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John Ruskin

Excerpt

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SIR JOSHUA AND HOLBEIN

(1860)

XIX.

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[*Bibliographical Note.*—This paper first appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine* for March 1860, vol. i. pp. 322–328. It was unsigned; but a review in the *Critic*, March 3, 1860, remarked, “There is no need of signature to the charming little article to inform us of the secret of its authorship. None but the pen of John Ruskin could have produced this sketch of the two masters.”

The paper was reprinted in *On the Old Road*, 1885, vol. i. pp. 221–236 (§§ 149–165); and again in the second edition of that work (1899), vol. i. pp. 225–240 (§§ 149–165).]

## SIR JOSHUA AND HOLBEIN

1. LONG ago discarded from our National Gallery, with the contempt logically due to national or English pictures, —lost to sight and memory for many a year in the Ogygian seclusions of Marlborough House—there have re-appeared at last, in more honourable exile at Kensington, two great pictures by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Two, with others; but these alone worth many an entanglement among the cross-roads of the West, to see for half-an-hour by spring sunshine:—the *Holy Family*, and the *Graces*, side by side now in the principal room. Great, as ever was work wrought by man. In placid strength, and subtlest science, unsurpassed;—in sweet felicity, incomparable.<sup>1</sup>

2. If you truly want to know what good work of painter's hand is, study those two pictures from side to side, and miss no inch of them (you will hardly, eventually, be inclined to miss one): in some respects there is no execution like it; none so open in the magic. For the work of other great men is hidden in its wonderfulness—you cannot see how it was done. But in Sir Joshua's there is no mystery: it is all amazement. No question but that the touch was so laid; only that it *could* have been so laid, is a marvel for ever. So also there is no painting so majestic in sweetness. He is lily-sceptred: his power blossoms, but burdens not. All other men of equal dignity paint more slowly; all others of equal force

<sup>1</sup> [For another reference to the "Holy Family" (No. 78), no longer publicly exhibited (owing to its bad state of preservation), see Vol. III. p. 30. The picture is here illustrated from an engraving (Plate I.). "The Graces decorating a Statue of Hymen" is No. 79 in the National Gallery; the picture is a fancy portrait of the three daughters of Sir William Montgomery. For another reference to it, see Vol. XIV. p. 472.]

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paint less lightly. Tintoret lays his line like a king marking the boundaries of conquered lands; but Sir Joshua leaves it as a summer wind its trace on a lake; he could have painted on a silken veil, where it fell free, and not bent it.

3. Such at least is his touch when it is life that he paints: for things lifeless he has a severer hand. If you examine that picture of the *Graces* you will find it reverses all the ordinary ideas of expedient treatment. By other men flesh is firmly painted, but accessories lightly. Sir Joshua paints accessories firmly,\* flesh lightly;—nay, flesh not at all, but spirit. The wreath of flowers he feels to be material; and gleam by gleam strikes fearlessly the silver and violet leaves out of the darkness. But the three maidens are less substantial than rose petals. No flushed nor frosted tissue that ever faded in night wind is so tender as they; no hue may reach, no line measure, what is in them so gracious and so fair. Let the hand move softly—itsself as a spirit; for this is Life, of which it touches the imagery.

## 4. “And yet——”

Yes: you do well to pause. There is a “yet” to be thought of. I did not bring you to these pictures to see wonderful work merely, or womanly beauty merely. I brought you chiefly to look at that Madonna, believing that you might remember other Madonnas, unlike her; and might think it desirable to consider wherein the difference lay:—other Madonnas not by Sir Joshua, who painted Madonnas but seldom. Who perhaps, if truth must be told, painted them never: for surely this dearest pet of an English girl, with the little curl of lovely hair under her ear, is *not* one.

## 5. Why did not Sir Joshua—or could not—or would not

\* As showing gigantic power of hand, joined with utmost accuracy and rapidity, the folds of drapery under the breast of the Virgin are, perhaps, as marvellous a piece of work as could be found in any picture, of whatever time or master.

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Sir Joshua Reynolds

W Sharp  
Allen & Co. Sc.

The Holy Family

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Sir Joshua—paint Madonnas? neither he, nor his great rival-friend Gainsborough?<sup>1</sup> Both of them painters of women, such as since Giorgione and Correggio had not been; both painters of men, such as had not been since Titian. How is it that these English friends can so brightly paint that particular order of humanity which we call “gentlemen and ladies,” but neither heroes, nor saints, nor angels? Can it be because they were both country-bred boys, and for ever after strangely sensitive to courtliness? Why, Giotto also was a country-bred boy. Allegri’s native Correggio, Titian’s Cadore, were but hill villages; yet these men painted not the court, nor the drawing-room, but the Earth: and not a little of Heaven besides: while our good Sir Joshua never trusts himself outside the park palings. He could not even have drawn the strawberry girl,<sup>2</sup> unless she had got through a gap in them—or rather, I think, she must have been let in at the porter’s lodge, for her strawberries are in a pottle, ready for the ladies at the Hall. Giorgione would have set them, wild and fragrant, among their leaves, in her hand. Between his fairness, and Sir Joshua’s May-fairness, there is a strange, impassable limit—as of the white reef that in Pacific isles encircles their inner lakelets, and shuts them from the surf and sound of sea. Clear and calm they rest, reflecting fringed shadows of the palm-trees, and the passing of fretted clouds across their own sweet circle of blue sky. But beyond, and round and round their coral bar, lies the blue of sea and heaven together—blue of eternal deep.

6. You will find it a pregnant question, if you follow it forth, and leading to many others, not trivial, Why it is, that in Sir Joshua’s girl, or Gainsborough’s, we always think first of the Ladyhood; but in Giotto’s, of the Womanhood? Why, in Sir Joshua’s hero, or Vandyck’s,

<sup>1</sup> [Compare *Modern Painters*, vol. v. (Vol. VII. p. 378), and *Academy Notes*, 1859 (Vol. XIV. p. 223).]

<sup>2</sup> [“The Strawberry Girl” (exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1773) is No. 40 in the Wallace Collection, Hertford House.]

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it is always the Prince or the Sir whom we see first; but in Titian's, the man.

Not that Titian's gentlemen are less finished than Sir Joshua's; but their gentlemanliness\* is not the principal thing about them; their manhood absorbs, conquers, wears it as a despised thing. Nor—and this is another stern ground of separation—will Titian make a gentleman of every one he paints. He will make him so if he is so, not otherwise; and this not merely in general servitude to truth, but because, in his sympathy with deeper humanity, the courtier is not more interesting to him than any one else. “You have learned to dance and fence; you can speak with clearness, and think with precision; your hands are small, your senses acute, and your features well-shaped. Yes: I see all this in you, and will do it justice. You shall stand as none but a well-bred man could stand; and your fingers shall fall on the sword-hilt as no fingers could but those that knew the grasp of it. But for the rest, this grisly fisherman, with rusty cheek and rope-frayed hand, is a man as well as you, and might possibly make several of you, if souls were divisible. His bronze colour is quite as interesting to me, Titian, as your paleness, and his hoary spray of stormy hair takes the light as well as your waving curls. Him also I will paint, with such pictur- esqueness as he may have; yet not putting the pictur- esqueness first in him, as in you I have not put the gentlemanliness first. In him I see a strong human creature, contending with all hardship: in you also a human creature, uncontending, and possibly not strong. Contention

\* The reader must observe that I use the word here in a limited sense, as meaning only the effect of careful education, good society, and refined habits of life, on average temper and character. Of deep and true gentlemanliness—based as it is on intense sensibility and sincerity, perfected by courage, and other qualities of race; as well as of that union of insensibility with cunning, which is the essence of vulgarity, I shall have to speak at length in another place.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [A reference to the chapter on Vulgarity in the fifth volume of *Modern Painters*, which was published three months after the present paper appeared.]

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or strength, weakness or picturesqueness, and all other such accidents in either, shall have due place. But the immortality and miracle of you—this clay that burns, this colour that changes—are in truth the awful things in both: these shall be first painted—and last.”

7. With which question respecting treatment of character we have to connect also this further one: How is it that the attempts of so great painters as Reynolds and Gainsborough are, beyond portraiture, limited almost like children's? No domestic drama—no history—no noble natural scenes, far less any religious subject:—only market carts; girls with pigs; woodmen going home to supper; watering-places; grey cart-horses in fields, and such like. Reynolds, indeed, once or twice touched higher themes,—“among the chords his fingers laid,”<sup>1</sup> and recoiled: wisely; for, strange to say, his very sensibility deserts him when he leaves his courtly quiet. The horror of the subjects he chose (Cardinal Beaufort and Ugolino)<sup>2</sup> showed inherent apathy: had he felt deeply, he would not have sought for this strongest possible excitement of feeling,—would not willingly have dwelt on the worst conditions of despair—the despair of the ignoble. His religious subjects are conceived even with less care than these. Beautiful as it is, this Holy Family by which we stand has neither dignity nor sacredness, other than those which attach to every group of gentle mother and ruddy babe; while his Faiths, Charities, or other well-ordered and emblem-fitted virtues, are even less lovely than his ordinary portraits of women.<sup>3</sup>

It was a faultful temper, which, having so mighty a power of realization at command, never became so much

<sup>1</sup> [Compare Scott's “amid the strings his finger stray'd” (*Lay of the Last Minstrel*, Introduction) and “among the strings his fingers range” (*Rokeby*, canto v. stanza 19).]

<sup>2</sup> [“The Death of Cardinal Beaufort” (illustrating *Henry VI.*, part ii. Act iii.), painted for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery in 1790, is at Petworth; the sketch for the picture is in the Dulwich Gallery (No. 254). The picture of “Ugolino and his Sons,” exhibited at the Academy in 1773, is at Knole; a study for the head of Ugolino is in the National Gallery (No. 106).]

<sup>3</sup> [Reynolds's designs for the “Seven Virtues” were executed in the window of the ante-chapel at New College, Oxford; for another reference to the window, see Vol. XVI. p. 417.]



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interested in any fact of human history as to spend one touch of heartfelt skill upon it;—which, yielding momentarily to indolent imagination, ended, at best, in a Puck, or a Thais; a Mercury as Thief, or a Cupid as Linkboy.<sup>1</sup> How wide the interval between this gently trivial humour, guided by the wave of a feather, or arrested by the enchantment of a smile,—and the habitual dwelling of the thoughts of the great Greeks and Florentines among the beings and the interests of the eternal world!

8. In some degree it may indeed be true that the modesty and sense of the English painters are the causes of their simple practice. All that they did, they did well, and attempted nothing over which conquest was doubtful. They knew they could paint men and women: it did not follow that they could paint angels. Their own gifts never appeared to them so great as to call for serious question as to the use to be made of them. “They could mix colours and catch likeness—yes; but were they therefore able to teach religion, or reform the world? To support themselves honourably, pass the hours of life happily, please their friends, and leave no enemies, was not this all that duty could require, or prudence recommend? Their own art was, it seemed, difficult enough to employ all their genius: was it reasonable to hope also to be poets or theologians? Such men had, indeed, existed; but the age of miracles and prophets was long past; nor, because they could seize the trick of an expression, or the turn of a head, had they any right to think themselves able to conceive heroes with Homer, or gods with Michael Angelo.”

9. Such was, in the main, their feeling: wise, modest, unenvious, and unambitious. Meaner men, their contemporaries or successors, raved of high art with incoherent passion; arrogated to themselves an equality with the

<sup>1</sup> [Of the pictures here referred to, “Puck” and “Thais,” as also “Mrs. Pelham feeding Chickens,” were shown at the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition in 1857. “Puck” is in the collection of Mr. G. W. Fitzwilliam. “Thais” (a portrait of Miss Emily Pott in that character, painted 1781) is at Waddesdon. “Mercury as Thief” and “Cupid as Linkboy” are in the collection of Mr. A. Henderson.]

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masters of elder time, and declaimed against the degenerate tastes of a public which acknowledged not the return of the Heraclidæ.<sup>1</sup> But the two great—the two only painters of their age—happy in a reputation founded as deeply in the heart as in the judgment of mankind, demanded no higher function than that of soothing the domestic affections; and achieved for themselves at last an immortality not the less noble, because in their lifetime they had concerned themselves less to claim it than to bestow.

10. Yet, while we acknowledge the discretion and simple-heartedness of these men, honouring them for both: and the more when we compare their tranquil powers with the hot egotism and hollow ambition of their inferiors: we have to remember, on the other hand, that the measure they thus set to their aims was, if a just, yet a narrow one; that amiable discretion is not the highest virtue, nor to please the frivolous, the best success. There is probably some strange weakness in the painter, and some fatal error in the age, when in thinking over the examples of their greatest work, for some type of culminating loveliness or veracity, we remember no expression either of religion or heroism,<sup>2</sup> and instead of reverently naming a Madonna di San Sisto, can only whisper, modestly, “Mrs. Pelham feeding chickens.”<sup>3</sup>

11. The nature of the fault, so far as it exists in the painters themselves, may perhaps best be discerned by

<sup>1</sup> [A passage in the first draft shows the particular painters of whom Ruskin was thinking as arrogating to themselves the rôle of the descendants of Hercules:—

“Barry foamed over his frescoes in classic rage; West compared religious subjects with exact decorum and Raphaellesque propriety; Opie and Fuseli adorned the loftiest phases of the drama with sublime incoherence; and Haydon believed himself Phidias in the morning, and retired as Michael Angelo at night.”

For similar allusions to Barry, see Vol. III. p. 649, Vol. VII. p. 231, and *Eagle's Nest*, § 63; for West, Vol. IV. p. 382, Vol. V. p. 125, Vol. X. p. 125; for Opie, Vol. XIV. p. 330; for Fuseli, Vol. V. p. 108, Vol. VII. p. 419; and for Haydon, *Cestus of Aglaia*, § 85 (below, p. 133).]

<sup>2</sup> [In the MS.: “we remember neither saint nor hero, neither Madonna by the cradle, nor angel by the grave.”]

<sup>3</sup> [This picture, painted 1770-1774, is in the Earl of Yarborough's collection; for another reference to it, see *Art of England*, § 66.]