

**NOTES ON SOME OF THE
PRINCIPAL PICTURES EXHIBITED
IN THE ROOMS OF THE ROYAL
ACADEMY: 1855-1859**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649659166

Notes on Some of the Principal Pictures Exhibited in the Rooms of the Royal Academy: 1855-1859 by John Ruskin

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JOHN RUSKIN

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EXHIBITED IN THE ROOMS OF THE

ROYAL ACADEMY:

1855.

• BY THE AUTHOR OF "MODERN PAINTERS."

John Ruskin.

THIRD EDITION.

WITH A SUPPLEMENT.

LONDON:
SMITH, ELDER, AND CO., 65. CORNHILL.
1855.

FA3056.3.11

1874, April 14.

Lane Fund.

(No. I, II, III, V.)

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P R E F A C E.

I AM often asked by my friends to mark for them the pictures in the Exhibitions of the year which appear to me the most interesting, either in their good qualities, or their failure. I have determined, at last, to place the circular letter which on such occasions I am obliged to write, within reach of the general public. Twenty years of severe labour, devoted exclusively to the study of the principles of Art, have given me the right to speak on the subject with a measure of confidence; but it will be found that in the following pages, few statements are made on my own authority, and that I have limited myself to pointing out simple facts with respect to each picture, leaving to the reader the power of verifying such statements for himself. No criticism is of any value which does not enable the spectator, in his own person, to understand, or to detect, the alleged merit or unworthiness of the picture; and the true work of a critic is not to make his hearer believe him, but agree with him.

Whatever may be their abstract truth, the following remarks have at least in them the virtue of *entire* impartiality. Among the painters whose works are spoken of, the greater number are absolutely unknown to me ; some are my friends ; and some quite other than friends. But the reader would be strangely deceived who, from the tone of the criticism, should endeavour to guess to which class the painter belonged. It might, indeed, be alleged, that there is some unfairness in fastening on the faults of one or two works, not grosser in error than many around them ; but it would have been tedious to expose all the fallacies in the Academy, and I believe it will be found, besides, that the notice of the particular picture is nearly always justified, if not by excess of demerit, at least by excess of pretension.

I have been hindered, by unforeseen pressure of work, from noticing, this year, any but pictures in the Academy ; and have perhaps missed several there which ought to have been favourably distinguished ; but I hope henceforward, to furnish, every year, in the same form, some notes on the leading pictures in all the Exhibitions, which may be of use in guiding the public to the discernment and acceptance of those unobtrusive truths of which our modern Idealism has so long repressed the pursuit, and withheld the appreciation.

May 29th, 1855.

NOTES,

&c.

No. 35. FLOWERS. (Miss A. J. Mutrie.)

There are two other works by this artist in the rooms, Nos. 304. and 306. It would be well to examine them at once in succession, lest they should afterwards be passed carelessly when the mind has been interested by pictures of higher aim; for all these flower paintings are remarkable for very lovely, pure, and yet unobtrusive colour—perfectly tender, and yet luscious — (note the purple rose leaves especially), and a richness of petal texture that seems absolutely scented. The arrangement is always graceful — the backgrounds sometimes too faint. I wish this very accomplished artist would paint some banks of flowers in wild country, just as they grow, as she appears slightly in danger of falling into too artificial methods of grouping.

68. El Paseo, the property of Her Majesty the Queen. (J. Philip.)

76. Mrs. Coleridge. (W. Boxall.)

The juxtaposition of these two pictures looks very

like deliberate malice; but it may read an excellent lesson to the two artists. Mr. Philip's fault is excess of decision and force; Mr. Boxall's, excess of delicacy and tenderness. Mr. Philip's work, by the contrast, has become vulgar, and Mr. Boxall's, evanescent.

Looked at separately, there is much merit in both paintings; but the truth, so painfully brought out, is still a truth with respect to both. Mr. Philip has much to subdue, and much to refine, before he will be able to represent not merely the piquancy, but the wayward, half melancholy mystery of Spanish beauty; and Mr. Boxall has much to complete, much to *define*, before he can hope that his graceful idea of the English lady will be in anywise justly expressed. The same may be said of all his works in this exhibition. Refined in expression, though in some cases looking too stiffly straightforward, the faces he paints are still little more than shadows—the reflection of the truth in a cloudy mirror. The dresses are even less than this; in fact nothing more than a filling of the canvass with vague sweeps of the brush, issuing, when there is any momentary distinctness, in pure fallacy; as in the portrait before us, where the shadow of the chain on the neck, which, to accord with the faintness of the rest of the drawing, should have been so tender as hardly to be perceived, is nearly as black as the chain itself—and this equally on the flesh tint, and on the white dress!

Mr. Boxall will never satisfy himself, nor do his real talents justice, until he is content to paint, un-