arranged symmetrically on the walls of a cheerful room next to the study, all in black frames with gilt mouldings. My father held the principle, which he frequently and even passionately defended, that one should employ living artists and pay less attention to past masters, in judging whom a great deal of prejudice was likely to be present. He maintained that paintings are exactly like Rhine wines, i.e. though age may confer a particular value on them, nevertheless every subsequent year may produce as excellent examples as the past has done. . . In accordance with these principles he commissioned for several years on end the entire body of Frankfurt artists.⁴

Now who were these Frankfurt artists? The first thing to note about them is that though they lived in the Rococo period they did not – with few exceptions – paint Rococo pictures. They shared the disaste of the Frankfurt patriciate and bourgeoisie for the Baroque–Rococo. They eschewed the Classical allegories and rhetorical gestures of the fashionable Court painters of the time, just as they eschewed their flamboyant religious altarpieces.

What they did provide was a faithful realism in the Dutch manner. Indeed they consciously modelled themselves on the Dutch masters of the seventeenth century, thus, as we know, carrying on a well-established Frankfurt tradition. So pronounced was this influence that when Goethe comes to describe his father's collection in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* he introduces the individual painters under the sign and symbol of their Dutch prototypes: Johann Georg Trautmann, for instance, who took Rembrandt as his master, or Christian Georg Schütz, who applied the manner of Sachtleven to the landscape of the Rhinelands, or Justus Juncker, who followed in the footsteps of the Dutch still-life painters. Nevertheless, though they consciously imitated the Dutch masters, they were not mere imitators, any more than were Morland or Wilkie in this country.⁵

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These then were the artists whom Johann Caspar employed to embellish the walls of the renovated house in the Grosser Hirschgraben and whose persons and whose work Goethe had known from at least the age of six. And now through a historical accident he was to become still more intimately connected with them. Frankfurt was not to remain unaffected by the changes and chances of the Seven Years War, and at New Year 1759 it was finally occupied by French troops. This meant among other things that Goethe's father had to submit to the disagreeable necessity of having a high-ranking French officer billeted upon him in the so recently renovated house. This was the Lieutenant du roi, François de Théas, Comte de Thoranc, who was in charge of the relations between the military and the civilian population of the city.⁶ The whole episode is recounted with great vividness and narrative skill in the third book of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.

Johann Caspar was lucky in his guest; though he – anti-French and pro-Frederick as he was – showed little appreciation of the fact and took little trouble to disguise his resentment at the enforced disturbance of his normal way of life. Thoranc indeed was a remarkable man, highly cultured, humane and civilized and – what is more important from our point of view – passionately devoted to the arts. As soon as he arrived in the house and heard Johann Caspar speak of his collection, he begged, although it was already dark, to be allowed to have at least a glance at the paintings by candlelight. ‘He had an immense pleasure in these things and showed the greatest courtesy to my father as he accompanied him; and when he learnt that most of the artists were still alive and were residing in Frankfurt or its neighbourhood, he insisted that his greatest wish was to make their acquaintance as soon as possible and to employ them.’⁷

From now on the house in the Grosser Hirschgraben was transformed in part at least into a studio for the Frankfurt painters and a period of the closest preoccupation with the artists and their work opened up for the young Wolfgang. In

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the very first days of his sojourn the Count summoned to him the entire body of Frankfurt painters, such as Hirt, Schütz, Trautmann, Nothnagel and Juncker, bought from them what they were ready to sell, and commissioned them on a scale they had never dreamt of. Wolfgang's much-loved room in the attic storey was put at their disposal. Count Thoranc commissioned the pictures not only for himself, but more specifically for his brother, whose house in Provence he proposed to decorate with a series of mural paintings to be executed by the Frankfurt artists.

This grandiose commission occupied the Frankfurt artists for over two years, during which period (1759–62) Goethe was constantly in the presence of the painters and their pictures. At this time he was a boy of ten to twelve; it is not too much to say that the basis of his aesthetic taste was laid by the Frankfurt artists. In *Dichtung und Wahrheit* he describes how closely his daily life was interwoven with the painters in these years and how the part he played was by no means a purely passive one:

Since I had known all these men from my earliest youth and had often visited them in their studios and since moreover the Count liked to have me around, this meant that I was actually present when the works were commissioned, discussed and finally handed over; nor did I scruple to offer my own opinion, especially when the drafts and sketches were handed in. I had long acquired the reputation among art-lovers, and especially at auctions, which I attended assiduously, that I was able to say straight away what was the theme of any historical picture, be the subject biblical or profane or mythological; and even if I did not always hit on the meaning of the allegorical paintings, there was seldom anyone else present who had any more inkling than I. Thus I had frequently been able to propose one subject or another to the artists, and I availed myself of these opportunities with the greatest relish. I still remember composing an elaborate essay, in which I described twelve pictures which were supposed to represent the story of Joseph, and some of these were actually carried out.⁸

Though Wolfgang had been obliged to hand over his attic room to the Frankfurt artists and their works he evidently spent nearly as much time in their company there as when he had

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been its sole occupant. Count Thoranc too, it appears, was a frequent visitor, examining with the greatest interest the finished pictures as they were delivered. At last the commission was virtually completed, the paintings packed in chests and despatched to Grasse, and the attic room cleaned up and returned to Wolfgang for his own use. In December 1762 the French evacuated Frankfurt and Count Thoranc departed from the city.⁹ But this did not mean that the commissions were entirely at an end. As late as 1764 he was still ordering pictures from Nothnagel and Seekatz. It has been calculated that in all Count Thoranc must have commissioned some 250 pictures from the Frankfurt painters.¹⁰

There is a postscript to this story of the Lieutenant du roi. A certain Martin Schubart, who happened to be staying in the neighbourhood of Grasse in 1876 and had just read the passage in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* relevant to Count Thoranc, succeeded in discovering the former residence of the Count and his brother, and lo! – there upon the walls were still hanging the paintings of the Frankfurter Maler. Not only that, but he also succeeded in acquiring some of the pictures – namely the paintings by Trautmann of the legend of Joseph referred to in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* – for the Goethehaus in Frankfurt. And some years later Seekatz's cycle of twelve pictures of the months and two landscapes with ruins by C. G. Schütz, also in Grasse, were likewise acquired for the Goethehaus, where they still hang to this day.¹¹

It is clear from what has been said that the Frankfurt painters exercised an important influence on Goethe's early aesthetic development. What then did this influence consist in? First and foremost, their importance lay in the fact that through them he became immersed in an artistic ambience; the world of art was, so to speak, the air he breathed from his earliest years. The experience of the Frankfurter Maler set the scene for his life-long preoccupation with the visual arts. If they were not primarily responsible for, they were at least an important contributory factor to, the essentially visual nature of Goethe's genius,

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as it expressed itself in his poetry and thought. As he put it in a famous passage from his autobiography: 'The eye was above all others the organ with which I apprehended the world. I had lived among painters from childhood and had grown accustomed like them to look at the objects about me from the point of view of the artist.'¹² (Das Auge war vor allen anderen das Organ, womit ich die Welt fasste. Ich hatte von Kindheit auf zwischen Malern gelebt, und mich gewöhnt, die Gegenstände wie sie in bezug auf die Kunst anzusehen.)

Secondly, the importance of the Frankfurt painters for Goethe lay in the specific character of their work, in its sober realism in the manner and spirit of the Dutch masters of the seventeenth century. The qualities of these pictures are simplicity, realism and a pleasing naturalness. Their essential virtue, one might say, is truth to nature, and this after all was to remain one of the guiding principles of Goethe's aesthetic life.

We have seen that, with the exception to some extent of Seekatz (see note 5) the Frankfurt painters rejected the Baroque-Rococo tradition and all it stood for. In this they were only being true to the tradition of Frankfurt itself. For the Free City remained a kind of bourgeois enclave within the aristocratic Baroque world that surrounded it. If one compares Frankfurt with neighbouring cities like Mainz or Würzburg what strikes one most is the relative absence of the Baroque and Rococo in the city of Goethe's birth and upbringing. Without much exaggeration one could say that in Frankfurt the architecture of the Middle Ages was directly succeeded by the architecture of the Classical Revival, with only a sprinkling of not very important monuments of the intervening styles. With few exceptions even the buildings which were erected during the Baroque period have about them a modesty and simplicity which are essentially un-Baroque, and which have more affinity with the spirit of English Georgian architecture.

The reasons for this distaste for the Baroque-Rococo are obvious enough. The Free City of Frankfurt, like the other

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Free Cities of the Reich, was a fundamentally bourgeois community, ruled over by a bourgeois – and also Protestant – patriariate. Now the qualities of the Baroque – its dynamic power, its love of extremes, its exuberance, its daring flights of imagination, its theatricality and frivolity – all these are the very antithesis of the bourgeois ideal. In addition, the Baroque style in the eyes of the Frankfurt burghers was politically tainted: it was the typical expression of eighteenth-century absolutism, of the boundless will to power and self-glorification of the petty despots of the age, both secular and ecclesiastical. It was equally tainted from the religious point of view, for at any rate in South Germany, where it mainly flourished, it was associated almost exclusively with Catholicism, and its more flamboyant and rhetorical qualities were particularly distasteful to the sober inhabitants of Frankfurt in this context.

When Goethe was growing up in Frankfurt under the influence of the Frankfurter Maler, what many people now regard as the greatest epoch of German architecture had already reached its zenith, but was by no means at its end. Though many of the great masterpieces of German Baroque architecture were already in existence by the time of Goethe's birth, many more were still in process of completion or indeed not even begun, including, for instance, the supreme achievements of the greatest of German Baroque architects, Johann Balthasar Neumann, whose abbeys of Vierzehnheiligen and Neresheim were not finished until 1772 and 1792 respectively. Thus this tradition, at any rate in the field of architecture, was still a living and creative force, capable of the highest artistic achievements, during at least the first four decades of Goethe's life.

Only when we take into account the factors enumerated above which rendered this whole tradition objectionable to the spirit of the Free City can we explain the astonishing fact that Goethe would appear to have been completely indifferent to this whole development. Nowhere in his writings is there a single reference to the great Baroque architects of the age or to their works. This is all the more surprising when one remem-