

AMERICAN ART;

THE NEED AND NATURE OF ITS HISTORY.

THE landscape that lies in beauty or grandeur, veiled in the illusive autumn-like haze of distance, may feed imagination, but cannot carry its distinctive meaning to the heart and reproduce there its own sentiment. The enchantment of distance must be dissolved by a nearer approach. It is so with AMERICAN ART, the outlines of which have already been given. We have looked upon it as an energy coming up out of conflict with the spirit of the people, the genius of a proud democracy, and indicating no uncertain future for itself. We wish now to mark its growth, and in it, feel its unfolding individuality.

A general survey of AMERICAN ART, from any æsthetic point of view, cannot be a satisfactory or even a useful performance. However well executed, it can do little more than provoke inquiry, and awaken in the breast of the reader a desire for a nearer view of the subject. Criticism is imperfect without history: the praise or blame of an artist's works is of little account unless it is given in the light of the facts of his life, as well as the canons of taste. The demand of nature, requiring the past to be thrown open, must be respected. The artist is a development of the man.

With these considerations before us, we look over the brief past of American art. Only seventy-eight years have passed away since our national independence. During this short period, unusually short for the growth of a nation, unwonted activity and freshness have marked our history. They have found their way into the quiet walks of artistic life. The resulting works have received attention—attention at home and abroad. And yet it is somewhat remarkable that, up to the date of this article, our artists have not been represented; the progress of art, unless we greatly err, has not been appreciated, and that which is to give character to an American school, clearly indicated.

Why is this? We do not know, unless American artists do not wish to be represented by those who have undertaken to write about them, and none of their own order has come forth to speak for the fraternity. The consequence is, that art lives a hidden life in our midst, only so far as it is forced to become a public one through exhibitions, art-unions, and the sale of its works.

The subject has not been wanting, however, in interest to Americans. Our painters have received respectable attention in our chief serials—the "North American Review," "American Quarterly Review," and the "American Whig Review." Painting has been noticed in the "Democratic Review," and "Southern Literary Messenger." Dunlop has given us a plain and faithful narrative history of its early condition, and Tuckerman, in a work called "Artist-Life," has attempted, with considerable success, to give us, in essay style, a series of critical memoirs of our distinctive artists. We say nothing of foreign writers in this connexion, because we feel that their necessary ignorance of American scenery in the full changes of the year, and the peculiarities of our civilisation, incapacitates them to judge correctly of what is distinctively American. In taking a careful survey of what has been written on the subject at home and abroad, we are disposed to believe that the extremes of praise and blame mark the resting-points of the critical mind. It remains for the gravity of truth to overcome the velocity by which its vibrations have been perpetuated, and change the pendulum into the plummet of justice.

The birth of American art, in our estimation, is not a fact in history. We do not believe that it was born in the cradle of a sleeping infant, and in the person of Benjamin West, the Quaker boy. West, we think, should not be regarded as an American artist. The fact of his birth does not justify such a claim; his works, if carefully examined, although noble in themselves, contain nothing that we are warranted to claim as American. This judgment, we think, will be found in accordance with the views of our best artists.

Having thus rejected the only well-defined fact that marks

the birth of art on this continent, we leave it without a historic beginning. We are content to do so. There was, at that time, no national life or character of a nature to impress itself upon the mind of artists and impart its form and spirit to their conceptions. Nature was with them,—nature in our peculiar autumn scenery, but it wanted the domesticating influences of national associations. In the absence of these, artists looked to the Old World; and art, like the colonies of Jamestown and Plymouth, was transplanted to a new home. Like those colonies, it suffered under foreign taxations, but, unlike them, it has *yet* to assert its independence. It is scarcely possible for those who have formed their artistic taste on the models of the Old World and under the influence of the old civilisation, to preserve the freshness and freedom of this continent. It is, on the other hand, scarcely possible for those who have tarried at home and attempted to cultivate art in circumstances so poor in models and patronage, to reach that vigour and boldness necessary to secure its independence and furnish the materials of its history. If the work of the historian was to be no more than the narrating of what has been done in the New World, and by her natural or adopted sons, it would be easy. But this, in our opinion, is not the distinctive work of the historian of American art and artists. His work is nobler. As the true philosopher wisely distinguishes between the permanent and the temporal, so the true historian of art in this country will distinguish between what is native and what is alien.

Little, if we are not greatly mistaken, has been done in this way. We have memoirs—a partial narrative. We have no history of art, in which the moulding influences of nature are pointed out, and that which is aboriginal clearly indicated. We propose no such thing in this article. In the outline views which we are taking, we aim at nothing but a simple indication of what has been done for the history of art, or yet remains to be done. We express the wants of our nature.

Attempting to carry out this aim, we are constrained, for the sake of unity and completeness, to stretch our views beyond our national independence—beyond our national existence. The principles that define our character as a people are rooted in the experiences of the colonies, and grew out of their struggles. Their development was gradual, and in endeavouring to trace it, in reference to our subject, we experience no ordinary difficulties in fixing upon even the proximate beginning of our distinctive art. Its root is in the distant past of the Old World, nearer the cradle of Christian art than that of the infant-sister of Benjamin West.

In accordance with these statements, we may conveniently divide American art into three periods: the *colonial*, the *revolutionary*, and the *national*.

The *colonial period* extends from the settlements of Jamestown and Plymouth to the Declaration of Independence, 1776. During this period, as might be expected, we have little art, and that little is not American. The colonies were too closely related in every respect to the mother-country to produce much that was not animated by the English spirit. Oppression was needed to sever the ties. Copley is the representative of this period. He was a portrait-painter of some eminence in his day, but too much influenced by aristocratic distinctions and conventionalities to know the warming of the heart to nature. Copley was coldly artificial in style, and strictly English in feeling.

The *revolutionary period* reaches from the Declaration of Independence to the close of the last war. Stuart and Trumbull are its representatives. The former possessed a well-defined mind. He was bold, self-confident, and effective. He had a happy and somewhat peculiar tact in subduing the self-consciousness of those who sat for their portraits, and drawing out to the face the permanent features of their minds. He seized the essentials, and by a few general and bold outlines produced the desired effect. His portrait of Washington is deservedly regarded as the portraiture of the character more than the face of the Father of our Country. Stuart was the first in the New World to think independently on the subject of art, and has no second claim to be regarded as its parent.

Trumbull was very unlike Stuart. He was gifted with no powers of lofty conception, nor beauty of disposition. His subjects dignified his performances. He wrote the history of his period in associated portraits, and, in connexion with Stuart, introduced a kind of hero-worship among us. Great men are our antiquities; faces are the popular subjects of art.

The *national period* is somewhat rich in names and works. The agitations of the Revolution continued long to disturb the free formation of an appropriate national character; and their effects, like mysterious ground-swells, continue to shake the whole coast of thought. Rising superior to this state of things, an array of artists has appeared, honourable to the nation:—Allston, Malbone, Vanderlyn, Sully, Suman, Ingam, Huntington, Seutze, Cole, Kensett, and Durand, in painting; Crawford, Greenough, and Powers, in sculpture.

These names are worthy representatives of their age, and although we cannot point to any one of them as the founder of a school, there are in the works of some of them the elements of one,—there are in the list some men to whom the next generation will look with reverence. Their hearts have warmed to our own scenes. They have brooded over the haunts of beauty and grandeur in our middle and eastern states till the hidden meanings of rocks, and trees, and lakes, assumed a distinctness to the bodily sense. But we arrest this train of thought. Our object is not to write, or even sketch, a history of art among us, but simply to indicate its necessity and its character.

On looking over the three periods which we have defined, we find all the departments of art cultivated, but with unequal devotion and success. Portrait-painting is unduly prominent, and up to the present time has presented the only certain resource to young artists for subsistence. So prominent is this department, that writers at home and abroad have been led to speak of it as the only one in which the United States could lay claim to the honour of forming a school. This is too much. We think that portrait-painting can never rise to this dignity. The artist is so bound to a certain order of production, and so controlled by principles of imitation, as to bar his approach to high art. Stuart may seize the permanent in character. Sully may trace female beauty in gentle colours. Ingam may give us ideal flesh. But what can we have here that is creative? What sentiments whose habitations are the light of setting suns? What beauty whose haunts are mountain and lake-scenes and the dreamy repose of aerial perspective?

Historical painting has been cultivated with considerable success, but with uncertain aim. Vanderlyn, Weir, Huntington, and Seutze, have produced works in this department of much merit. And yet, in looking over them, we have been more than once pained with the conviction that they are not national. We regard them as incidental works rather than the fruits of true devotion to historical painting.

The *imaginative* department of art has not been neglected; it is well represented by Cole and Malbone. The former, in his "Voyage of Life" and "Course of Empire," has given evidence of extraordinary creative power and skill in composition; but in a way that leads us to believe that he depended much on foreign suggestion, and drew his inspiration almost as much from other lands as his own. Malbone, in his conception of "The Hours," has left us a perfect gem in imaginative art.

Landscape painting, the only department in which we can hope to form a school, has been cultivated with true devotion. Here we may gain a proud eminence among the nations, and here alone. The character of our civilisation is too earnest and practical to foster imaginative tastes: the nearness of our past denies to the artist the mellowness and deep perspective of distance. But "the hills rock-ribbed," the course of noble rivers, the repose of lakes, and a climate peculiarly our own, these things, as they appear in the Catskill and Adirondack, the Hudson, Lake George, and Schroon, and especially in our autumn loveliness, furnish rich materials for landscape composition.

Our prominent artists have not failed to notice them, and devote themselves to their study. Among those who have succeeded and gained for themselves a name in this department, no one stands so deservedly high as Asher B. Durand, the President of the National Academy of Design, as much on account of the purity and simplicity of his devotion to American landscape as his eminence and skill in his art. The individuality of his trees, true patriarchs of the woods, the charm of his autumn haze, and his quiet, philosophic contemplativeness, give to his works that place in painting which the "Elegy" of Gray, the "Excursion" of Wordsworth, and the "Thanatopsis" of Bryant, occupy in poetry. They are entirely American, and are destined, in our judgment, to become the models after which existing and future artists are to build up a distinctive school of American art in painting—a school whose fame is to be co-extensive with that of our industry. We have artists capable of this great work. They only wait the development of our civilisation to seize upon its different stages and spirit, and record them in colours and marble.

Thus far we have said nothing of sculpture. Its history is brief, and is found only in the national period of our art. It is written in the lives of Greenough, and Crawford, and Brown, and Powers, but with such characteristic excellence as to give to the United States, in this department of art, a place next to the masters of antiquity. Sculpture is the field of our triumph in the fine arts.

As a partial confirmation, at least, of this ambitious statement, it may be well to observe, that the great Thorwaldsen named Hiram Powers and George Crawford as among the finest sculptors of the age. Powers, he regarded as rivalling his own boldness and purity of conception; Crawford, he spoke of as eminent for the harmony of his groups and the natural ease of his drapery.

JACOB RUYSDAEL.

JACOB RUYSDAEL was the son of a cabinet-maker, and was esteemed in his youth for the excellency of his disposition and the suavity of his manners. He has been called the painter of Melancholy, and over his life and works there is a certain indescribable sadness, a love, a sentiment, which affects the spectator without an obvious cause; something that rekindles faded impressions, that brings back the imaginations of youth—he cannot tell why—he does not understand it; but it is true, nevertheless. Poetry and music excite the same feelings—certain prospects, landscapes viewed under peculiar effects—exercise the same influence—a species of morbid sensibility.

Ruysdael was a man of deep melancholy. He received a liberal education, and was designed for the medical profession; but he laid aside the scalpel and assumed the pencil; he had conversed with nature, had drawn inspiration from her deep silence, and longed to pour forth the inspiration that was in him. If he had spoken in words, he must have written philosophical tragedies; if he had spoken in the harmonious strains of music, he would have made the heartstrings vibrate to his solemn dirge and mournful songs; as he spoke on canvas, the idiom of the world—he let his sighs have vent and melancholy utterance in leafless trees and gloomy clouds, and mysterious groupings of old trees and dark woody avenues, that began like the chancel of an old cathedral, and dwindled away into a slender sheep tract—in misty horizons, and in coming night. He was always introducing water; but whether that water was tossed and tumbled as a cataract, or whether it flowed smoothly, without a murmur or a ripple, it was sure to be sorrowful; there was a shadow over everything, a gloom upon all—the painter brooded over his sorrow, and seemed to have his dwelling among the tombs.

Of his life little is known. He devoted himself entirely to art. He resolved to lead a life of celibacy, and never to quit his aged father. He wrote his own mental history in his pictures, and it was all gloom and sadness. Here a tree isolated from its fellows, dark and sombre—scathed and naked—its im-