

SOME GREAT ENGLISH PAINTERS.



DIGNITY AND IMPUDENCE.
Sir E. Landseer.

TO see ourselves as others see us" is a proverbially wholesome, if not always quite a pleasant process, but a very clever French critic has written a volume on English art and artists which goes far to prove that others sometimes see us to even better advantage than we see ourselves. The name of M. Ernest Chesneau is familiar to every one who attended Professor Ruskin's lectures on the "Art of England," and our great art-critic has shown his appreciation of his Gallic brother by commissioning him to write a life of J. M. W. Turner, which is to be preceded by a history of previous landscape; and also by himself writing a characteristic preface and annotations to the book* in which "the acute and kindly Frenchman" shows us how thoroughly he has studied our national old and modern masters, and how extensive is his knowledge of their works. A very admirable introduction takes a bird's-eye view of what English sovereigns have done in the way of encouraging art from the days of Henry III. to those of William and Mary, which chiefly took the form of patronising foreign painters, and distinctly marks the period when native artists first came to the fore and asserted their own individuality; adding, "France to-day, on behalf of Europe, sets to her lips the golden clarion of renown to celebrate the still fresh glory of English painting."

In the first part of his work, which is devoted to our old masters, M. Chesneau pertinently asks whether there is an English school of painting at all, and answers himself in the negative by declaring that it is just the "absence of any national tradition that strikes me most forcibly in studying English painting. Each painter seems to stand by himself, and is, so to speak, isolated from his brother artists. No trace is to be found of any uniformity of method or of teaching, none of systematic instruction by the State, the Academy, or the Fine Art School. English art is free, and on that very account is infinitely varied, full of surprises and unexpected originality."

In these words M. Chesneau has put his finger on the secret of our strength; our artists have not followed the Italian, or the French, or the German schools, but have struck out in vigorous and varied paths of their own, and have at length commanded the serious and respectful attention of nations who fondly supposed that

they themselves held the complete monopoly of artistic feeling and expression. The first noteworthy Englishman who can be classed among our so-called old masters was William Hogarth, Handel's contemporary, and the pupil and son-in-law of Sir James Thornhill, sergeant-painter to King George I., the first English artist who was ever knighted. Hogarth is aptly described as preëminently Anglo-Saxon, and his chief weapon is designated as "a merciless truth;" but though his principal pictures are skilfully and appreciatively analysed, M. Chesneau calls him essentially a moralist painter, but not an artist in the true sense of the word.

Reynolds and Gainsborough are fully recognised as artists, and the distinction between them very cleverly put, the talent of Reynolds being called "a magnificent victory of the will," and that of Gainsborough "the spontaneous unfolding of a flower accomplishing its natural transition, and ripening into fruit." Reynolds' masterpiece is pronounced to be one of his portraits of Nelly O'Brien, which is not very well known; and Gainsborough's, his "Blue Boy," of which a charming illustration is given in black and white. Here is the history and analysis of the picture:

"In one of his lectures to the Academy, Reynolds had laid down the principle that blue cannot be used in a picture as the dominant colour, and also that the most vivid tints ought to be placed in the centre of the painting.

"Gainsborough's reply was his celebrated 'Blue Boy,' by name Master Buttall.

"Master Buttall is a nice-looking, well-dressed boy of about fifteen years old, simply placed in a standing posture. His hair and eyes are black, and he has rosy cheeks and lips. Over his left hand, which is supported on his hip, hangs the flap of a light mantle, whilst his right hand, hanging by his side, holds a beaver hat ornamented with a long feather. His handsome costume of light satin consists of a short jacket with slashed sleeves, small-clothes tied at the knees with knots of ribbon, silk stockings, and rosettes on his shoes. With the exception of a muslin collarette and the slashes on his sleeves, the whole picture is of the same blue of the shade known as Royal Blue."

That Gainsborough "strove to take in all that was noble and pure in his sitters, and thus, without flattering, he gives to every work . . . a particular character of ideal dignity combined with truthfulness," is exemplified in his portrait of the Princess Elizabeth, an oval which is very well reproduced.

The line of English portrait painters is very carefully followed, due notice being accorded to such lesser lights as George Romney, who painted Mrs. Robinson, the fair singer, who afterwards became Countess of Peterborough; John Russell of Guildford, the friend of John and Charles Wesley; Sir William Beechey, John Hoppner, and John Opie, whose talent, says M. Chesneau, "was very suitable for portraying the Saxon type of beauty, florid and massive." Sir Thomas Lawrence is described as "the last of the English portrait painters who devoted themselves to the aristocracy of their country." Very scant mercy is shown to him, for he is styled:

"An attenuated Reynolds; like him, only in a greater degree, he effects his work by artifice. He manages to conceal his numerous defects, and admirably feigns the most splendid qualities. He cannot

* The English School of Painting: London, Cassell & Co., Limited.

draw well, yet his subjects are life-like; his colouring is not good, yet his faces have a certain harmonious brilliancy. He never understood either power or truth. He is tricky everywhere and on every occasion. Simple beauty has no charm for him. He wants to depict an elegant and stylish woman, and he paints her in washy blue and pink colours, without depth, and utterly unsubstantial. And the woman thus travestied turns out charming.

"I can understand Lawrence's enormous success, not so much because he was an attractive painter, in spite of his faults, as because he knew how to place art at the disposal of pretty, vain women, empty-headed, affected coquettes."

Poor Lawrence would indeed have winced under this estimate of his work, for he could not bear any one to criticise his pictures!

Benjamin West, the favourite of King George III., whose "Death on the Pale Horse" sent so strange a thrill of religious terror throughout London in the early part of this century, Fuseli, W. Etty, Northcote, and Smirke receive little more than a passing mention, but it is quite as much as they deserve. Wilkie has full justice done to him, and so has Collins, whose charming and popular picture, "As Happy as a King," is given as an example of his style. Three very admirable examples of C. R. Leslie are also given, including "Sancho Panza and the Duchess;" "The Merry Wives of Windsor," in which even on this small scale every face is a study; and the inimitable "Uncle Toby and the Widow Wadman," which is characterised as "Leslie's *chef-d'œuvre*, a masterpiece of observation, good-humour, and fun." Scarcely less charming is Newton's "Yorick and the Grisette," the

work of an artist whose career was out all too short by mental malady. Mulready may be said to belong to the same group of artists, and his "Choosing the Wedding Gown" is a little picture that attracts universal sympathy, though the artist was perhaps less widely known in his own day as a painter than as an illustrator of children's books.

M. Chesneau refuses to accord high artistic rank to Sir Edwin Landseer, although he quite appreciates the manner in which he has "learnt all the obscure intricacies of the simple brains" of animals, and his power of explaining all their actions. It is impossible to recall "Dignity and Impudence" without feeling exactly what is expressed in these words, and it scarcely detracts from our love of the pictures when we are reminded that to the "trick" of giving his animals a human expression the artist's success and fortune were owing.

Haydon, Maclise, Stothard, and Barry are all included among our old masters of lesser repute, and British art during the first half of our nineteenth century is summed up as possessing "the same characteristics as its own country: it is hard and stern, and consequently destitute of grace." Landscape painting is not, however, included in this judgment, and a very important and most interesting section of the book is devoted to it.

First among our landscape painters in point of time M. Chesneau reckons Richard Wilson, born in 1714, whose skill was overlooked during his lifetime, and exaggerated after his death; but he ranks Gainsborough as the father of English landscape. "He did not wait till a spirit from on high should influence him under other skies; he never left his island, and the Suffolk woods always seemed to him the most beautiful in the world." He appears to know George Morland better as a painter of public-house and tavern life than as a painter of pigs, but his name among us is very much associated with his studies of that far from æsthetic animal. It is very delightful to find Old Crome appreciated by a foreigner, and our French friend declares that "by the imposing majesty of his *tout ensemble*, by diversity in detail, by skill and power of expression, Old Crome attains to genius." Of R. P. Bonington he speaks very highly, telling us that we did not think enough of this young genius, who studied chiefly in France, and won his laurels in the Paris Salon; but here Mr. Ruskin puts in a dissentient word, saying: "If the young genius had learned the first rules of perspective, and never seen either Paris or Venice, it had been extremely better for him." Constable is highly praised, but M. Chesneau reserves his deepest and most reverent admiration for Turner, whose "one dream, the extraordinarily high aspiration of his life, was to gain a complete knowledge of light in all its phases."

"Turner was an artist of sublime genius, although his productions were too seldom complete. He did not die till 1851; but for long before this date he had lived a life apart, in a solitude which was said to be caused by dislike to his fellow-creatures, but in reality it was because he was so bound up, heart and soul, in the contemplation of his inner revelations, that communication with the outer world lost all charm for him. We reap the fruits in works of intense feeling splendidly expressed."



MISSING.—Hubert Herkomer, A.R.A.

This view of the genius who realised that the colour of the purest sunshine "is white, and its shadow scarlet," is novel, but if he did thus live in "the glory and the dream," he was happier than men gave him credit for being.

The second part of "The English School of Painting" is devoted to our modern masters, leading off with the Pre-Raphaelites and their apostle. The most perfect justice is done to them and their works, beginning with Mr. Holman Hunt's "Light of the World," exhibited in 1855, and a far less known picture, Mr. Fisk's "Last Evening of our Lord at Nazareth."

A very important aspect of the early Pre-Raphaelite work is here insisted on, and that is the conflict between accuracy and faithfulness in detail, and nobility of design, but no one perhaps has ever before so clearly set forth the original aims of the first disciples of the cult:

"All the followers of Pre-Raphaelitism were agreed on one fundamental point, which was the base and groundwork of the mission they wished to accomplish. With the idea that art had adopted an entirely wrong course ever since the sixteenth century, they chose utterly to ignore and discountenance all its manifestations belonging to the intervening period. They wished to take it up exactly where it had been left by Raphael's predecessors, and immediately before it had been led astray, according to their view, into paths of craft and beautiful deceit, by a man endowed with genius, although of a corrupted order. Thus retracing their steps to a common point of departure, each one strove, in his own manner, to turn the style of art back into the paths of truth. The means they employed to forward this end were very different and varied, according to their distinctive temperaments."

Sir Noel Paton is classed among the Pre-Raphaelites, but rather as friend than faithful follower. Mr. D. G. Rossetti seems to have been little known save by reputation, and Mr. Millais is carefully followed, and his work illustrated throughout the former part of his career. The style of Mr. Madox Brown, which "removes us far from the common-place familiarities of every-day life," is most judiciously illustrated by reproductions of his "Expulsion of the Danes from Manchester," "Elijah and the Widow's Son," and "The Parting of Cordelia and her Sisters." Mr. Burne Jones receives warm, yet not indiscriminate, praise as "the only artist whose high gifts in designing, arranging, and colouring are equal to his poetical conceptions," and no better example could have been given than his "Merlin and Vivien."

Pre-Raphaelite landscape is discussed and admired in the work of J. C. Hook, John Linnell, Vicat Cole, J. Brett, Macallum, E. Edwards, and Macbeth, the young Scotch artist who has painted and etched so many scenes of rural life, chief among which are his "Return from St. Ives Market" and "Potato Harvest among the Fens."



THE PRINCESS ELIZABETH.—T. Gainsborough.

As historical painters, M. Chesneau groups together Sir Frederick Leighton, Mr. Alma Tadema, Mr. G. F. Watts, Mr. Long, Mr. Val Prinsep, whose "Berenice" is accounted as his *ideal*, while his realistic style is illustrated by his "Linen Gatherers;" and Mr. Briton Rivière's "Daniel in the Lion's Den" is summed up as a "finely conceived work," the figure of Daniel being "really beautiful."

As principal examples of *genre* painting we have Mr. Hubert Herkomer's "Last Muster" and "Missing," Mr. Webster's "Truant," Mr. Orchardson's "Queen of the Swords," Mr. Pettie's "Before his Peers," Mr. Hall's "Leaving Home," and Leslie's "School Revisited;" and as caricaturists, Leech, Tenniel, Du Maurier, Keene, and the Cruikshanks.

"The English School of Painting," of which a mere sketch has here been given, is a book no home library should be without; the writing is so quaintly vivid, and the study of our art and artists so minute and painstaking, that far more may be learned from its perusal than most people would be able to gather from a life-long pursuit of pictures in public galleries and private collections.

E. C.