

PORTFOLIO OF AN ARTIST

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Portfolio of an Artist by Rembrandt Peale

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PREFACE.

THE beautiful creations of this wonderful world are chiefly manifested through the sense of sight, and especially all that relates to form and colour, distance, light, and shade ; with every variation incidental to night and day ; through mist and fog ; in the dim twilight ; by the lamp's mellow beam ; the cool reflection of the moon ; or the copious outpourings of the glorious sun. All these variations of objects and effects are minutely pictured on the retina of the eye, at the instant of their occurrence ; and afford pleasure as much by their immediate novelty as their truth,—the novelty of their endless combinations, and the undeviating truth and certainty of their impressions. These constitute a succession of pictures, which not only gratify us by their beauty and perfection at the moment of perception, but continue to delight the imagination, as they are afterwards reproduced by the memory, and contemplated in the mind,—a moving mental gallery. Thus manifestly has it been the design of a beneficent Creator to endow us with the means of a rational, innocent, and most abundant enjoyment, which it is gratitude to receive and wisdom to employ.

The other senses, however highly they may be prized, are productive of inferior enjoyments, though essential to existence ; as the proper nourishment of our bodies might be neglected, but for the stimulation of hunger, and the

gratification of taste ; and we should suffer many inconveniences without the monitions of hearing and feeling. The blind can but grope their restricted way through the gloom of utter darkness ; yet experience consolation from the cultivation and refinement of their senses of touch and hearing. Much, however, as the blind and the deaf have their states of melancholy privation improved by the benevolence of instruction, their condition is infinitely inferior to that of those who enjoy the comprehensive sense of vision, which concentrates within themselves, from the world without, the beauties of creation,—the perfect works of the “ all-seeing eye.”

The sense of smell, though serving as a guard to health, derives its greatest interest from associations that belong to poetry and picture ; for it is the sight which enhances the enjoyment of the violet-scented gale of spring, the aromatic perfume of the orange grove, the fragrant atmosphere diffused around the magnificent *magnolia grandiflora*, the sweet of purple blooming clover, the honey-scented plains of the waving buckwheat, or the pleasant effluvia from the new-made hay ;—take away the pictures, the poetry, and the music which are associated with the scenes of these odours, and the smell alone will soon be cloyed by indulgence.

It is the duty of the sojourner who gravitates upon earth, not only to see that he does not stumble, but to derive pleasure from the sight even of the rugged path, the frowning precipice, and the deep but silent moving stream ; not to limit his thoughts merely to substances within his palpable reach, but, with rapid glance and without fatigue, to range over distant fields, or climb the pathless mountain ; not merely to occupy the earth he

treads on, but to be conscious of an undisputed right of property in the vast concave above him;—in its clear expanse, its splendid scenery of fleecy clouds, in the sublimity and grandeur of its storms, and in the magnificent structures of its gorgeous sunsets.

Almost every human being participates in some degree in these enjoyments; but in their fullest extent they are derived from the refinement of taste, and appertain to cultivated minds. The necessities of life unquestionably demand our first care and labour, but should not so entirely enslave us that we can perceive no beauty in the graceful corn before it is cut down to furnish our tables with bread; nor should the appetite for meat engross our faculties to disregard the landscape which is animated with herds, unconscious of their doom. But chiefly is it our privilege to derive from social connexions the highest enjoyments of which our nature is susceptible,—from the contemplation of beauty and innocence; strength and character; form and expression; grace and dignity;—in the aspect of single figures, or the endless variety of groups, produced by accident or design, in the multitudinous occupations of our species. These are portraits to the eye and mind, or family groups, or conversation pieces, or historic compositions,—painted without affectation or false colouring; models of perfection for the study of the artist or amateur; and pictures of life which furnish interest and embellishment to existence.

Hence the power and influence of the fine arts, deservedly so called, to distinguish them from the coarse arts, which administer merely to our necessities. The animal man wants nothing more than the rudest furniture for his savage wigwan; but even there is to be found

some indications of refinement, in the ornamented war-club, sculptured canoe, or painted buffalo robe. In our superior state of civilization, how much greater is our enjoyment in contemplating the magnificence of architecture, the wonders of sculpture, and the charms and mysteries of painting! Every day adds to the perfection of our accommodations; and a corresponding development of the faculties of mind in the discoveries of science and the inventions of art, convince us that refinement of intellect and taste is the peculiar prerogative and destination of man. Thus honestly he becomes the noblest work of God; for he cannot be truly said to be honest who does not pay a just degree of attention to the claims of beauty, truth, and character; nor does he show his right of possession, whilst he is deficient in the expression of gratitude for the bounties of Providence, who has given him an eye to see and a mind to comprehend.

Music, poetry, and painting exalt our animal existence infinitely above the brute creation, and cheer and recreate us in periods of relaxation from the drudgery of business, or the sublime abstractions of scientific research. Music thrills us with the pictures of sound in combinations of endless variety; painting perpetuates the transient harmonies of form and colour; and poetry, while it delineates the picture, inspires it with life by measure, sound, and sentiment; for that is not poetry whose painting is false, and whose music is discordant with the sentiment to be produced. Music should be the soul of poetry and the thrilling nerve of picture; whilst painting, in its noblest aspirations, and with its universal language, should combine their chief excellencies, in correspondent unison. The poetry of painting is without words, and

its music without sound; but it is a music whose tones are felt by the glancing eye, as it ranges and returns, in voluntary movement, over the harmonious composition; and it is a poetry which often gives inspiration to the flow of words, slowly descriptive of the instant impressions produced by the painter's pencil.

If the enjoyments of sight depended on the perfection of beauty, they could be but seldom experienced; for that alone is considered most beautiful which is most rare, and distinguished from ordinary nature by superior symmetry and complexion. Such extraordinary beauty is capable of producing emotions of delight equally rare, and as indefinable as the qualities by which they are excited; but pleasure of a more permanent nature is derived from expression and the indications of character. Novelty is the first enjoyment of infancy, and is only diminished in the advance of old age; but in the middle term of life, when attention is less frequently excited by novelty, our enjoyments are multiplied by the more interesting combinations which are constantly passing before us; and variety then constitutes the great charm of existence. Even the continual changes of the seasons are not sufficient to satisfy our fancies, but we leave one scene of interest to gaze more intently upon another; and in the contemplation of our own species, however perceptible are the changes from infancy to manhood and old age, the mind is more sensibly affected by glancing rapidly from one to another. If blindness is to be considered the most lamentable of all privations, the faculty of sight should be appreciated as a gift of inestimable value. But of all the enjoyments of sight, to regard the human form, and to distinguish the human features, in