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978-1-108-06724-9 - An Essay on the Picturesque as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful: And, on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape

Uvedale Price

Excerpt

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ON THE  
PICTURESQUE, &c.

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**T**HERE is no country, I believe (if we except China) where the art of laying out grounds is so much cultivated as it now is in England. Formerly the embellishments of a place were confined to the garden, or a small space near the mansion; while the park, with all its timber and thickets, was left in a state of wealthy neglect: but now these embellishments extend over a whole district; and as they give a new and peculiar character to the general face of the country, it is well worth considering

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sidering whether they give a natural and a beautiful one, and whether the present system of improving (to use a short though often an inaccurate term) is founded on any just principles of taste.

In order to examine this question, the first enquiry will naturally be, whether there is any standard to which works of this sort can be referred; any authority higher than that of the persons who have gained most reputation by those works? I think there is a standard; there are authorities of an infinitely higher kind; the authorities of those great artists who have most diligently studied the beauties of nature, both in their grandest and most general effects, and in their minutest detail; who have observed every variety of form and of colour, have been able to select and combine, and then, by the magic of their art, to fix upon the canvas all these various beauties.

But, however highly I may think of the art of painting, compared with that of improving,

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improving, nothing can be farther from my intention (and I wish to impress it in the strongest manner on the reader's mind) than to recommend the study of pictures in preference to that of nature, much less to the exclusion of it. Whoever studies art alone, will have a narrow pedantic manner of considering all objects, and of referring them solely to the minute and particular purposes of that art to which his attention has been particularly directed; this is what improvers have done: and if every thing is to be referred to art, at least let it be referred to one whose variety, compared to the monotony of what is called improvement, appears infinite, but which again falls as short of the boundless variety of the mistress of all art.

The use, therefore, of studying pictures is not merely to make us acquainted with the combinations and effects that are contained in them, but to guide us by means of those general heads (as they may be called) of composition, in our search of

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the numberless and untouched varieties and beauties of nature; for as he who studies art only will have a confined taste, so he who looks at nature only will have a vague and unsettled one; and in this more extended sense I should interpret the Italian proverb, "*Cbi s'infegna, ha un pazzo per maestro*: He is a fool who does not profit by the experience of others."

We are therefore to profit by the experience contained in pictures, but not to content ourselves with that experience only; nor are we to consider even those of the highest class as absolute and infallible standards, but as the best and only ones we have; as compositions, which, like those of the great classical authors, have been consecrated by long uninterrupted admiration, and which therefore have a similar claim to influence our judgment, and to form our taste in all that is within their province. These are the reasons for studying *copies* of nature, though the *original* is before us, that we may not lose

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## [ 5 ]

lose the benefit of what is of such great moment in all arts and sciences, the accumulated experience of past ages; and, with respect to the art of improving, we may look upon pictures as a set of experiments of the different ways in which trees, buildings, water, &c. may be disposed, grouped, and accompanied in the most beautiful and striking manner, and in every style, from the most simple and rural to the grandest and most ornamental: many of those objects, that are scarcely marked as they lie scattered over the face of nature, when brought together in the compass of a small space of canvas, are forcibly impressed upon the eye, which by that means learns how to separate, to select, and combine.

Who can doubt whether Shakespeare and Fielding had not infinitely more amusement from society, in all its various views, than common observers? I believe it can be as little doubted, but that the having read such authors must give any man (however

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## [ 6 ]

acute his penetration) more enlarged views of human nature in general, as well as a more intimate acquaintance with particular characters, than he would have had from the observation of nature only; that many groupes of characters, many combinations of incidents, which might otherwise have escaped his notice, would forcibly strike him, from the recollection of scenes and passages from such writers; that in all these cases the pleasure we receive from what passes in real life is rendered infinitely more poignant by a resemblance to what we have read or have seen on the stage. But will any man argue from thence that these characters and incidents have no intrinsic merit, but merely that which is derived from their having been made use of by great and admired authors? The parallel between this and the assistance which painting gives towards an accurate as well as a comprehensive view of nature is so obvious as hardly to require pointing out.

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## [ 7 ]

I am therefore persuaded that those men's minds will be the most amused (and perhaps not the least usefully employed) to whom "all the world's a stage," who remark wherever they go (and habit will give a rapid and unobserved facility in doing it) not only the characters of all individuals, but their effect on each other. Such an observer will not divide what passes into scenes and chapters, and be pleased with it in proportion as it will do for a novel or a play, but he will be pleased on the same principles as Shakespeare or Fielding would have been. This appears to me a true and exact statement of the mutual relation that painting and nature bear to each other.

Had the art of improving been cultivated for as long a time, and upon as settled principles, as that of painting, and were there extant various works of genius, which, like those of the other art, had stood the test of ages (though from the great change which the growth and decay

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## [ 8 ]

of trees must produce in the original design of the artist, this is hardly possible) there would not be the same necessity of referring and comparing the works of reality to those of imitation; but as the case stands at present, the only models that approach to perfection, the only fixed and unchanging selections from the works of nature, united with those of art, are in the pictures and designs of the most eminent masters.

It may be objected, that there are many pleasing circumstances in nature, which, in painting, would appear flat and insipid, as there are others that have a striking effect in a picture, which yet in nature (by a common observer at least) would be unnoticed, or even disliked; but, however true this may be in particular instances, the great leading principles of the one art, as general composition—grouping the separate parts—harmony of tints—unity of character, are equally applicable to the other: I may add also, what is so very essential to the painter, though at first sight it seems hardly



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hardly within the province of the improver—breadth and effect of light and shade.

Nothing can be more directly at war with all these principles (founded as they are in truth and in nature) than the present system of laying out grounds. A painter, or whoever views objects with a painter's eye \*, looks with indifference, if not with disgust, at the clumps, the belts, the made water, and the eternal smoothness and sameness of a finished place; an improver, on the other hand, considers these as the most perfect embellishments, as the last finishing touches that nature can receive from art; and consequently must think the

\* When I speak of a painter, I do not mean merely a professor, but any man (artist or not) of a liberal mind, with a strong feeling for nature as well as art, who has been in the habit of comparing both together.

A man of a narrow mind and little sensibility, in or out of a profession, is always a bad judge; and possibly (as that ingenious critic the Abbe du Bos has well explained) a worse judge for being an artist.

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finest composition of Claude (and I mention him as the most ornamented of all the great masters) comparatively rude and imperfect; though he probably might allow, in Mr. Brown's phrase, that it had "capabilities."

No one, I believe, has yet been daring enough to improve a picture of Claude\*, or at least to acknowledge it; but I do not think it extravagant to suppose that a man,

\* The account in *Peregrine Pickle*, of the gentleman who had improved Vandyke's portraits of his ancestors, used to strike me as rather *outré*; but I met with a similar instance some years ago, that makes it appear much less so. I was looking at a collection of pictures with Gainsborough; among the rest the housekeeper shewed us a portrait of her master, which she said was by Sir Joshua Reynolds: we both stared, for not only the touch and the colouring, but the whole style of the drapery and the general effect, had no resemblance to his manner. Upon examining the housekeeper more particularly, we discovered that her master had had every thing but the face—not re-touched from the colours having faded—but totally changed, and newly composed, as well as painted, by another, and, I need not add, an inferior hand.

Such a man would have felt as little scruple in making a Claude like his own place, as in making his own portrait like a scare-crow.

thoroughly