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# **The Works Of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford**

In Five Volumes

**Walpole, Horace**

**London, 1798**

A Sermon on Painting

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**Nutzungsbedingungen**

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-55700](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-55700)

S E R M O N  
O N  
P A I N T I N G.

PREACHED BEFORE

The EARL of ORFORD, at Houghton, 1742.

PSALM CXV. VERSE 5.

*They have Mouths, but they speak not : Eyes have they, but they see not :  
neither is there any Breath in their Nostrils.*

THESE words, with which the royal prophet lashes the insensibility of the gods of Paganism, are so descriptive of modern idolatry, that, though so frequently applied, they still retain all the force of their first severity. I do not design to run into the parallel of ancient and modern superstition, but shall only observe with concern, that the same arguments which at last exploded and defeated the heathenism of the Gentiles, have not yet been able to conquer the more obstinate idolatry of Christians. The blind, the misled Pagans bowed and adored the first ray of truth that broke in upon them : but we have eyes, and will not see !

I must

I must remark to you, that the words in the text, though spoken of images, which were more particularly the gods of the ancients, are equally referable to the pictures of the Romish church, and to them I shall chiefly confine this discourse.

Indeed, so gross is the error of adoring the works of the creature, that the folly seems almost greater than the sin; seems rather to demand pity, than provoke indignation! They would worship! they bow to a shadow!— They would adore the incomprehensible God! but they revere the faint produce of their own idea! Instead of him who is the eye of the universal world; who speaks through all nature, who breathes life into every being; instead of him, they adore shadows, that have eyes, but see not; mouths, but speak not; neither is there any breath in their nostrils. These are thy gods, O Rome!

It has been observed, that the evil principle has with the most refined policy always chosen to spread his law under the covert of the true one; and has never more successfully propagated sin, than when introduced under the veil of piety. In the present case, has he not deluded men into idolatry by passing it on the world for religion? He preached up adoration of the godhead, but taught them to worship the copy for the original. Nay, what might have tended to heighten their devotion he perverted to the means of their destruction. Painting in itself is innocent; no art, no science can be criminal; it is the misapplication that must constitute the sin. Can it be wrong, to imitate or work after the works of the divinity, as far as man can copy the touches of the great artificer? It is when with impious eyes we look on the human performance as divine; when we call our own trifling imitations of the deity, inimitable gods: it is then we sin: this is vanity! this is idolatry! Would we with other eyes regard these efforts of art, how conducive to religion! What subjects for devout meditation! How great that Being, that could give to his productions the power even to work after his almighty hand, to draw after his heavenly designs! Could we so inform our labours, our creations, then were idolatry more excusable; then might the vessel say to the potter, *How hast thou made me thus?*

And

And here I cannot but reflect on that infinite goodness, whose thought for our amusement and employment is scarce less admirable than his care for our being and preservation. Not to mention the various arts which he has planted in the heart of man, to be elaborated by study, and struck out by application; I will only mention this one of Painting. Himself from the dust could call forth this glorious scene of worlds; this expanse of azure heavens and golden suns; these beautiful landscapes of hill and dale, of forest and of mountain, of river and of ocean! From nothing he could build this goodly frame of man, and animate his universal picture with images of himself.—To us, not endowed with omnipotence, nor masters of creation, he has taught with formless masses of colours and diversifications of light and shade to call forth little worlds from the blank canvass, and to people our mimic landscapes with almost living inhabitants; figures, who, though they see not, yet have eyes; and have mouths that scarce want speech. Indeed, so great is the perfection to which he hath permitted us to arrive, that one is less amazed at the poor vulgar who adore what seems to surpass the genius of human nature; and almost excuse the credulity of the populace, who see miracles made obvious to their senses by the hand of a Raphael or a Guido. Can we wonder at a poor illiterate creature's giving faith to any legend in the life of the Romish virgin, who sees even the doctors of the \* church disputing with such energy on the marvellous circumstances ascribed to her by the catholics? He must be endowed with a courage, a strength of reasoning above the common standard, who can reject fables when the sword enforces, and the pencil almost authenticates, the belief of them. Not only birds have pecked at painted fruit, and horses neighed at the coloured female: Apelles himself, the prince of the art, was deceived by one of its performances.—No wonder then the ignorant should adore, when even the master himself could be cheated by a resemblance.

When I thus soften the crime of the deceived, I would be understood to double the charge on the real criminal; on those ministers of idolatry, who, calling themselves servants of the living God, transfer his service to inanimate images. Instead of pointing out his attributes in those objects that might

\* See the picture by Guido, in the gallery.

make religion more familiar to the common conceptions, they enshrine the frail works of mortality, and burn incense to canvass and oil.

Where is the good priest, where the true charitable Levite, to point out the creator in the works of the creature? to aid the doubting, to strengthen the weak, to imprint the eternal idea on the frail understanding? Let him lead the poor unpractised soul through the paths of religion, and by familiar images mould his ductile imagination to a knowledge of his maker. Then were painting united with devotion, and ransomed from idolatry; and the blended labours of the preacher and the painter might tend to the glory of God: then were each picture a sermon, each pencil *the pen of a heavenly writer*.

Let him say, Thus humble, thus resigned, looked the \* son of God, when he deigned to receive baptism from the hand of man; while ministering angels with holy awe beheld the wondrous office.

Thus chafely beautiful, in such meek majesty, shone the † mother of God! Thus highly favoured among women was the handmaid of the Lord! Here behold the heavenly love of the holy family! the tender care, the innocent smiles, the devout contemplation! Behold inspired ‡ shepherds bowing before the heavenly babe, and the holy mother herself adoring the fruit of her womb! whilst good § Simeon in raptures of devotion pronounces the blessings of that miraculous birth!

Then let him turn his eyes to sadder || scenes! to affliction! to death! Let him behold what his God endured for his sake! behold the pale, the wounded body of his saviour; wasted with fasting; livid from the cross! See the suffering parent swooning; and all the passions expressed which she must have felt at that melancholy instant! Each touch of the pencil is a lesson of contrition, each figure an apostle to call you to repentance.

\* See the picture by Albano, in the salon. Guido, in the gallery.

† Several pictures of Madonnas, particularly in the Carlo Marat room, and holy families.

§ Simeon and the child, by Guido, in the salon.

‡ The octagon picture of The adoration, by

|| See the picture of Christ laid in the sepulchre, by Parmegiano, in the cabinet.

This

This leads me to consider the advantages of Painting over a fister art, which has rather been allotted the preference, I mean Poetry. The power of words, the harmony of numbers, the expression of thoughts, have raised poetry to a higher station than the mute picture can seem to aspire to. But yet the poem is almost confined to the nation where it was written: however strong its images, or bold its invention, they lose their force when they pass their own confines; or not understood, they are of no value; or if translated, grow flat and untasted. But Painting is a language every eye can read: the pictured passions speak the tongue of every country.

The continence of \*Scipio shines with all its lustre, when told by the hand of a Pouffin; while all the imagination of the poet, or eloquence of the historian, can cast no beauty on the virtuous act, in the eye of an illiterate reader.

When such benefits flow from this glorious art, how impious is it to corrupt its uses, and to employ the noblest science to the mercenary purposes of priestly ambition! to lend all the brightness with which the master's hand could adorn virtue, to deck the persecuting, the barbarous, the wicked head of a fainted inquisitor, a gloomy visionary, or an imaginary hermit! Yet such are deified, such are shrouded in clouds of glory, and exposed for adoration, with all the force of study and colours! How often has a consecrated glutton, or noted concubine, been dressed in all the attributes of divinity, as the lewdness or impiety of the painter or pontiff has influenced the picture!—The pontiffs! those gods on earth! those vicegerents of heaven! whose riches, whose vices, nay, whose infirmities and near approach to the grave have perhaps raised them to the † seat of infallibility; soon proved how frail, how mortal, when the only immortality they can hope, is from the masterly pencil of some inestimable painter!

This is indeed not one of the least merits of this, I may say, heavenly art—its power to preserve the form of a departed friend, or dear relation dead! to show how severely just looked the good legislator! how awfully serene

\* See the picture on this subject in the gallery.

† See the picture of pope Clement IX. in the Carlo Marat room.

the humane, the true patriot! It shows us with what fire, what love of mankind, WILLIAM flew to save religion and liberty! It expresses how honest, how benign the line of HANOVER\*! It helps our gratitude to consecrate their memory; and should aid our devotion to praise the almighty goodness, who by those his instruments has preserved his people Israel!

When we can draw such advantages from the productions of this art, and can collect such subjects for meditation from the furniture of palaces, need we fly to deserts for contemplation, or to forests to avoid sin? Here are stronger lectures of piety, more admonitions to repentance. Nor is he virtuous who shuns the † danger, but who conquers in the contest. He is the true philosopher, who can turn from three the brightest forms that paganism or painting could ascribe to ideal goddesses; and can prefer the penitent, the contrite soul of the ‡ Magdalene, whose big-swoln eye and disheveled hair speak the anguish of her conscience; her costly offering and humble embraces of her saviour's feet, the fervency of her love and devotion. Who can see this without repentance? who view the haughty worldly pharisee, without abhorrence and indignation?

Sights like these must move, where the preacher fails; for each picture is but scripture realized; and each piece a comment on the history; they are explications of parables, that seeing *ye may see and understand*. The painter but executes pictures which the saviour himself designed. He drew in all the colours of divine oratory the rich, the pampered nobleman, swelling in purple and fine linen, and sumptuously banqueting his riotous companions: he drew poor anguished § Lazarus, sighing without the proud portal for the very crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, while the dogs came and licked his sores! Who can hear this description without sentiments of compassion, or emotions of anger? Who can see it represented, without blaming the one, or shedding a charitable tear for the other?—Who can—is as the idol that has *a mouth but speaks not, and eyes that cannot see*.

\* See the portraits of king William III. and king George I. by sir Godfrey Kneller, in the parlour.

† See the picture of Christ at the house of Simon the pharisee, by Rubens, in the salon.

‡ See The judgment of Paris, by Carlo Marat and by Luca Jordano, in the yellow drawing-room.

§ See the picture of Dives and Lazarus, by Paul Veronese, in the gallery.

Again,

Again, behold the divine master sketching out new groupes of figures, which every day compose pictures of sin, of folly and repentance! Hear him paint the luxurious\* prodigal, given up to riot and debauchery; hear him draw the consequential ills, the miseries, the want, that tread hard upon his profusion and excess. See that prodigal, half naked, half in rags, uncouth and foul, kneeling among swine, and cursing the vices that drew on him such extremity of distress.—With him let us arise and say, *I will go to my father, and say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son!* That father will hear, will not turn from the cry of the penitent: he is not like those idols that have ears and hear not.—Will the Romish saints do thus? Can their hallowed Madonnas thus incline to their supplications? Can those gaudy missionaries, whose consecrated portraits elbow the altars of the living God, can they cast their unseeing eyes on their prostrate votaries? Can their speechless mouths say, *I will, be thou clean?*—Alas! those saints which those worshipped pictures represent, may themselves want the very pardon which their deluded adorers so idolatrously demand of them. Thus, be it, as we affirm, that they worship them and their images; or, as they pretend, that they only pray to them to pray to God, how lamentable is their option! Either to adore idols instead of the divinity; or to beg their intercession who themselves want all the intercession of the Son of God.

One really knows not how to account for the prevalence of this sin. Men fly from God into all the various crimes which human nature is capable of committing; and when apprehensions of futurity, or decay of appetite, overtake them, instead of throwing themselves into the arms of eternal mercy or infinite goodness, they barter for pardon with impotent images, or perished mortals, who died with the repute of a few less sins than the rest of mankind!—But could these supposititious deities attend to their prayers—why should canvass or stone, why men who when living were subject to all the obduracy, ill-nature, and passions of humanity, why be supposed more capable of pity, more sensible of our sorrows, than the fountain of tenderness and compassion, who sacrificed his best-beloved for the sake of mankind? Or why prefer the purchase of pardon from interested mercenary saints, to

\* See the picture on this story by Salvator Rosa, in the gallery.



the free forgiveness of him who delighteth not in burnt-offerings; who hath no pleasure in the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live?

Yet still this prodigality of devotion is the favourite, the fashionable religion! This builds those hospitals for droning monks; this raises those sumptuous temples, and decks their gorgeous altars. Misers\*, who count farthings with such labour and exactness, with such careful minuteness, who would deny a mite to the fatherless and widow, here squander their precious treasures and darling exactions. View but the tabernacle of a faint in vogue! How offerings pour in! What riches are showered upon their altars! Not happy † Job, when relieved from his misfortunes, and replaced on the seat of felicity, saw such treasures, such oblations heaped on him by the bounty and munificence of his returning friends.

How great is one's surprise, on coming to enquire into the merits that are the foundation of this universal esteem! Perhaps a churlish recluseness; a bold opposition of lawful magistrates; a dogmatical defence of church-privileges; a self-tormenting spirit; or, worse, a spirit that has tormented others, under colour of eradicating heresies or propagating the faith, is the only certificate they can show for their titles to beatitude. No love of society; no public spirit; no heroic actions; are in the catalogue of their virtues. A morose Carthusian, or bloody Dominican, is invested with robes of glory, by authority of councils and consistories; while a ‡ Curtius or a Cocles is left to the chance of fame which a private pencil can bestow on him.

But it is not necessary to dive into profane history for examples of unregarded merit: the scriptures themselves contain instances of the greatest patriots, who lie neglected, while new-fashioned bigots or noisy incendiaries are the reigning objects of public veneration §. See the great Moses himself! the law-giver, the defender, the preserver of Israel! Peevish orators are

\* See the picture of The usurers, by Quint. Mattis, in the gallery.

† See the two pictures on their stories, by Mola, in the gallery.

‡ See the picture on this subject, by Guido, in the gallery.

§ The allusion to lord Orford's life is carried on through this whole character.

more run after, and artful Jesuits more popular. Examine but the life of that slighted patriot: how boldly in his youth he undertook the cause of liberty! Unknown, without interest, he stood against the face of Pharaoh! He saved his countrymen from the hand of tyranny, and from the dominion of an idolatrous king: how patiently did he bear for a series of years the clamours and cabals of a factious people, wandering after strange lusts, and exasperated by ambitious ringleaders! How oft did he intercede for their pardon, when injured himself! How tenderly deny them specious favours, which he knew must turn to their own destruction! See him lead them through opposition, through plots, through enemies, to the enjoyment of peace, and to the possession of *a land flowing with milk and honey!* Or with more surprise see him in the \* barren desert, where sands and wilds overspread the dreary scene, where no hopes of moisture, no prospect of undiscovered springs could flatter their parching thirst; see how with a miraculous hand

He struck the rock, and straight the waters flow'd †.

Whoever denies his praise to such evidence of merit, or with jealous look can frown on such benefits, is like the senseless idol, that *has a mouth that speaks not, and eyes that cannot see.*

Now to God the father, &c.

\* Alludes to the waters made at Houghton, and to the picture of Moses striking the rock, by Pouffin, in the gallery.

† A line of Cowley.

F I N I S.

more than that, and such things were possible. I believe that the life of  
the blessed martyr, who boldly in his youth he undertook the cause of  
Christ, without interest, he stood against the force of tyrants,  
He saved his countenance from the hand of tyranny, and from the dominion  
of an ambitious king, he had the heart for a certain time, the  
classical and catholic, a famous people, wandering after images, and  
exhibited by English nobles, how did he manage his  
part, when in his mind? How tenderly they their factors favour,  
when he saw and their own destruction, and the loss of their  
opinion, though they through their, to the enjoyment of peace, and  
to the position of a land, which will not deny, but will maintain  
this for him in the 7 years, when their hands and wills, against the  
heavy, heavy, and hopes, of nations, no purpose of unholy things,  
could latter their, butching their; for how with a minister's hand

He struck the rock, and brought the water down  
Whoever denies his faith to such evidence of merit, or will, shall look  
and how on such points, is like the candle, that for a while  
Now to God his father, &c.

And to the world, which is the world, and to the world of things, which is the world,  
and to the world, which is the world, and to the world of things, which is the world,  
and to the world, which is the world, and to the world of things, which is the world,

FINIS