

**NOTES BY MR. RUSKIN ON SAMUEL
PROUT AND WILLIAM HUNT.
ILLUSTRATED BY A LOAN COLLECTION
OF DRAWINGS EXHIBITED AT THE FINE
ART SOCIETY'S GALLERIES, 148 NEW
BOND STREET, 1879-80**

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Notes by Mr. Ruskin on Samuel Prout and William Hunt. Illustrated by a loan collection of drawings exhibited at The Fine Art Society's Galleries, 148 New Bond Street, 1879-80 by J. Ruskin

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AND

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148 NEW BOND STREET.

1879-80.

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NOTE.

I HAVE to thank the kind friends who have contributed drawings. I regret that very many of them have had to be returned, simply because I had already to my hand examples which sufficiently illustrated the lessons I wished to teach in putting together these notes.

J. RUSKIN.

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PREFACE.

IT has been only in compliance with the often and earnestly urged request of my friend Mr. Marcus Huish, that I have thrown the following notes together, on the works of two artists belonging to a time with which nearly all associations are now ended in the mind of general society; and of which my own memories, it seemed to me, could give little pleasure, (even if I succeeded in rendering them intelligible,) to a public indulged with far more curious arts, and eager for otherwise poignant interests than those which seemed admirable,—though not pretending to greatness, and were felt to be delightful,—though not provoking enthusiasm, in the quiet and little diverted lives of the English middle classes, 'sixty years since.'

It is especially to be remembered that drawings of this simple character were made for these same middle classes, exclusively: and even for the second order of the middle classes, more accurately expressed by the term 'bourgeoisie.' The great people always bought Canaletto, not Prout,

and Van Huysum, not Hunt. There was indeed no quality in the bright little water-colours, which could look other than pert in ghostly corridors, and petty in halls of state; but they gave an unquestionable tone of liberalmindedness to a suburban villa, and were the cheerfulest possible decorations for a moderate-sized breakfast-parlour, opening on a nicely mown lawn. Their liveliness even rose, on occasion, to the charity of beautifying the narrow chambers of those whom business or fixed habit still retained in the obscurity of London itself; and I remember with peculiar respect the pride of a benevolent physician, who never would exchange his neighbourhood to the poor of St. Giles's for the lucrative lustre of a West End Square, in wreathing his tiny little front-drawing-room with Hunt's loveliest apple-blossom, and taking the patients for whom he had prescribed fresh air, the next instant on a little visit to the country.

Nor was this adaptation to the tastes and circumstances of the London citizen, a constrained or obsequious compliance on the part of the kindly artists. They were themselves, in mind, as in habits of life, completely a part of the characteristic metropolitan population whom an occasional visit to the Continent always thrilled with surprise on finding themselves again among persons who familiarly spoke French; and whose summer holidays, though more customary, amused them nevertheless with the adventure, and beguiled them with the pastoral

charm, of an uninterrupted picnic. Mr. Prout lived at Brixton, just at the rural extremity of Cold Harbour Lane, where the spire of Brixton church, the principal architectural ornament of the neighbourhood, could not but greatly exalt, by comparison, the impressions received from that of Strasburg Cathedral, or the Hôtel de Ville of Bruxelles; and Mr. Hunt, though often in the spring and summer luxuriating in country lodgings, was only properly at home in the Hampstead road,* and never painted a cluster of nuts without some expression, visible enough by the manner of their presentation, of the pleasure it was to him to see them in the shell, instead of in a bag at the greengrocer's.

The lightly rippled level of this civic life lay, as will be easily imagined, far beneath the distractions, while it maintained itself meekly, yet severely, independent of the advantages, held out by the social system of what is most reverently called 'Town.' Neither the disposition, the health, nor the means of either artist admitted of their spending their evenings, in general, elsewhere than by their own firesides; nor could a spring levée of English peeresses and foreign ambassadors be invited by the modest painter whose only studio was his little back-parlour, commanding a partial view of the scullery steps and the water-butt. The fluctua-

* See his own inscription, with LONDON in capitals, under No. 132.

tions of moral and æsthetic sentiment in the public mind were of small moment to the humble colourist, who depended only on the consistency of its views on the subject of early strawberries : and the thrilling subjects presented by the events or politics of the day, were equally indifferent to the designer who invited interest to nothing later than the architecture of the 15th century. Even the treasures of scientific instruction, and marvels of physical discovery, were without material influence on the tranquillity of the two native painters' uneducated skill. Prout drew every lovely street in Europe without troubling himself to learn a single rule of perspective ; while Hunt painted mossy banks for five-and-twenty years, without ever caring to know a Sphagnum from a Polypody, and embossed or embowered his birds' eggs to a perfection, which Greek connoisseurs would have assured us the mother had unsuspectingly sate on,—without enlarging his range of ornithological experience beyond the rarities of tomtit and hedge-sparrow.

This uncomplaining resignation of patronage, and unblushing blindness to instruction, were allied, in both painters, with a steady consistency in technical practice, which, from the first, and to the last, precluded both from all hope of promotion to the honours, as it withheld them from the peril of entanglement in the rivalries, connected with the system of exhibition in the Royal Academy. Mr. Prout's method of work was entirely founded on the

quite elementary qualities of white paper and black Cumberland lead ; and expressly terminated within the narrow range of prismatic effects producible by a brown or blue outline, with a wash of ochre or cobalt. Mr. Hunt's early drawings depended for their peculiar charm on the most open and simple management of transparent colour ; and his later ones, for their highest attainments, on the flexibility of a pigment which yielded to the slightest touch and softest motion of a hand always more sensitive than firm. The skill which unceasing practice, within limits thus modestly unrelaxed, and with facilities of instrument thus openly confessed, enabled each draughtsman in his special path to attain, was exerted with a vividness of instinct somewhat resembling that of animals, only in the slightest degree conscious of praise-worthiness, but animated by a healthy complacency, as little anxious for external sympathy as the self-content of a bee in the translucent symmetry of its cell, or of a chaffinch in the silver tracery of her nest,—and uniting, through the course of their uneventful and active lives, the frankness of the bird with the industry of the insect.

In all these points of view the drawings to which I venture, not without hesitation, to call the passing attention of the public, can claim regard only as examples of genius both narrowed and depressed ; yet healthy enough to become more elastic under depression ; and scintillant enough to