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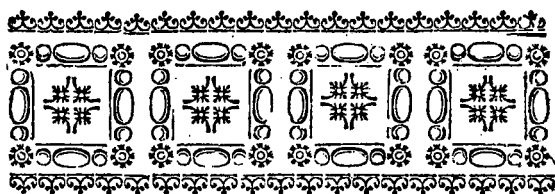
978-1-108-06678-5 - An Essay upon Prints: Containing Remarks upon the Principles of Picturesque Beauty

William Gilpin

Excerpt

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[ 1 ]



## CHAPTER I.

*The principles of Painting considered,  
so far as they relate to Prints.*

**A** Painting, or picture, is distinguished from a print only by the colouring, and the manner of execution. In other respects, the

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## [ 2 ]

foundation of beauty is the same in both; and we consider a print, as we do a picture, in a double light, with regard to a *whole*, and with regard to its *parts*. It may have an agreeable effect as a *whole*, and yet be very culpable in its *parts*. It may be likewise the reverse. A man may make a good appearance upon the *whole*; tho' his *limbs*, examined separately, may be wanting in exact proportion. His *limbs*, on the other hand, may be exactly formed, and yet his *person*, upon the *whole*, disgusting.

To make a print agreeable as a *whole*, a just observance of those rules is necessary, which relate to *design*, *disposition*, *keeping*, and the *distribution*.

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## [ 3 ]

*tion of light*: to make it agreeable in its *parts*, of those which relate to *drawing, expression, grace, and perspective*.

By *design*, (a term, which painters sometimes use in a more limited sense) I mean the general conduct of the piece as a representation of such a particular story. It answers, in an historical relation of a fact, to a judicious choice of circumstances, and includes a *proper time, proper characters, the most affecting manner of introducing those characters, and proper appendages*.

With regard to a *proper time*, the painter is assisted by good old dra-

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matic rules; which inform him, that *one* point of time only should be taken — the most affecting in the action; and that no other part of the story should interfere with it. Thus *in the death of ANANIAS*, if the instant of his falling down be chosen, no anachronism should be introduced; every part of the piece should correspond; each character should be under the strongest impression of astonishment, and horror; those passions being yet unallayed by any cooler passions succeeding.

With regard to *characters*, the painter must suit them to his *piece* by attending to historical truth, if his subject be history; or to heathen mythology, if it be fabulous.

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## [ 5 ]

He must farther *introduce them properly*. They should be ordered in such an advantageous manner, that the principal figures, those which are most concerned in the action, should catch the eye *first*, and engage it *most*. This is an essential ingredient in a well-told story. In the first place, they should be the least embarrassed of the group. This alone gives them distinction. But they may be farther distinguished, sometimes by a *broad light*; sometimes, tho' but rarely, and when the subject requires it, by a *strong shadow*, in the midst of a light; sometimes by a remarkable *action*, or *expression*; and sometimes by a combination of two or three of these modes of distinction.

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## [ 6 ]

The last thing included in *design* is the use of *proper appendages*. By *appendages* are meant animals, landscape, buildings, and in general, what ever is introduced into the piece by way of ornament. Every thing of this kind should correspond with the subject, and rank in a proper subordination to it. BASSAN would sometimes paint a scripture-story; and his method was, to crowd his foreground with cattle, well painted indeed, but wholly foreign to his subject; while you seek for his principal figures, and at length perhaps with difficulty find them in some remote corner of his picture. We often see a landscape well adorned with a story in miniature. The *landscape* here is principal; but at the same

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same time the figures, which tell the story, tho' subordinate to the landscape, are the *principal figures*. BASSAN's practice was different. In his pictures neither the *landscape*, nor the *story* is principal. His cattle are the ornament of his pieces. To introduce a story then is absurd.

When all these rules are observed, when a proper point of time is chosen; when characters corresponding with the subject are introduced, and these ordered so judiciously as to point out the story in the strongest manner; and lastly, when all the appendages, and under-parts of the piece are suitable, and subservient to the subject, then the story is well told, and of course the design is perfect.

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## [ 8 ]

The second thing to be considered with regard to a *whole*, is *disposition*. By this word is meant the art of grouping the figures, and of combining the several parts of a picture. *Design* considers how each part, *separately taken*, concurs in producing a *whole* — a *whole*, arising from the *unity of the subject*, not the *effect of the object*. For the figures in a piece may be so ordered, as to tell the story in an affecting manner, which is as far as *design* goes, and yet may want that agreeable *combination*, which is necessary to please the eye. To produce such a combination is the business of *disposition*. In the cartoon of St. PAUL *preaching at Athens*, the *design* is perfect; and the



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the characters, in particular, are so ordered, as to tell the story in a very affecting manner: yet the several parts of the picture are far from being agreeably combined. If RUBENS had had the *disposition* of the materials of this picture, and the management of the lights, its effect as a *whole* had been very different.

Having thus distinguished between *design* and *disposition*, I shall explain the latter a little farther.

It is an obvious principle, that one object at a time is enough to engage either the senses or the intellect. Hence the necessity of *unity* or a *whole* in painting. The eye, upon a complex view, must be able to  
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comprehend the picture as *one object*, or it cannot be satisfied. It may be pleased indeed by feeding on the parts separately; but a picture, which can please no otherwise; is as poor a production, as a machine, the springs and wheels of which are finished with nicety, but are unable to act in concert, and effect the intended movement.

Now *disposition*, or the art of grouping and combining the figures, and several parts of a picture is an essential, which contributes greatly to produce a *whole* in painting. When the parts are scattered, they have no dependance on each other; they are still only parts: but by an agreeable  
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