

**THE ROMANES LECTURE,
1895. THE OBLIGATIONS
OF THE UNIVERSITIES
TOWARDS ART**

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The romanes lecture, 1895. The Obligations of the Universities Towards Art by W. Holman Hunt

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PREFACE

No one who has experienced the satisfaction of knowing the leading Universities of this country during the last half of the century, can have failed to remark the increasing interest in Art on the part of their members. I have followed this advancing recognition of the Art I pursue, since first as a visitor to Oxford, in the year 1850, I made the acquaintance of many of its Fellows, and leaders of the time.

William Sewell, the founder of Radley, on one occasion, lecturing on a general subject—when I attended with Mr. and Mrs. Combe—took occasion to refer, in terms of dignified laudation, to the active and courageous taste which they had shown, in bringing to the city, at their own initiative, works of art of a disputed but obviously conscientious character. In doing so, he expressed the conviction that Art is a necessary attainment for a refined Nation.

At the same period lectures were delivered by Dr. Wellesley on the Raphael drawings in the Taylor Buildings.

The roof of Merton Chapel was then fresh with the decorations executed by John Hungerford Pollin, one of the Fellows of the College. Ere the scaffolding was removed, John Everett Millais had taken advantage of it to copy some of the old glass in the window, as an accessory in a picture he was painting. This contact of representatives of University learning and taste with artistic knowledge and proficiency was not merely of transient importance.

A few years later Dr. Henry Acland had succeeded in his efforts to extend the teaching of the University to Science, and the new Museum by Woodward and Deane was in progress. This brought Dante Gabriel Rossetti, my fellow-student at the Royal Academy, and my recent painting pupil, on a visit to the University. He commenced certain mural decorations in the 'Union,' for which he enlisted the efforts of Spencer Stanhope, who had taken to painting after completing his undergraduate term, with those of certain young London artists, who had volunteered their gratuitous services.

William Morris and Edward Burne Jones were by Rossetti's encouragement on that occasion induced to adopt the career of Art. The Schools of Design soon after were found to be a necessity to the city. A few years later John Ruskin was installed as Slade Professor to the University, and on Mr. Combe's death, his widow gave 'The Light of the World' to Keble College, and

last year her further collection of pictures was bequeathed to the Taylor Buildings.

That Professor Romanes shared with others in the University this steadily growing interest in Art, to those who knew him needs little proof; but I call to mind an occasion, when in a London drawing-room, he introduced me with much enthusiasm to the name of an artist I had not before heard of, and in confirmation of his well-placed admiration, he took pains to procure many of Mrs. Trequair's imaginative and highly poetic illuminations for me to see, convincing me at the same time of his serious estimate of Art, and of how he regarded its healthy cultivation as important for a people's life.

These memories, when it became my duty to consider the responsibility of the trust with which I was honoured as Romanes lecturer on Art, could not but demand the gravest attention: and they encouraged me to appear not as a passing entertainer, but as a faithful witness on the question which is now admittedly one of the most sacred importance.

Many of my compeers in the profession have lately spoken to me with the greatest anxiety of the influences in operation, of a kind injurious to wholesome taste, and to the future of English Art, and they have deplored the increasing assumption on the part of perfectly untrained and self-elected guides who trifle with the honest

dictates of reason in the young devoting themselves to the career.

These complaints have not been uttered in any narrow spirit, for it is evident the misdirection has been made not only in the loose and prejudiced spirit of previous journalistic writers on Art, but in the interests of a new movement, proclaiming a complete contempt for beauty of body and mind, and recommending young adventurers with paint and clay to emulate one another in setting at naught patient study and painstaking.

Leading up to this innovation, critics have for years advocated study in Paris, and many young men who have late in life taken to Art as a profession, and who know the commercial value of newspaper championship, have adopted this counsel, and have followed the wildest deviations of the realistic school, and so found a communistic road to distinction, the discoverers of which—spurred by inevitable antagonism to the over-sentimental and prettified idealism formerly paramount—have preferred a course the furthest away from fastidiousness of every kind.

The works of this realistic school are of a nature which to any previous age would have been inconceivable, and to any future generation it may be concluded they will be quite incredible, for it is impossible that the common sense of the world can exercise patience enough to preserve them even as curiosities.

In the Salon in 1887, and in 1888 at Earl's Court, was a painting of life size, rewarded with the *prix d'honneur*: it represented the interior of an Indian hut; the head of the family, just returned from his labours in the field, was in the foreground looking with horror upon the scene that lay in front of him; in the centre of the canvas were gorged tigers, with the mangled remains of the mother and children strewn about the floor. Other works appear in each exhibition of equally brutal subjects, and without even the inventiveness of this composition. Realistic sculpture moreover is produced, of a kind to convince the spectator that humanity has truly *descended* from the brutes.

In 1889 or 1890 there was a group, more than full size, of a gorilla carrying away under his left arm a woman whom he had captured. This delectable production was also distinguished by the *prix d'honneur*, and it was while on exhibition surrounded each day by groups of all classes of people.

It would be impossible that such examples of work in the name of Art should not have a mischievous effect upon those students who, without natural strength of mind and taste, are unable to resist the arguments coming from the admiration of a noisy circle; and accordingly, our own school is in a state of overwhelming confusion, most injurious to such as work modestly and with sweet inspiration. No one can doubt that it is our duty fearlessly to denounce this false taste.

Owing to the distinction of the post that I have been permitted to occupy, my words will remain on record, and my course will be judged by Time.