

ART STUDIES

by R. A. PENNETHORNE (C.M.C.)

The appreciation of art, apart from 'applied arts,' is no new thing. From the days of Elizabeth I when the young Englishman went abroad and returned perhaps, like Sir Andrew Aguecheek, a little 'Italianate,' the 'man of taste' was fairly common in English society. The great collections made for Charles I now at Hampton Court and the collection of King Stanislaus of Poland now at last in the Dulwich Gallery, which includes part of King Charles' collection, remain available to all.

The great and stately homes of England all had their galleries and collections even if only of family portraits. The Portland vase, and the

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collection made in Naples by Sir William Hamilton show that the taste for classic art included statuary and vases and all the glories and elegancies of the past.

Then in the eighteenth century as the heir to all this came the Regent and his advisers and helpers. The Academy of Arts had been founded in the days of his father, George III, and one of its early Presidents was Sir Benjamin West, for there are no national boundaries to art. Under the Regent's helper, John Nash, was founded The Gallery of Illustrators in Lower Regent Street, which was a definite early attempt to teach appreciation of art. The models he had made of great buildings of antiquity, before age and ruin overtook them, are still extant in private hands.

There followed the early part of the nineteenth century when English art shrank and dwindled. The Napoleonic wars had cut a generation of young Englishmen off from the continent; the 'hungry 'forties' made pleasant extravagances impossible and when the Great Exhibition of 1851 came it came to a people who had lost the earlier traditions of appreciation.

The Exhibition made the great statues of old visible in reproductions, and it challenged the banalities of Victorian taste.

Two men arose who were lights in this darkness, a critic and a writer, John Ruskin and Robert Browning.

Ruskin re-awakened the hearts of men by his work and study and *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Mornings in Florence* and all his other work trained young men once more to see, and understand what they saw. Robert Browning lived in Italy and interpreted its artists. He could write with feeling of 'the wronged great soul of an ancient master.' Ruskin, in his old age and shattered health, lived in the Lake District above Coniston—his friend and pupil Mrs. Firth lived in Ambleside at Southwaite Rayne, and was the friend and neighbour of Charlotte Mason. And so the students of one became also the students of art as taught by its great worshippers.

Mrs. Firth showed the students from 1895 onwards for many many years her wonderful collection of photographs, and expounded them in the light of what she had learnt.

So 'Picture Talk' became part of the programmes issued for the Parents' Union School.

Many of its early teachers went into the great homes where the private collections still remained, all of them learnt that the great galleries of our own country and of the world were a precious national heritage.

Gradually the teaching and example spread, 'Art Appreciation' became an examination subject for the universities' School Certificate, and so part of the national educational

requirements. South Kensington Museum with its lecturer Miss Spiller and the Courtauld Institute in Portman Square made the great critical work of modern days available to teachers, and after the first world war many lecturers arose who passed on to the man in the street a knowledge of the treasures in galleries and museums available to all.

In the meanwhile our own work had grown. Originally the children in these schools had, as reproductions, 'The Perry Pictures,' published in America and cheap enough for *all* to enjoy. Then the copyright laws

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made these difficult to obtain, and eventually the firm of Mansells at Twickenham continued the work for us. Nowadays for those who want 'colour' there are many reproductions available—Medici pictures, postcards issued by the museums, etc. The door into the salon of art is wide open.

In the *Parents' Review* a series of talks on the pictures selected for each term's work in the Parents' Union Schoolrooms appeared by E. C. Allen, who was at the Charlotte Mason College from 1897–8 and who was also a student and friend of Mrs. Firth's.

She tried to show the parents and teachers that our approach to the subject was universal—not technical. The great picture is great because it has a great thought to convey, or a flash of insight to make available. Expert technical instruction on how the effects are obtained, on colouring, on brushwork, on the influence of one painter upon another, are most valuable for the budding artist, and should be given by artists, but they are not for everyman, nor would they add to his love and appreciation. A child can love El Greco without being upset by his ideas of perspective, or equally learn from Fra Angelico without knowing all his theology. It is 'for the children's sake' that the P.U.S. has endeavoured to spread appreciation of all that has been given to the world through this medium. From some point of approach the artist chosen for the term has always been a part or interpreter of that term's work.

Often contemporary art has been a mirror for the term's history, or explanatory to its geography, or lit up by its literature, but always there is a co-ordinating link. Over and over again the children's comments on the pictures have thrown quaint and amazing light on their inner message.

G. Watts' 'Progress' drew from one child in a slum school the comment, 'And if you please, Miss, there is one gentleman who seems to be a savage'—the figure representing the Future, with his back turned to the spectator and in awe and thanks-giving looking into 'the things that are to come'! Let us believe that a generation familiar with the great inspirations of art will grow beyond the appreciation of men's human cleverness, and will produce among themselves the great artists of the future who will:

Paint the thing as he sees it
For the God of things as they are.