MAY.—THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF PAINTERS.

For three parts of a century, the Royal Academy of Painting has been the leading attraction of the London season. It struggled into existence in the first instance with much difficulty, and had to contend with the chilling blight of public indifference on the one hand, and the resolute hostility of more than one of the most eminent painters of the time, on the other. Hogarth not only refused to belong to it, but discountenanced it in his writings; and Romney could not be persuaded to contribute to it. When the Royal Academy was first opened to the public, it could boast, with the splendid exceptions of Reynolds and Gainsborough, of no contributor whose works are held in the slightest esteem at the present day. The taste for art was indeed at so low an ebb that, throughout London, there did not exist more than three printsellers. Nor can the Royal Academy claim to have been the first Association of Artists for the purpose of exhibiting their works. Two societies were established in 1761, one occupying the Great Room of the Society of Arts, and the other a Gallery in Spring Gardens: the former ceasing to exist in 1775, and the latter in 1807. To the dissensions of the managers of these societies, was the formation of the Royal Academy principally owing. It is, however, due to them to record that in the course of thirty years they had relieved upwards of three hundred artists, distributed one hundred per annum among charitable institutions, and realised a capital of upwards of four thousand pounds. A dispute between the Directors of the Incorporated Society, led to an application to George III., by Benjamin West, for a charter for a new institution to be entitled the Royal Academy of Painting—which association commenced its profitable and useful career in 1769, in apartments built for an auction room in Pall Mall. It numbered in the first instance, only fifty exhibitors, of whom thirty-three were members. The average number is now from 800 to 900; and that of the works exhibited from 1400 to 1500.

The sole favor ever received from the Crown by the Royal Academy has been a suite of rooms, and the confirmation, by Royal authority, of its academical honours. During its progress, the Royal Academy has expended from four to five hundred thousand pounds in affording relief to decayed artists and their widows, and in providing schools of instruction in the Fine Arts, and professors to instruct them. Whatever, therefore, may have been the errors of its constitution, the services which it has rendered have been exceedingly valuable. Its culminating point, so far as the excellence of its exhibitions are concerned, may be said to have been the period between 1825 and 1835; when a succession of the finest works of the British school were brought into juxtaposition on its walls. Lawrence, Wilkie, Turner, Stothard, Etty, Calcott, Collins, Constable, Howard, Smirke, Fuseli, Shee, Westall, Allan, among painters; and Flaxman and the elder Westmacott, among sculptors, have passed from amongst us; whilst among the living painters whose *chefs-d'œuvre* were exhibited during that interval, were Landseer, Leslie, Mulready, Eastlake, Uwins, Stanfield, Pickersgill, Chalon, Danby, and Baily. To supply the places of the vanished stars of the Royal Academy, we have Maclise, Ward, Webster, Cope, Grant, Herbert, Redgrave, Frost, Frith, Elmore, the pre-Raphaelite Millais, and Macdowell.

To the frequenters of the Exhibition of the Royal Academy, it may be scarcely necessary to mention that the institution is composed of forty Royal and twenty-six Associate Academicians, six of whom are engravers, who have been excluded until within these last two years from the higher honours. Five of the Royal Academicians are Professors of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Anatomy, and Perspective, all of whom receive annual stipends; as do also the Keeper, Secretary, and Librarian. The Professors of Ancient Literature, and Ancient History, the Secretary of Foreign Correspondence, and the Chaplain (whose priestly offices, excepting to say grace at their annual banquets are never invoked), are all honorary members.

It has been a subject of repeated complaint with the "outsiders," that a considerable portion of the revenue of the Royal Academy is expended in an annual dinner, which is given in the Great Room of the Exhibition on the day succeeding the private view. To this banquet, the Ministers of the day, many of the public functionaries and the leading members of the aristocracy, intermixed with such commoners as may happen to be extensive patrons of Academical art, are invited—an investment which has always been highly advantageous to the body, and as we think, to the Fine Arts at large. The only literary persons we ever remember to have figured at these dinners were Mr. Rogers, Mr. Moore, and Mr. Dickens. A stray printseller may sometimes be invited, if he have been a large purchaser in the course of the preceding year and is expected to continue one; but this leaven of the aristocratical character of the *réunion* is not of frequent occurrence. Many of the guests have never purchased a picture in their lives, and never intend so to do; but they are at least members of the aristocracy, and manage to repay the obligation in one shape or other. The banquet is laid in the Great Room of the Exhibition: the dull quarter of an hour which usually precedes dinner being relieved by an examination of the pictures by which the admiring if hungry guests are surrounded. The Royal Academicians pride themselves not a little on the age and quality of their wines, on their china, plate, and, indeed, on all the appointments of their table. Complimentary speeches are exchanged, and most of the leading R.A.'s receive in turn their "passing paragraphs of praise." As at a Lord Mayor's Dinner, the Ministers of the day, Whig or Tory, are invariably applauded to the echo, and make in their turn promise of measures calculated to promote the extension of art, which are not always redeemed. This banquet is to the artist what the Booksellers' Trade Sale Dinner is to the booksellers, excepting that it is on a much more sumptuous scale, and the society of a much higher order. In the hilarity of the moment, pictures are purchased, and commissions given to an extent which fully attests the policy of the arrangement. Some few of the visitors, indeed, amply repay the courtesies of which they are the recipients, by the purchase of some important works of art from the walls around them. Such tasteful amateurs as the late Mr. Vernon, Mr. Wells, of Redleaf, Mr. Sheepshanks, Mr. Windus, Mr. Rogers, and others, take their seat at the banquet by prescriptive right, long and gratefully recognised.

A more striking scene than this annual *réunion* presents, can scarcely be conceived. The distinguished company (a combination of rank and intellect), the brilliant arrangements of the table, and the concentration around it of the finest pictorial products of the year, form a *coup d'œil* of unrivalled attraction. Great, however, as have been the advantages of this agreeable assemblage of rank and talent, they would be still greater, if the feeling of reciprocity were fully carried out. But there are noblemen and gentlemen of high position and large means, who, whilst they accept annually the costly hospitalities of the Academy, have never been known to purchase, themselves, or to promote the sale of a single work of the British School. Ladies are not included in the dinner invitations, but are eligible for admission to the Private View, which is always considered the most distinguished lounge of the season. The most brilliant beauty and fashion of the day are assembled on such occasions; and have thus an opportunity of examining the respective pictures without being incommoded by the crowd and dust inseparable from a Public Exhibition. The floors are covered with green-baize, and the whole aspect of the place is more redolent of repose than on ordinary exibition days; whilst the artists are all, so to say, on their good behaviour, and await patiently the admiration of the spectator without attempting to extort it. It is, however, dangerous to express an unfavourable opinion above the breath at a Private View, for the painter or sculptor, if not occupied in indicating the lions of the Exhibition to some lady of rank, is nearly certain to be within ear-shot of his picture or statue. Of any new purchase of a man of consequence and wealth, there is sure to be an abundance of admirers, for the pictures, like the jests of the rich, are always successful. The most noticeable men among the artists in the palmy days of Private Views were the courtly Lawrence, the impersonation of graceful adulation, and old-world courtesies; Turner, our English Claude, with the manners, dress, gait, and physiognomy of the steward of a Margate steamer; Howard, the polished gentleman of the old school, with that suavity of manner, and blandness of courtesy, which were his characteristics; Constable, lavish of caustic criticism on his neighbours' pictures, but sensitive to a fault of any unfavourable remark upon his own; Flaxman and Stothard, simple-hearted old men, with their flowing silver locks; Etty, coarse-visaged and plebeian-looking, and strikingly awkward in his gait; Uwins, grave, sententious, and venerable beyond his years; Shee, poet-painter, polished and exuberant in his courtesies; Wilkie, with his slouching walk, and Doric simplicity, stealing now and then an exulting glance at the bulkhead picture (so called, because it occupies the seat of honour at the head of the room, and used in those days to be defended from too close a pressure of its admirers by a brass rail); Calcott, with an air of aristocratical assumption; Landseer, leading about the room some lady of high birth, and indicating to her what she is to admire; Leslie, silent and reserved, watching with ill-disguised anxiety the effect produced by his principal picture; Chalon, with refined and almost feminine manners, lisping graceful nothings to some *belle* of the season; and Collins, noting with delight the popularity of his "Pet Lambs," his "Sea-shores," or his "Rustic Civilities."

Among the privileged orders, not immediately connected with art, who were wont to be invited to the Private View, was the late Charles Mathews, no mean contributor to the enjoyment of the scene, as he mimicked, for the benefit of a few safe friends, the notabilities around him—hitting off his friends Moore, Campbell, and Rogers to the life.

Anon, with the pause of the intervening Sunday, came the Public View, when the hopes or fears of the unprivileged artist were realised, and the precise position of his picture ascertained. As good a one in all probability as the Forty Academicians, after they have helped themselves to the best places (as it is but natural that they should) can afford him. Great will be the complaints which are poured in upon the innocent and unconscious Secretary, and loud and fierce are the denunciations of the "Hanging Committee." To place some pictures out of sight is often the greatest service that can be rendered to an artist, but he cannot always be brought to think so. Then follow the anathemas of excluded aspirants, who can see nothing on the walls half so good as those pictures which have been so ungraciously omitted. The rooms are crowded, the heat most intolerable, and the visitor who desires to catch a sight of the pictures, wisely resolves to come again at a much earlier hour in the morning. The features of Royal Academy Exhibitions may vary, but the usual scene differs but little from that which we have sketched out.

Of the Exhibitions connected with the Fine Arts, which are opened simultaneously with the Royal Academy, it is no part of our present purpose to more than glance at. If wanting in the *éclat* of an inauguration dinner, they take care to have their private views and special privileges, and are not deficient in abundant attraction. We may mention among others, the Society of British Artists, the two Societies of Painters in Water Colors, the British Gallery, and the Exhibition of the Works of Amateur Artists, and last, not least, the Exhibition of French Art—to say nothing of a host of Panoramas, Dioramas, Cosmoramas, and other scenic representations of the kind which usher in the "merry month of May."