ART TREASURES AND THEIR PRESERVATION.

An Address delivered before the British Archæological Association, *at a meeting of their Congress at Weymouth, August 23rd, 1871, by* Dr. Joseph Drew, LL.D., *and reported fully and otherwise favourably noticed in the* Times, Standard, Art Journal, Athenæum, Builder, Antiquary, *&c., &c., &c., &c.*

Mr. President, Ladies, and Gentlemen,—

It may be thought by some that the address we are about to deliver hardly comes within the pale of archæological science, but we think, upon more mature consideration, you will agree with us in considering the study of statuary and ancient paintings a very desirable adjunct in connection with archæological pursuits, for, from the accessories generally introduced in the works of the old masters, we become acquainted with the manners, customs, arts, sciences, domestic life, implements of war and industry, and also the costume of the various grades of society depicted by the sculptor's and painter's art, we therefore look upon the preservation of such art treasures as an obligation we owe to posterity; we view them as the sacred symbols in which we can most correctly trace the social, political, and religious status of our ancestors, and, though the literature of a country may perish and its records decay, still there are certain monuments amongst the art treasures of a nation which appear to defy the rust of time, and outlive even the memory of those whose genius and labour called them into existence. Now the object of my address to you this evening is to call attention to the decadence which, under some form or other, has become apparent in many of the higher departments of our present schools of art, for where the art itself is still in the zenith of its power and freshness, the elements and materials employed to give form and colour to the creations of the mind are frequently in themselves of a more fragile and perishable character than were formerly used, and this we date to the peculiar characteristic of the age, namely, that spirit of rivalry and competition amongst our manufacturers which lead them to produce, irrespective of durability, inferior

articles at the cheapest possible rate. The decadence, however, to which we more particularly allude, is especially apparent in the absence of durability amongst the paintings produced within the last century, for whilst the transcripts from nature are quite as faithful, and the ideal conceptions frequently more elevated in character than many of the early schools, still we regret to say, the works of our mode rn painters are, for the most part, doomed to a very limited existence—premature decay has already set in amongst them—and many of the noblest efforts of modern art are even now passed into a state of dilapidation beyond the restorer's art to repair. We know we have men who assert that art itself—taking the word in its most comprehensive sense—has degenerated, and that the art workers of the early ages possessed a more elevated conception of the beautiful than the designers of the present day, but we see no reason why we should endorse this opinion. We have no standard whereby to measure perfection, consequently our judgment can only be comparative. One country may decline in art, but the great wave of intelligence and genius will be found surging on other shores, and unlooked for examples of excellence have been and will again be the result. To a certain extent, however, we have come to recognise an idea of perfection, and to believe that each particular department in the art world culminates at its own specific time. Sculpture is said by some to have reached its meridian of glory and perfection several centuries before Christ, when Phidias—the chief of the early Attic school—produced his Olympian Jupiter, and Praxitelles—the head of the latter school—his group of Niobe; but may there not be in this idea an excess of veneration for early art? Modern times have given to the world marvels of beauty; the works of Bailey, Pradier, and Canova will go down to posterity as glorious specimens of art creation wrought by men whom England, France, and Italy love to claim as their children, and although the ideal in some opinions may not reach so high a standard as ancient Greek, still these works have become art treasures, beyond price to their possessors, and are as imperishable and as valuable for the purposes of education and archæology as those relics of the Athenian schools, the remains of which are so much prized at the present day. Without, however, presuming to be an art critic, and without being so enthusiastic as some in favour of ancient art, we cannot pass through the courts of the British Museum without being struck with the massive grandeur and classic beauty of some of the ideal creations of those men who have left us such a comprehensive syllabus, as it were, of primeval civilization. Some of the sculptures in the Egyptian sanctuary, although upwards of 4,000 years old, stand before us as perfect in preservation as if the last touch of the

finishing tool had just been given, and yet, notwithstanding their preservation and beauty, many of the works of our modern sculptors will bear a critical comparison with those of the same class, whilst like them they have become the imperishable records of our age, in which will be read the history of our art schools, and from which posterity will be enabled to judge of the elevation or decadence of our art productions. With what veneration and delight, however, do we examine even a fragment of a statue, if known to be by one of the ancient chiefs of the sculptor's art. For some time past the lovers of antiquities who frequent the British Museum have been waiting with anxiety for the removal of the screen behind which Mr. J. D. Crittenden, the well-known sculptor, has been engaged in the restoration of a fine marble statue of an athlete, the copy of a work by Polycletus, made by Stephanos, an artist who flourished at the time of Augustus Cæsar. The statue, admirably restored by Mr. Crittenden, has at length been unveiled, and now stands a valuable addition to the other works in the Museum. The statue is a free copy of the famous bronze figure of Diadumenos, by Polycletus, a celebrated sculptor of Sicyon, now Basilico, a town of Peloponnesus. Polycletus lived about 232 years B.C., and was universally reckoned the most skilful artist of his profession among the ancients. A companion statue, known as the Doryphorus, or spear bearer, by Polycletus, was regarded in antiquity as a figure in which the proportions of an athlete were presented in a form to serve as a canon for all succeeding sculptors. Stephanos lived about the time of Augustus, and appears to have been employed by that monarch in making copies of celebrated works of the great masters. The statue was found about ten years ago in the ruins of an ancient theatre at Vaison, in France—the ancient Vasio—and was purchased by the Museum in 1870. When found it was in several pieces, which were put together on the spot, and the lost portions restored, but in a manner so unsatisfactory that on its arrival at the Museum all the parts were separated and a new restoration was placed in the hands of Mr. Crittenden. The new portions are the left thigh, part of the left leg under the knee, left foot, right hand, and nose. Difficulties were felt in the execution of the new thigh, in making the outlines accurately continuous with the outlines of the original above and below the new portions, and in making the anatomical development to agree with the rest of the statue. The foot required three separate new pieces. The difficulty here was to express the exact degree of weight on the foot and pressure on the toes, the heel being raised from the ground. The thumb and all the fingers of the hand are new, with the exception of the tips of the two middle fingers, which

were broken quite away, but showed their position by the fracture on the ball of the thumb where they originally touched. It was, of course, requisite that every new portion should be executed in the same style as the antique, and that, in the fitting and finishing, not the slightest damage should be done to the original surface of the statue. The statue is considered by some to be one of the finest in the Museum, and its restoration is universally acknowledged to be a marked success. But to pass on to the sister art, painting, we are pleased to be able to say that as a rule, the works handed down to us by the painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and more especially those of the Venetian, Roman, and Parma school, are well preserved. We can go quite as far back for examples of the painter's art as we can for those of the sculptor's, but they are not so familiar to us from the fact that very few are found in private collections, for paintings were not always the moveable chattles and cabinet gems they are at the present day. In its earliest phases the painter's art was principally called into requisition for mural decoration—the delineation of battles and triumphs, or the representation of great political events, and these were usually painted on the interior walls of public edifices, and on the ceilings of the mansions of the great, but even these early works commanded much attention in their day, and the artists realised enormous prices for their productions. The earliest picture of which we have any authentic record is one painted 720 years before Christ, by Bularchus, and mentioned by Pliny. It represented the battle of the Magnesians, and this was purchased by the King of Lydia for its weight in gold ; but as we have neither the size of the picture nor the particulars of the material upon which it was painted, we can form no conception of the price realised for this early work of art. Pliny, however, mentions another picture painted by a disciple of Antidotus, representing "Ulysses invoking the shadows of the dead," for which the artist refused 60 talents of gold, or about £11,000 sterling, and afterwards made it a present to his country. All these very early productions, however, were in outline only, and it was not until Apollodorus, the Athenian, established a school for painting, about 400 years before our era, that the distribution of light and shade became a recognised principle of the art. Apollodorus was the first man who contributed to the glory of painting, and before he appeared there were no productions of the easel worthy to be called works of art. Alexander the Great was a munificent patron of the fine arts, and by way of encouragement, he gave a monopoly—so far as his own person was concerned—to Lyseppus the sculptor and to Apelles the painter, and refused to permit any other artist to carve his bust, paint his portrait, or even to introduce his figure

as a copy in any of their productions, without his special license or consent, and by these means men were stimulated to compete for true excellence. But passing over these art treasures, of which so few examples remain, we come to those with which the world is more familiar, those marvellous conceptions of Raphael, whose works still preserve all their original delicacy and beauty. With very few exceptions, the productions of this prince of painters are in the same perfect state of preservation as when they left the easel, untouched by time and undefaced by the work of restoration. Not only are the paintings themselves in such a high state of preservation, but the colours have such a brilliant hue of freshness, that we can scarcely reconcile their beauty with the fact that three centuries and a half have passed since his great patron, Leo X., stood by his easel watching the facility of his pencil and admiring his work, for even now, the delicate bloom on the cheek of beauty, the harmonious colouring of the draperies, the semi-tones and half-tints, as it were, of the accessories and distances, possess a delicacy and transparency rarely to be found in the productions of other schools. The intrinsic value, however, of the art treasures bequeathed by this glorious painter to posterity does not consist simply in their high state of preservation and delicate work, but in the emotions produced by the contemplation of their conception and beauty; in fact, the effect produced by the study of a really beautiful picture upon the mind is never effaced, it becomes photographed, as it were, upon the imagination, and we can always bring to our remembrance some prominent incident in connection with its composition or general beauty. Raphael, like the Grecian sculptors in the purest era of their art, strove for that ideal beauty which is never to be found in individual nature, and which can only be represented by taking the most beautiful parts of the many to form one, and it is this desire to reach ideal perfection that Sir Joshua Reynolds says "ennobles the painter's art and elevates him above those who can only reproduce by the mere exercise of mechanical labour." What we have said of the works of Raphael, as to their perfect state of preservation, applies equally to those of Correggio and to the productions of other schools of the same period; the works of the best masters in the Dutch and Flemish schools are also in the highest state of preservation, forming a very striking contrast to those dilapidated wrecks so frequently found amongst the pictures of our modern men. Now the great question is, where are we to look for the cause of this decadence? Certainly not in the decline of the art. If we could entirely disabuse our minds of that "halo" which schoolmen and enthusiastic art critics have thrown around the works of ancient art, and were to go through this year's exhibition of the Royal Academy, we

believe we could point to canvasses not wanting in the beauty and passion of Raphael, the sweetness of Correggio, the triumphs of Titian, the cool silvery transcripts of Ruysdael, or the golden sunsets of Cuyp—the mellowness of tone, which time alone can bestow, being the only element wanting to render many of them worthy of the admiration bestowed upon their early rivals. But will these modern efforts of the painter's art bear the same test of years as their predecessors have done? We have a melancholy foreboding—amounting almost to a moral certainty—that they will not. Now, the old masters were chymists as well as painters; they were no tyros in the mysteries of the crucible and alembic; they knew from personal investigation, much thought, and direct experience, the nature and durability of the pigments they were using. Under their own supervision were their canvasses and panels grounded—under their own immediate direction were their colours selected and their mediums prepared. No element of care was wanting, no precaution neglected to make their works, not only worthy of their name to posterity, but durable in the highest degree. The artist colour-man, with his prepared canvas at so much per yard, coated with whiting and size, and his tube colours, and megilph, so neatly put up, but which will not bear the action of light for a few years, was unknown in these early days; and it was not until the productions of this particular branch of trade were made competitive in price, and cheapness became the order of the day, that decay commenced its ravages, and the durability of paintings could no longer be relied upon. In examining the preparation on some panels of the 15th century, we found the surface upon which the picture was painted much harder than the panel itself, whilst in modern panels it is quite the reverse. In the early panels the surface broke with a gelatinous kind of fracture, the edges of which were sufficiently hard to cut the fingers, whilst in the modern panels a fracture of the surface presented a soft marley appearance, and the preparation itself could be crumbled by friction or pressure. It appears then that this want of solidity in the preparation of canvasses and panels permits the colours to sink in, it extracts the medium used in working them, and thus the pigments become so non-elastic, that as the panels and canvasses contract or expand by the atmospheric changes so prevalent in this variable clime, so the colours are rent in all directions, and the fine network of cracks which we so frequently observe spreading over the surface of a picture would appear to be the first step towards its decay. Then again in the metropolis, paintings are generally hung in rooms where the air becomes highly vitiated by the presence of large assemblages of human beings and by the pernicious influence of gas, and this is a very

prolific source of destruction to these works of art, added to which even the air of London itself has been declared by competent authorities to be very prejudicial to the preservation of paintings, owing to the excess of carbonic acid and other deleterious gases in the atmosphere; and if this hypothesis is correct then all other crowded cities must be the same. In watching the progress of this decay in a modern picture we noticed that when these cracks once made their appearance their edges were immediately eaten away by becoming oxidised, and as the erosion went on the fissures gradually widened, and although a thin coat of the finest mastic varnish would for a while stop the process of decay, still we have even seen the varnish itself rent asunder by the contractive and expansive action of the materials beneath. In fact, so justly alarmed have the patrons of art become upon the question of the durability of our modern paintings—for some of them have invested large fortunes in their purchase—that Sir Francis Grant, the president of the Royal Academy, has suggested that a chair for chemistry should be founded and a professorship established in connection with the Academy, so that the painter's art might receive the assistance of the science of chemistry, in order, if possible, to check the spread of this terrible blight which is destroying some of our noblest works of modern art. This difference in the durability of paintings is painfully manifested, and can be readily studied by comparing the pictures of the Peel collection in the National Gallery—which are generally productions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—with the Turner collection under the same roof, which may be called examples of our own day. In the former they are as perfect as when they were painted, whilst in the latter many are already in ruins. Indeed the possessors of some of the best works of Reynolds, Turner, Wilson, Hilton, and a score of other modern men, look with increasing dismay on the widening cracks and fading colours of those otherwise matchless productions of art, and they feel they have a right to invoke the aid of the Royal Academy, whose council are supposed to be the conservators of this particular art, to investigate the cause and point out the remedy for this gigantic evil, which is robbing posterity of the art treasures it is our duty to hand down to them in as good a state of preservation as possible. But as we have remarked, we do not believe that the art has waned, but we do believe that all this mischief can be traced to the present rage for cheap productions. The age in which we live is essentially an age of electro-plate, and lath and plaster, not through the lack of genius, but owing to the inordinate spirit of competition, and the desire of all classes to imitate the grades above them in society. Scarcely a single work of art is in existence that has not

its thousands of copies, whether in sculpture, painting, carving, or engraving, no matter how costly, for the higher the value the more likely it is to be copied for the use of the many, but as we have said before, we live in an age of imitation. The ancients built their houses upon rock;. the moderns build them upon sand. Quantity and not quality, expediency and not principle, are the prevailing characteristics of the present age. Those matchless carvings which Gibbons left for our admiration and instruction—the throne at Canterbury, and the choirs of St. Paul's and Windsor—can now be imitated by machinery at a comparatively small cost over the price of the material. The portrait painter, with his hundred guinea portraits on canvas and panel, has been superseded—to a certain extent—by the photographer with his sixpenny pictures on paper and glass. The elaborate works of Benvenuto Cellini and his followers are supplanted by race cups and salvers, produced by the thousand at the factories of Sheffield and Birmingham. Lace work and tapestry, the goldsmith's art and enamels, stained glass and ornamental china, and even architecture itself, have all lost a certain amount of their native dignity in the art world through the inundation of inferior substitutes; but the producers say that mediocrity and cheapness pay the best, and these are the causes which will prevent many of the art treasures of the present century from occupying that place in the estimation of posterity which from our intelligence and wealth they would otherwise be entitled to claim. We cannot close this short paper without alluding to the fact that Weymouth has some slight associations with the art world. Sir Christopher Wren, whose celebrity as an architect and mathematician, is so fully attested by the monuments he has left us, was, in the year 1700, elected one of the parliamentary representatives of this borough, and Sir James Thornhill, the eminent painter, whose daughter married the inimitable Hogarth, was born at Weymouth in 1676, and also represented the borough for some years in Parliament, and, strange to say, Thornhill was the artist selected to paint the dome of St. Paul's—one of the greatest achievements of Wren's genius—and thus were the two men and Weymouth associated together. Thornhill was knighted by George I, who became his patron and friend. The altar-piece in St. Mary's Church, Weymouth, was the gift of Sir James to the town, and we rejoice to say this admirable work, representing the "Last supper of our Lord," is still in a most excellent state of preservation.

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