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9781-1-080-6902-1 - The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Containing his Discourses, Idlers, a Journey to Flanders and Holland (Now First Published), and his Commentary on du Fresnoy's Art of Painting: Volume 2

Edited by Edmond Malone

Excerpt

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A
J O U R N E Y
T O
FLANDERS AND HOLLAND,
IN THE YEAR MDCC LXXXI*.

AT Ostend, where we landed, July 27, 1781, there are no pictures, and even Bruges affords but a scanty entertainment to a Painter; however, there are a few, which, though not of the first rank, may be worth the attention of a traveller who has time to spare.

BRUGES.

In the Cathedral. — The high altar; the Adoration of the Magi, by Segers. This picture is justly considered as one of the best of that painter's works.

BRUGES.
SEGERS.

* Our author, accompanied by Philip Metcalfe, Esq. left London on Tuesday, July 24, 1781, went to Margate, and embarked there for Ostend; proceeded from thence to Ghent, Brussels, Antwerp, Dort, the Hague, Leyden, Amsterdam, Dufeldorp, Aix-la-chapelle, Liege; returned to Brussels again; from thence to Ostend; landed at Margate, and arrived in London on Sunday, Sept. 16.

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A JOURNEY TO

BRUGES.

The part which first obtrudes itself on your attention is one of the kings, who is placed in the front: this figure, notwithstanding its great fame and its acknowledged excellence in many respects, has one great defect; it appears to have nothing to do with the rest of the composition, and has too much the air of a whole-length portrait. What gives it so much this appearance is, the eyes looking out of the picture; that is, he is looking at the person who looks at the picture. This always has a bad effect, and ought never to be practised in a grave historical composition, however successfully it may be admitted in ludicrous subjects, where no business of any kind, that requires eagerness of attention, is going forward.

OTTOVENIUS.

THE second altar on the right from the door is the Nativity, by Ottovenius. Many parts of this picture bring to mind the manner of Rubens, particularly the colouring of the arm of one of the shepherds; but in comparison of Rubens it is but a lame performance, and would not be worth mentioning here, but from its being the work of a man who had the honour to be the master of Rubens.

OTTOVENIUS published two books of Emblems, explained by prints of children: it was from him Rubens imbibed that predilection in favour of emblematical representation

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FLANDERS AND HOLLAND.

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sensation which has afforded so much subject for criticism; particularly his introducing them in the Luxemburgh gallery.

BRUGES.

IN the Sacristy is a picture, painted by Jean Van Eyck, of the Virgin and Child, with St. George, and other Saints; one of those figures which is dressed in white, and which undoubtedly was taken from the life according to the custom of the painters of those times, has great character of nature, and is very minutely finished, though the painter was sixty-six years old when it was done; for the date on it is 1436. This picture claims perhaps more attention from its being painted by a man who has been said to be the first inventor of the art of painting in oil, than from any intrinsic merit in the work itself. However, his claim to this invention, which was first attributed to him by Vasari, and from his authority propagated in the world, has been justly disputed by the learned antiquarian Mr. Raspe, who has proved beyond all contradiction, that this art was invented and practised many ages before Van Eyck was born.

JEAN VAN
EYCK.

THE art is here in its infancy; but still having the appearance of a faithful representation of individual nature it does not fail to please. To a certain degree the painter has accomplished his purpose, which is more than can be said of two heads by Rubens of St. Peter and St. Paul, in the same sacristy, which are neither a good representation of

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individual

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A J O U R N E Y T O

BRUGES.

individual or general nature: however, each of these heads is inshrined in a rich tabernacle of silver, locked up, and shewn only on high festivals. The great reputation which Rubens has so justly acquired, is here extended to pictures slightly painted, and which perhaps he himself would be ashamed to acknowledge as his; they appear to have nothing to recommend them, but a tint of colour and lightness of pencil; a merit which indeed Rubens seldom wanted: they are insipid, without grace, dignity, or character of any kind.

CHURCH OF NOTRE DAME.

MICHAEL

THE Virgin and Christ (Bambino) in marble, said to be of Michael Angelo. It has certainly the air of his school, and is a work of considerable merit; it was a prize taken by a Dutch Corsair going from Civita Vecchia to Genoa.

GHENT.—THE CATHEDRAL.

**GHENT.
RUBENS.**

IN this great Church is the St. Bavon of Rubens. This picture was formerly the ornament of the high altar of this cathedral, but was displaced to make room for an ordinary piece of sculpture. When Rubens was thus degraded, one may conclude his fame was then not established: he had not been dead long enough to be canonized, as he may be said to be at present. It is now placed in a chapel behind the great altar. The saint is represented in

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the

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the upper part of the picture, in armour, kneeling, received by a priest at the door of a church ; below is a man who may be supposed to be his steward, giving money to the poor. Two women are standing by, dressed in the fashion of the times when Rubens lived ; one of them appears to be pulling off a chain which falls from her neck, as if she intended to follow the example before her. This picture for composition, colouring, richness of effect, and all those qualities in which Rubens more particularly excelled, claims a rank amongst his greatest and best works. It is engraved by Pilsen.

GHEHT.

In a chapel is a work of the brothers Hubert and Jean Van Eyck, representing the Adoration of the Lamb, a story from the Apocalypse : it contains a great number of figures in a hard manner, but there is great character of truth and nature in the heads ; and the landskip is well coloured.

HUBERT
and JEAN
VAN EYCK.

In the third Chapel on the right, is a picture of St. Sebastian by Gerard Honthorst (1663). This picture is mentioned, not for any great excellence that it possesses, but from its being much talked of here : people fancy they see great expression of tenderness in the woman who is drawing the arrows from the Saint's body, but she appeared to me perfectly insipid, and totally without expression of any kind : the head of St Sebastian is hard and disagreeable ; the body indeed is well drawn, and not ill coloured,

GERARD
HON-
THORST.

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A JOURNEY TO

Ghent.  loured, and is the only part of the picture that deserves any commendation.

ST. MICHAEL'S CHURCH.

Vandyck. IN this church is, or rather was, the famous crucifixion of Vandyck; for it is almost destroyed by cleaning. It is well known by the fine print of Bolswert, and it appears by what remains to have been one of his most capital works.

VANDYCK has here introduced a most beautiful horse in an attitude of the utmost grace and dignity. This is the same horse on which he drew Charles the Fifth, which is in the gallery at Florence; the head of the Emperor he copied from Titian.

ST. John's hand in this picture comes round the Virgin Mary's neck, and falls on the other shoulder. The first impression of Bolswert's plate has this circumstance; but it was afterwards changed, being supposed to be too familiar an attitude.

Segers. CHRIST scourged by Segers; the arm finely drawn, and the body well coloured, but too large.

Langen Jan. St. Hubert, a well painted and well composed picture, by Langen Jan.

THE

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FLANDERS AND HOLLAND.

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GHENT.

THE RECOLLETS.

THE high altar ; a profane allegorical picture by Rubens. RUBENS.
Christ with Jupiter's thunder and lightening in his hand, denouncing vengeance on a wicked world, represented by a globe lying on the ground with the serpent twined round it: this globe St. Francis appears to be covering and defending with his mantle. The Virgin is holding Christ's hand, and shewing her breasts ; implying, as I suppose, the right she has to intercede and have an interest with him whom she suckled. The Christ which is ill drawn, in an attitude affectedly contrasted, is the most ungracious figure that can be imagined: the best part of the picture is the head of St. Francis.

MARY MAGDALEN expiring, supported by ill drawn RUBENS.
angels, by Rubens; the saint herself old and disagreeable.

ST. Francis receiving the Stimate, likewise by Rubens;— RUBENS.
a figure without dignity, and more like a beggar: though his dress is mean, he ought surely to be represented with the dignity and simplicity of a Saint. Upon the whole Rubens would appear to no great advantage at Ghent, if it was not for the picture of St Bavon.

ST.

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A J O U R N E Y T O

G H E N T .


S T . N I C H O L A S C H U R C H .

N. ROOSE. THE great altar, representing some history of this saint, is painted by N. Roose, a painter of no great merit; but this is far superior to any other of his works, which are plentifully dispersed over Flanders. It is of a mellow colour, and has great force and brilliancy: it is illuminated by torch-light, but so well managed, as to have nothing of that disagreeable effect which Honthorft, Segers, Scalken, and others, gave to their pictures, when they represented night-pieces.

ROMBOUTS ST. Joseph advertised by an Angel, by Rombouts. The angel is an upright figure, and treads the air with great grace; his countenance is likewise beautiful, as is also that of the Virgin.

A L O S T S T . M A R T I N .

RUBENS. ST. Rock interceding with Christ for the diseased of the plague, by Rubens. The composition is upon the same plan as that of St. Bavon at Ghent. The picture is divided into two parts; the Saint and Christ are represented in the upper part, and the effects of the plague in the lower part of the picture--In this piece the grey is rather too predominant, and the figures have not that union with their ground which is generally so admirable in the works of Rubens. I suspect it has been in some picture-cleaner's hands, whom
I have

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I have often known to darken every part of the ground about the figure, in order to make the flesh look brighter and clearer; by which the general effect is destroyed. There is a print from this picture, by P. Pontius.

GRENT.

BRUSSELLS. ST. GUDULE.

CHRIST'S charge to Peter with two of the Apostles. The characters heavy, without grace or dignity; the handling on a close examination appears tame even to the suspicion of its being a copy: the colouring is remarkably fresh. The name of Rubens would not stand high in the world, if he had never produced other pictures than such as this. On the same pillar is a Pieta of B. Van Orley, with six portraits of the family who presented this picture to the church. The old man who appears to be the father, has great nature, but hard, as the whole picture is in a dry gothick style.

BRUSSELS.

RUBENS.

B. VAN ORLEY.

UNSHOD CARMALITES.

THE high altar; the Assumption, by Rubens. The principal figure, the Virgin, is the worst in the composition, both in regard to the character of the countenance, the drawing of the figure, and even its colour; for she is dressed not in what is the fixed dress of the Virgin, blue and red, but entirely in a colour between blue and grey, heightened with white; and this, coming on a white Glory, gives a dead-

RUBENS.

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A J O U R N E Y T O

BRUSSELS.  nefs to that part of the picture. The apostles and the two women are in Rubens's best manner; the angels are beautifully coloured, and unite with the sky in perfect harmony; the masses of light and shade are conducted with the greatest judgment, and excepting the upper part where the Virgin is, it is one of Rubens's rich pictures.

COPIES OF RUBENS. HERE are about the Church pretty good copies, making in all ten pictures, of that great work of Rubens, the Triumph of the Church. The originals were destroyed by fire when the Prince's palace was burnt in 1731.

RUBENS. ON the left side of the high altar, Christ and St Theresa with two angels; one supports her, and the other presents to her bosom a flaming arrow; neither are very angelical: the head of the saint is finely drawn and painted; the Christ is likewise well drawn for Rubens; but the effect is rather hard, proceeding from its being wrought up too highly: it is as smooth as enamel, which takes off that suppleness which appears in his other works: this is certainly not in his best manner, though it seems to have cost him the most trouble.

RUBENS. IN the sacristy is a fine portrait by Rubens.

CAPUCHINS.