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978-1-108-06065-3 - Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: Volume 1

William Holman Hunt

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VOLUME 1

WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT



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The Lady of Shalott.

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BY

W. HOLMAN HUNT, O.M., D.C.L.

TWO VOLUMES

WITH 40 PHOTOGRAVURE PLATES, AND
OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS

VOL. I

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THIS BOOK I DEDICATE

TO

MY WIFE

AS ONE OF MY INSUFFICIENT TRIBUTES TO HER
WHOSE CONSTANT VIRTUES EVER EXALT MY UNDERSTANDING
OF THE NATURE AND INFLUENCE OF WOMANHOOD

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Facsimile of the Initials on Millais'

"Lorenzo and Isabella," 1848

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PREFATORY NOTE

I HAVE to acknowledge my indebtedness to many friends for suggestions and assistance in the completion of this history. I omit the names of these lest they might be unfairly regarded as in any way responsible for the many deficiencies of this book. I may, however, express my obligation to Mr. Cameron Swan, whose great proficiency as photogravure engraver has been rendered the more effective by his untiring and ever-ready response to my frequent requirements for experiment with a view to greater excellence of effect in the reproduction of my pictures. It is a pleasure to me to acknowledge his great attention and proficiency.

W. H. H.

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PREFACE

I am but a single voice.—THEOCRITUS.

ART is generally regarded as a light and irresponsible pursuit, entailing for its misuse no penalty to the artist or to the nation of which he is a citizen. It is further assumed that a being endowed with original taste may, after some perfunctory essays, be happily inspired, and that he will then, with a few days of wrapt energy, be able to convert his thoughts into a masterpiece.

In my boyhood a brilliant novel was based on this idea. At the end of the eighteenth century a young hero of romance, in easy circumstances, wandering about Europe to gratify his love of ancient art, found himself in the classical cities of Italy. He was surrounded by sympathetic friends, who recognized that he had been born with fine tastes and talents, who listened to him appreciatively as he discoursed of Raphael, Guido, Salvator Rosa, and other favourite masters. After some less important artistic experiments criticised by an academic friend as wanting in orthodox arrangement; although interrupted by an engrossing love affair and by efforts to discover the true elixir of life, the amateur

artist shut himself up in a weird chamber, and on the white walls he elaborated a composition representing the "Judgment of the Dead by the Living." It was a masterpiece, as such a noble subject merited it should be.

Pictures are not produced thus. Long years are needed to train the eye and hand before a man can represent on a flat surface any forms of creation under the simplest conditions; the difficulty grows in compound ratio with intricate design of moving figures, and the immature artist's illustration of so sublime a theme would tax more than the extreme indulgence of the most partial friends.

For the sculptor to arrive at a high perfection not less severe study is needful; but the use of callipers may so far cover ignorance of proportion, that the essays of a pretender may not be so pitiable in the eyes of the undiscriminating as they would be for similar attempts in painting. Marble, finely polished, is a beautiful material, and its purity of surface compensates for defects which disenchant even the superficial in looking on the ignorantly smudged canvas; excellence in either branch of art can be won only by incessant labour, such as no one will bestow who is not endowed with that passion for art which made him draw in infancy, a passion which ever leaves him unhappy when not wrestling with some besetting sin discovered in his own practice.

Burne-Jones, once conversing upon the shortness of human life for the attainment of maturity in art, impulsively said to me that at least 300 years were needed. This, though an unpremeditated exclamation, was not a

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baseless guess. The Greeks, the Romans, and the Italians eked out their short span of personal observation and experience by handing on their acquired wisdom to their pupils, and so extended individual life, and thus more surely reached the goal of their ambition. I hope to convince my readers that every student of art in the past was loyal to his own nationality, and that in these days men of British blood, whether of insular birth or of the homes beyond the seas, should not subject themselves to the influence of masters alien to the sentiments and principles of the great English poets and thinkers.

It was matter for caution even in the days when the sober high purposes of Continental masters ensured the cultivation of correctness and respect for questions of common-sense ; but now that these qualities are ridiculed and put aside, there is greater reason for regarding foreign training as most pernicious and altogether to be shunned by students of the race to which Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and the great fathers of our own art belonged.

In the hope of eradicating many mischievous prejudices which are thoughtlessly handed on as unquestioned truths, I abandon reserve more than otherwise I should do.

Regarding the character of a nation's art as immeasurably more important than it is ordinarily thought to be, both for its own people and for the whole world, I may at times be led to speak with solemnity ; but at the outset I disclaim all pretensions to those graces of style and deft mingling of exquisitely selected words into variegated tints of meaning, which should grace a history across whose

stage will pass many of the masters of thought of the latter half of the nineteenth century. I must rely simply upon the charm of my theme when treating of men who were searching out a new perfection in life and lovingly teaching it to others.

The manner in which our particular views were conceived, and the order in which our coadjutors came together, the qualifications and character of each, our consultations and our resolves, will scarcely be intelligible until the conditions are understood in which young artists found themselves a few years before the middle of the nineteenth century, when the future members of the Pre-Raphaelite movement were boy students. The system of apprenticeship under which was produced all the great art of past ages had died out in the early days of the century, perhaps as an inevitable sequence of the establishment of art academies. Serious penalties, not generally considered, followed the change. A student received indeed valuable advice from the visitors in the schools as to the accuracy of the studies he made in prosaic imitation; but the constant paternal guidance of the master training the inventive faculties of a particular pupil ceased to exist, and the latter could no longer see the original work of the master in all its stages any more than the master could follow the student in his daily ambitious efforts. We, as students, no doubt lost much good resulting from the old tradition as it would have been carried out by an altogether wise master, but we escaped what would have been fatal evils had the director been wanting in wisdom. When Millais and I

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compared notes in after-life, we found that each of us had mainly depended for our painting practice upon the example and advice of fellow-students more advanced than ourselves. Our unguided position had compensating advantages; the necessity of proving any new suggestion established in us the habit of daring judgment, which we exercised on questions more important than those of technique alone, and our previous study of the great masters prevented our inquiries from having the taint of ignorant presumption.

To the casual cognoscenti of our youth the annual exhibitions contained all that British art was required to display. The press, it will be seen, testified to this judgment, as did also, in all societies, many of the representative men of the day.¹ The general enthusiastic approbation was further indicated by the avidity with which all well-to-do homes were furnished with engravings of the favourite current pictures, and also by the repugnance to reform proved by the detestation which our innocent works provoked.

I can aver that we also saw much to admire in the art of the day, but for my own part there was great need to distinguish between feelings of passing enjoyment in an exhibition and the more critical judgment called for to guard one's art conscience. After some hours spent in a modern gallery I felt pride welling up in me at the sensibility and skill of many British artists, yet each season I increasingly recognised that there could be no full satisfaction in merely carrying on our elders' ambitions, which

¹ See later extracts from Lord Macaulay, Kingsley, Rev. E. Young.

had become weakened in their dire struggle for existence in those straitened days, by the need of compromise with the prejudices of social taste. Artists had to work mainly on a sort of charitable sufferance from the rich, who were not always more than fashionably refined; our predecessors, therefore, deserved the less blame for their faults and the more praise for their excellences.

It was not till later days that I learned that one of our forerunners had been mourning the expiring condition of British art.

Let the gentle Leslie's despairing tone over Constable's prophecy¹ that British art would disappear about 1852, together with his interpretation of its fulfilment in the death of Turner, bear witness to the fear of this being inevitable. With Stothard, Constable, and Wilkie dead, Etty past account, and Turner's glorious career at an end, no effort of elders could affect the imminent prospect. We young men had no disposition to lay our spring-like lives at the feet of such fatality. If the open road ended in an impassable waste, we had to make a new way; it might be to push through the forest darkness, to root out venomous undergrowth, to substitute wholesome stock, grafting these with shoots, to ripen hereafter for the refreshment of travellers overcome by their toilsome march. It is by seeking out the teaching of the secret-revealing years that the young can justify their usurpation of the seats of their fathers.

Our purpose was formed with deliberation, and we

¹ See heading to Chapter III.

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had such faith in our initial thought that we disdained caution in our plans. “Will you advance guardedly?” said General Morgan to his re-engaged Ironsides fighting to raise the siege of Dunkirk, “or will you go happy-go-lucky?” “Happy-go-lucky,” replied they. We were as reckless in the manner of our advance. Their impetuosity ensured the warriors immediate victory, but our victory was for many years threatened, and has, to say the least, been much retarded by our impulsive course.

The question, Who is truly an artist? is not a new one. Michael Angelo said that carrying a box of colours did not make a painter, and in our day to flaunt trivial fancies into dainty form, cherished by idle patrons as the choicest examples of taste, cannot be consistent with the high service which art is called upon to render. To lounge about from studio to studio and confer over the things that “go off” best, or to report the highest sum given in Paris for an approved piece of manipulation, executed to suit the whim of a star of the demi-monde, may be a step towards reaching vulgar favour and opulence, but the triumph is a miserable one. With no larger aspiration than this astir, how will a people be blessed as were those to whom the artist gave a national talisman for the conquest of ignorance and brutality? Art, as of old, should stamp a nation’s individuality; it should be the witness of its life to all eternity.

To whom but the artist is relegated the task of giving a tangible and worthy image of the national body and mind, who else may select and uphold the visible sign of that

beauty in his race which is most heroic physically and mentally? Who shall warn the people from the cramping distortions of the ephemeral tastes of the day? the fashion for such frivolity being the mark of the corruption of original sin. In antique nations, 'tis true, deadly vanities, insidious as tares, were so cherished, supplanting the true wheat and imperilling the vigour of the race; tares spread by the hand of that Sower who never leaves those unvexed who are constant on a great perfection.

All development has its root in a desire. Man must have a revered image in his mind's eye. The leading races of antiquity authorised art to stamp the national insignia on all products. Happy is that nation that develops a true art of its own! Nations, when feeble-spirited as to design, incapable of reflecting their own soul, have bowed to classical supremacy, and by this tribute have escaped much lurking evil. Had China accepted the teachings of Greek art the nation would have been incapable of hideously laming its women; had late ages in Europe cared for healthy art one hundredth part as much as they professed to do, the distortions of fashion would have been defied. Even in ancient times the artists who marched in the van of thought had more than imaginary foes to overcome. Xenophon, in the very days of Pheidias, tells of the wife of Ischomachus, who, till converted to wisdom by Socrates, made use of poisonous white lead and vermilion to heighten the charm of her complexion in her husband's eyes. The idle vulgar,

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indeed, have ever affected vanities to distinguish them from their more humble brethren, to whom fortune gave nothing but some implement wherewith to take part in the labour of the world. The small hand is in truth the mark of decaying vigour, but it is valued by the idle as a sign of high descent. In foppish centuries, dandies, like silly women, squeezed in their languid bodies with stays, and false artists flattered these follies. But as priests are bound to remove all veils from vice and preach that virtue alone is imperishable, so the true limner has to show the hideousness and deadliness of sham fascination by proving the everlasting dignity of the natural proportions of the human form. It is this perfection which enables man to overcome the brute, which gives him courage to guard his belongings from murder and rapine and to repress tyranny. It is no idle fancy of Keats that “to be first in Beauty is to be first in Might.” The office of the artist should be looked upon as a priest’s service in the temple of Nature, where ampler graces are revealed to those that have eyes to see, just as ever gentler chords announce the fuller life to those that have ears to hear, while declared Law opens up wide regions unordered and anarchic, where selfish greed has yet to be tutored into wise rule. In the circle of the initiated, responsive beings recognise the elimination of immature design in creation to be a triumph of patient endeavour, and they join in the chorus of those who “sang together for joy” on the attainment of the ideal of Heaven’s Artist, who in overflowing bounty endowed the colourless world with prismatic radiance, prophesying of Titians yet to be

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who should go forth to charm away scales from the eyes
of the blind.¹

¹ “We may say roughly that the spectrum of white light consists of 100 colours ; since the colours of all cold natural bodies are those they reflect to us *when they can get it*, if they can’t get it they must be colourless (dark night). I supplied the flowers with one colour only, *yellow*, or rather *orange* light. This was a hard trial for the red roses and the green leaves, and, in short, they made a mess of it, as you remember so well.”—SIR NORMAN LOCKYER, K.C.B., June 6, 1905.

This refers to a demonstration made by Sir Norman Lockyer several years since, to prove that bodies have no power of producing colour, but can only reflect a selection from amongst the colours of the light that falls upon them. The source of all colour is therefore light.

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