



Johannes A. Oertel.

MASTERS OF ART AND LITERATURE.

Fourteenth Article.

JOHANNES A. OERTEL.

THE subject of this notice is the eldest son of a mechanic, who resided, at the time of his son's birth—Nov. 3d, 1823—in a small city, near the ancient and renowned city of Nuremberg, in Bavaria. He was moved at an early age, with the "artistic impulse," charcoal being his primitive pencil, with walls and deal-floors for his canvas. At the age of nine, he accomplished the copying of two large, elaborate, caligraphic prints, "The Lord's Prayer," and "The Ten Commandments," with compasses, a school-rule, and crow-quills, as his own preparation. These copies are still in his possession, and show his early talent in a favorable light. When thirteen, the im-

aginative and enthusiastic boy conceived the idea of studying for the ministry, and to become a missionary in some far distant, undefined country. Mission reports and travelling narratives had so fired his fancy and excited his religious enthusiasm that no dissuasion of friends availed, and he began his studies with an eminent divine, Rev. W. Lähe. But, in spite of his determination, letters were not to engage him for life, and his theology he was not to preach from the pulpit, but from the canvas. Rev. W. Lähe soon perceived the actual tendencies of the boy's mind, and was instrumental in bringing him under the tuition of a friend, Mr. J. M. Enzingmüller.

With Mr. E., at Nuremberg, he began his artistic career, at first as a steel-engraver. He had, happily, found the right teacher—a man of inventive mind, and of profound poetic thought; with whom Johannes went to Munich to reside for some years. There, at the most flourishing period of art in that Athens of

Germany, the boy received his strongest impressions, which, indeed, made themselves felt through all subsequent years of his artistic practice. The great epic compositions of W. Kaulbach influenced him most; for, wild with the true artistic enthusiasm, great works never depressed or discouraged, but rather stimulated him, and he was soon engaged in extensive historical compositions.

But his knowledge was not adequate to his ambitious attempts, and he felt it keenly. This caused him to study with intense industry, all the time remaining from the graver being given to books and practice. He read, and composed, and drew, incessantly, and made himself acquainted with the use of oil-colors.

Leaving Munich, he lived for a number of years in retirement with his master and some fellow-students, near Nuremberg, engaged, part of his time, in engraving as a means of support, and the rest in following out his higher inclinations. He always hated the slow mechanical process of digging in steel, line after line, and grew restive under the "infliction." Consequently the smallest pretext was embraced by him to desert the burin for the canvas. Left to consult his own inclinations, he regarded all branches of composition as legitimate and to his purpose—landscape-sketching, animals (wild and domestic), still-life, battles, religious and ideal subjects, all taking shape under his hand.

He was a passionate reader of ancient history, especially of Greece and Rome. Between his eighteenth and twenty-first years belong several compositions of extent, taken from Greek history, among which we may name: "The battle of the three hundred Spartans in the Pass of Thermopylæ," and "Alexander on the Granicus." These were both left in the form of cartoons—the former on canvas, the latter on paper, some fourteen feet long and ten feet high. Both are now to be seen in his studio, mementoes of his early career. Another careful composition, of many figures, followed: "David and his men rescuing from the Amalekites their wives and children." (1 Sam. 30.) But this work was interrupted by his emigration to this country with his master and tried friend, in the spring of the troublesome year, 1848.

Owing to his poverty, the passage was far from agreeable to him. After a tedious, trying voyage, he landed in

New-York, with one borrowed five-franc piece in his pocket. Thus he began life, a stranger upon strange soil. By advice he was induced to leave New-York for Newark, N. J., and in that city engaged as teacher in several institutes. This did not long suit him; he painted portraits, but threw this off also for branches offering more liberty and exercise of imagination. A number of animal pieces made their appearance, for which he used his European studies, and the American Art-Union was his principal purchaser. Thus passed three years.

About that time he married with an American lady, and, recovering the confidence which adverse circumstances and utter want of sympathy among strangers had impaired, he again concentrated his mind upon Scriptural subjects. Yet he was not master of color and effect. He knew it, and left his works as drawings in pencil only. "The Death of Saul," and a larger cartoon, "Redemption," belong to this period. The latter composition was never exhibited. It contains but five figures, most diverse and opposite in character, and illustrates, as the name implies, the redemption of the human soul by Christ, from Satan, Sin, and Death.

An idealistic disposition, love of retirement, ignorance of the world, and want of business talent, combined to keep the artist obscure and poor, and compelled him to work, not only distasteful to himself in a high degree, but also little calculated to advance his knowledge or his executive faculties. Yet he never lost sight of his aim; and, while most of the day had to be spent in laboring for a mere support, a few days occasionally, and the nights, were conscientiously appropriated to study, to keep, as he expressed it, "his soul alive." Thus, while he drew on wood, engraved on steel, or made small designs for engravings, for a living, he accumulated many thoughts and compositions, and some oil paintings, a small part of which only have come before the public. Of these, in oil, we may name: "The Country Connoisseurs," "The Captive Soul," and "Prairie Horses pursued by Indians." Of elaborate designs in pencil or crayon: "The Four Seasons" (a moral series), "The Four Greater Prophets," "The Warrior-Bard," and "Christ adored by Heaven and Earth."

In the spring of 1857, he was desired by the then superintendent of the Cap-

itol extension, Capt. M. C. Meigs, to visit Washington, and to assist in the decoration of the Capitol. Terms being arranged to his satisfaction, he left New-York City with high purposes to perform something worthy of the country of his adoption, and of the grand pile his work was to decorate. He was doomed to disappointment. After revising the various State-arms for the ceiling of the House of Representatives, but without painting one inch of the frescoes he was called and had contracted to execute, he resigned his position with indignation at the management of Art-matters at the Capitol, and removed again to the neighborhood of New-York. From that time he devoted himself chiefly to the study of animal-painting, the material for which lay all around him. Numerous smaller works were the result of his industry, and one of larger dimensions, called "Rich and Poor," attempts a moral as well as a story. While he is thus pursuing a branch of art that insures a more extended patronage, he does not neglect the principal study of his life, in which his heart and faculties are most deeply interested, that is, historic and religious painting. Works of this description always engage his spare time: "St. Paul in Prison," "Esau Returning from the Chase," "The Four Prophets," in oil, and "The Walk to Emmaus," are recent productions of his pencil and brush. The latter was exhibited at the National Academy of Design this season.

Mr. Oertel has, as will be seen, executed much for a man of his years; yet his promise is, as it were, that of one who had but half betrayed his strength. The world of American art has much to expect from his hands; and we hazard the prediction that it will not expect in vain.

The letters of Alexander von Humboldt have been, from the bookseller's point of view, a great success. Five editions of the German original have been exhausted within two months. English translations of it have appeared both in England and here. As might be expected, the success of the book has called forth a number of similar publications. One of these, entitled "Memoirs of A. von Humboldt," raised, by its title, great expectations; but is merely a compilation of matters already known, and possessing but little value.

MOSAICS.

Do we doubt that pictures and decorations, of a very graceful kind, depend upon little bits? Have we heard nothing about mosaics, and inlayings, and buhl, and marquetry, and parquetry, and niello, and pietre dure, and tessellated pavements, and encaustic tiles? All these are but so many applications of little bits—bits of enamel, bits of glass, bits of gems, bits of stone, bits of marble, bits of metal, bits of wood, bits of cement, bits of clay. Marked developments of skill and patience are connected with the working up of these little bits; and all the world knows that productions of great beauty result. Enamel, pebbles, marble, and clay, irrespective of metal and wood, form a very pretty family of little bits, as a brief glance will easily show us.

The little bits of enamel which constitute mosaic are the subjects of a most minute and tiresome routine of processes—perhaps more than the products are worth. A true mosaic picture consists of an infinity of little bits of enamel, disposed according to their colors, and imbedded in a frame-work prepared for their reception. Enamel is nothing more than opaque glass, the colors being given by the admixture of various metallic oxides. The number of varieties is quite enormous; for, in order to produce all the hues of a picture, there must not only be every color, but many shades or tints of each. The Pope himself is a mosaic manufacturer. He keeps up an establishment near St. Peter's; and at this establishment there are, it is asserted, no fewer than seventeen thousand tints of enamel, all arranged and labelled, in boxes and drawers, whence they are selected as the compositor would select his type. The enamel is cast into slabs; and each slab, by means of hammers, saws, files, lapidary-wheels, and other mechanical aids, is cut into tiny bits; or else the enamel, while hot and plastic from the furnace, is drawn out into threads or small sticks; for some of the bits for a small picture are as thin as sewing-thread. A back or groundwork for the picture is prepared, in marble, slate, or copper; it is hollowed out to a depth varying from a sixteenth of an inch to an inch, according to the size of the picture. The cavity is filled up with plaster of Paris; and the artist draws