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The Works Of Horatio Walpole, Earl Of Orford

In Five Volumes

Walpole, Horace

London, 1798

Preface.

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P R E F A C E.

WHEN one offers to the public the labours of another person, it is allowable and precedented to expatiate in praise of the work. Of this indulgence, however, I shall not make advantage. The industry of Mr. Vertue was sufficiently known; the antiquarian world had singular obligations to him. The many valuable monuments relating to our history, and to the persons of our monarchs and great men, which he saved from oblivion, are lasting evidences of his merit. What thanks are due to him for the materials of the following sheets, the public must determine. So far from endeavouring to prepossess them in favour of the work, it shall be my part fairly to tell them what they must expect.

In Italy, where the art of painting has been carried to an amazing degree of perfection, the lives of the painters have been written in numberless volumes, alone sufficient to compose a little library. Every picture of every considerable master is minutely described. Those biographers treat of the works of Raphael and Correggio with as much importance as commentators speak of Horace or Virgil; and indulging themselves in the inflated style of their language, they talk of pictures as works almost of a divinity, while at the same time they lament them as perishing before their eyes. France, neither possessed of such masters, nor so hyperbolic in their diction, contrives however to supply by vanity what is wanting in either. Pouffin is their miracle of genius; Le Brun would dispute precedence with half the Roman school. A whole volume is written even on the life and works of Mignard. Voltaire, who understands almost every thing, and who does not suspect that judgment in painting is one of his deficiencies, speaks ridiculously in commendation of some of their performers.

This country, which does not always err in vaunting its own productions, has not a single volume to show on the works of its painters. In truth, it has

very rarely given birth to a genius in that profession. Flanders and Holland have sent us the greatest men that we can boast. This very circumstance may with reason prejudice the reader against a work, the chief business of which must be to celebrate the arts of a country which has produced so few good artists. This objection is so striking, that instead of calling it *The Lives of English Painters*, I have simply given it the title of *Anecdotes of Painting in England*. As far as it answers that term, perhaps it will be found curious. The indefatigable pains of Mr. Vertue left nothing unexplored that could illuminate his subject, and collaterally led him to many particularities that are at least amusing: I call them no more; nor would I advise any man, who is not fond of curious trifles, to take the pains of turning over these leaves. From the antiquary I expect greater thanks; he is more cheaply pleased than a common reader: the one demands to be diverted, at least instructed—the other requires only to be informed.

Mr. Vertue had for several years been collecting materials for this work: he conversed and corresponded with most of the virtuosi in England; he was personally acquainted with the oldest performers in the science; he minuted down every thing he heard from them. He visited every collection, made catalogues of them, attended sales, copied every paper he could find relative to the art, searched offices, registers of parishes and registers of wills for births and deaths, turned over all our own authors, and translated those of other countries which related to his subject. He wrote down every thing he heard, saw, or read. His collections amounted to near forty volumes large and small: in one of his pocket-books I found a note of his first intention of compiling such a work; it was in 1713; he continued it assiduously to his death in 1757. These MSS. I bought of his widow after his decease; and it will perhaps surprise the reader to find how near a complete work is offered to him, though the research was commenced at so late a period: I call it commenced; what little had been done before on this subject, was so far from assistance, it was scarce of use. The sketch called *An Essay towards an English School*, at the end of the translation of Depiles, is as superficial as possible; nor could a fact scarce be borrowed from it till we come to very modern times. In general I have been scrupulous in acknowledging both Mr. Vertue's debts and my own. The catalogues of the works of Hollar and Simon, and those of the collection of king Charles I. king James II. and the duke of Buckingham, were part of Mr. Vertue's original plan, which is now completed by these volumes.

The compiler had made several draughts of a beginning, and several lives he had written out, but with no order, no connection, no accuracy; nor was his style clear or correct enough to be offered to the reader in that unpolished form. I have been obliged to compose a-new every article, and have recurred to the original fountains from whence he drew his information; I mean, where it was taken from books. The indigested method of his collections, registered occasionally as he learned every circumstance, was an additional trouble, as I was forced to turn over every volume many and many times, as they lay in confusion, to collect the articles I wanted; and for the second and third parts, containing between three and four hundred names, I was reduced to compose an index myself to the forty volumes. One satisfaction the reader will have, in the integrity of Mr. Vertue, it exceeded his industry; which is saying much. No man living, so bigoted to a vocation, was ever so incapable of falsehood. He did not deal even in hypothesis, scarce in conjecture. He visited and revisited every picture, every monument, that was an object of his researches; and being so little a slave to his own imagination, he was cautious of trusting to that of others. In his memorandums he always put a quære against whatever was told him of suspicious aspect; and never gave credit to it till he received the fullest satisfaction. Thus, whatever trifles the reader finds, he will have the comfort of knowing that the greatest part at least are of most genuine authority. Whenever I have added to the compiler's stores, I have generally taken care to quote as religiously the source of my intelligence. Here and there I have tried to enliven the dryness of the subject by inserting facts not totally foreign to it. Yet upon the whole I despair of its affording much entertainment. The public have a title to whatever was designed for them: I offer this to them as a debt—nobody will suspect that I should have chosen such a subject for fame.

If the observation of a dearth of great names in this list should excite emulation, and tend to produce abler masters, Mr. Vertue, I believe, and I should be glad to have the continuation of the work do greater honour to our country. It would be difficult perhaps to assign a physical reason, why a nation that produced Shakespeare, should owe its glory in another walk of genius to Holbein and Vandyck. It cannot be imputed to want of protection: Who countenanced the arts more than Charles the First? That prince, who is censured for his want of taste in pensioning Quarles, is celebrated by the same pen for employing Bernini. But want of protection is the apology for want of genius:

Milton

Milton and Fontaine did not write in the bask of court-favour. A poet or a painter may want an equipage or a villa, by wanting protection: they can always afford to buy ink and paper, colours and pencils. Mr. Hogarth has received no honours, but universal admiration.

But whatever has been the complaint formerly, we have ground to hope that a new æra is receiving its date. Genius is countenanced, and emulation will follow. Nor is it a bad indication of the flourishing state of a country, that it daily makes improvements in arts and sciences. They may be attended by luxury, but they certainly are produced by wealth and happiness. The conveniences, the decorations of life are not studied in Siberia, or under a Nero. If severe morality would at any time expect to establish a thorough reformation, I fear it must choose inhospitable climates, and abolish all latitude from the laws. A corporation of merchants would never have kept their oaths to Lycurgus of observing his statutes till he returned. A good government, that indulges its subjects in the exercise of their own thoughts, will see a thousand inventions springing up, refinements will follow, and much pleasure and satisfaction will be produced, at least before that excess arrives which is so justly said to be the forerunner of ruin. But all this is in the common course of things, which tend to perfection, and then degenerate. He would be a very absurd legislator, who should pretend to set bounds to his country's welfare, lest it should perish by knowing no bounds. Poverty will stint itself; riches must be left to their own discretion; they depend upon trade, and to circumscribe trade is to annihilate it. It is not rigid nor Roman to say it, but a people had better be unhappy by their own fault, than by that of their government. A *Censor morum* is not a much greater blessing than an *Arbiter elegantiarum*. The world, I believe, is not at all agreed that the austerities of the Presbyterians were preferable to the licentiousness under Charles II. I pretend to defend the one no more than the other; but I am sure that, in the body politic, symptoms that prognosticate ill, may indicate well. All I meant to say was, that the disposition to improvements in this country is the consequence of its vigour. The establishment of a society for the encouragement of arts will produce great benefits before they are perverted to mischiefs. The bounties bestowed by that society, for facilitating the necessaries of life to the poor, for encouraging the use of our own drugs and materials, or for naturalizing those of other countries, are bestowed on noble principles and with patriot views. That society does not neglect even the elegancies of life. Arts

that are innocent in themselves, and beneficial to the country, either by adding value to our productions, or by drawing riches as they invite strangers to visit us, are worthy the attention of good citizens; and in all those lights that society acts upon a national and extensive plan.

The art, that is chiefly the subject of these pages, is one of the least likely to be perverted: Painting has seldom been employed to any bad purpose. Pictures are but the scenery of devotion. I question if Raphael himself could ever have made one convert, though he had exhausted all the expression of his eloquent pencil on a series of popish doctrines and miracles. Pictures cannot adapt themselves to the meanest capacities, as unhappily the tongue can. Nonsense may make an apprentice a catholic or a methodist; but the apprentice would see that a very bad picture of St. Francis was not like truth; and a very good picture would be above his feeling. Pictures may serve as helps to religion; but are only an appendix to idolatry; for the people must be taught to believe in false gods and in the power of saints, before they will learn to worship their images. I do not doubt but if some of the first reformers had been at liberty to say exactly what they thought, and no more than they thought, they would have permitted one of the most ingenious arts implanted in the heart of man by the Supreme Being to be employed towards his praise. But Calvin by his tenure, as head of a sect, was obliged to go all lengths. The vulgar will not lift but for total contradictions: they are not struck by seeing religion shaded only a little darker or a little lighter. It was at Constantinople alone where the very shopkeepers had subtlety enough to fight for a letter more or less in a Greek adjective * that expressed an abstract idea. Happily at this time there is so total an extinction of all party-animosity both in religion and politics, that men are at liberty to propose whatever may be useful to their country, without its being imputed to them as a crime, and to invent what they mean should give pleasure without danger of displeasing by the very attempt.

At this epoch of common sense, one may reasonably expect to see the arts flourish to as proud a height as they attained at Athens, Rome, or Florence. Painting has hitherto made but faint efforts in England. Our eloquence and

* In the decline of the empire there were two nature of the second person was *ὁμοῖος*, co-
 sects who proceeded to the greatest violences essentialis; or *ὁμοῖος*, similis essentialis.
 against each other, in the dispute whether the

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the glory of our arms have been carried to the highest pitch. The more peaceful arts have in other countries generally attended national glory. If there are any talents among us, this seems the crisis for their appearance: the Throne itself is now the altar of the graces; and whoever sacrifices to them becomingly, is sure that his offerings will be smiled upon by a prince, who is at once the example and patron of accomplishments. The institution of a school of statuary in the house of a young * nobleman of the first rank rivals the boasted munificence of foreign princes. When we abound with heroes, orators and patrons, it will be hard if their images are not transmitted to posterity under graceful representations.

This is by no means said to depreciate the artists we have, but to inspire with emulation those arising. Ryfbrack, Roubiliac, Scheemaker, Wilton, would do honour to any country: but hitherto their skill has been in a manner confined to private monuments. When we have subjects for history, the people should read on public edifices the actions of their ancestors and fellow-citizens in bas-reliefs: busts and statues should reward the gallant behaviour of the brave, and exhibit them as models. What made Rome more venerable than every street being an illustration of Livy? Painting has been circumscribed within as selfish bounds as statuary; historic compositions totally neglected. Reynolds and Ramfay have wanted subjects, not genius. There is another artist, who seems born for an age of naval glory, and is equal to it, Mr. Scott. Architecture, the most suitable field in which the genius of a people arrived at superiority may range, seems reviving. The taste and skill of Mr. Adam is formed for public works. Mr. Chambers's treatise † is the most sensible book, and the most exempt from prejudices, that ever was written on that science. But of all the works that distinguish this age, none perhaps excel those beautiful editions of Balbec and Palmyra—not published at the command of a Louis quatorze, or at the expence of a cardinal nephew, but undertaken by private curiosity and good sense, and trusted to the taste of a polished nation. When I endeavour to do justice to the editions of Palmyra and Balbec, I would not confine the encomium to the sculptures; the books have far higher merit. The modest descriptions ‡ prefixed are standards of writing: the exact measure of what should and should not be said, and of

* The duke of Richmond.

† On civil architecture, folio, 1759.

‡ By Mr. Wood.

what was necessary to be known, was never comprehended in more clear diction, or more elegant style. The pomp of the buildings has not a nobler air than the simplicity of the narration—but I must restrain myself; though it is pleasing to expatiate on the just praise of one's country; and they who cannot perform great things themselves, may yet have a satisfaction in doing justice to those who can. If Juvenal was honest in his satires, he would have been happy if he could have lived to write the panegyric of Trajan.

1762.

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