The development of British landscape painting in water-colours

Finberg Alexander Joseph
THE DEVELOPMENT OF BRITISH LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN WATER-COLOURS

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**PREFATORY NOTE**

The Editor desires to acknowledge his indebtedness to the artists and owners who have kindly lent their drawings for reproduction in this volume.
THE DEVELOPMENT OF BRITISH LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN WATER-COLOURS. BY ALEXANDER J. FINBERG

(1) INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON THE IDEA OF DEVELOPMENT AS APPLIED TO ART

The idea of development has played, for considerably more than half a century, and still plays, a large part in all discussions about art. And it is obvious that it is a very useful and at the same time a very dangerous idea; useful, because with its aid you can prove anything you have a mind to, and dangerous, because it conceals all sorts of latent suggestions, vague presuppositions, and lurking misconceptions, and thus misleads and beguiles the unwary. The most insidious and dangerous of these suggestions is its connexion with the ideas of progress or advance. The dictionaries, indeed, give “progress” as one of the synonyms of “development,” and amongst the synonyms of “progress” I find “advance,” “attainment,” “growth,” “improvement,” and “proficiency.” So that as soon as we begin to connect the idea of development with the history of art we find ourselves committed, before we quite realize what we are doing, to the view that the latest productions of art are necessarily the best. If art develops, it necessarily grows, improves, and advances, and the history of art becomes a record of the steps by which primitive work has passed into the fully developed art of the present; the latest productions being evidently the most valuable, because they sum up in their triumphant complexity all the tentative variations and advances of which time and experience have approved.

Stated thus baldly the idea as applied to art seems perhaps too obviously at variance with our tastes, experience, and instinctive standards of artistic values to be worth a moment’s consideration. Yet we are all too well aware that this is the line of argument by which every freak, every eccentric, insane or immoral manifestation of artistic perversity and incompetence which has appeared in Europe within the last thirty or forty years has been commended and justified. Certainly in England every writer on art who calls himself “advanced” is an evolutionist of this crude and uncritical type. At one time it was Cézanne and Van Gogh who were supposed to have summed up in their triumphant complexity the less developed efforts of Titian, Rembrandt, Watteau, and Turner, and at the present moment Cézanne and Van Gogh are being superseded by Mr. Roger Fry and his young lions of “The New Movement.”

The worst of it is that the idea of development, or evolution, is a perfectly sound and useful one in certain spheres of activity. In science, for instance, the idea works and is helpful. The successive modifications and
improvements by which the latest type of steam-engine has been evolved from Stevenson's "Puffing Billy," or the latest type of air-ship from the Montgolfier balloon, form a series of steps which are related and connected with each other, and they are so intimately connected that the latest step sums up and supersedes all the others. No one would travel with Stevenson's engine who could employ a British or American engine of the latest type. There we have a definite system of development—of growth, improvement, and increased proficiency. And we find the same thing if we look at science as a whole, as a body of knowledge of a special kind. Its problems are tied together, subordinated and co-ordinated, unified in one vast system, so that we can represent its history as a single line of progress or retreat.

But art is not like science. Donatello's sculpture is not a growth from the sculpture of Pheidias or Praxiteles in the same way that the London and North-Western engine is a growth from Stevenson's model; nor was Raphael's work developed from Giotto's in the same way. Works of art are separate and independent things. That is why Donatello has not superseded Pheidias, nor Raphael Giotto; and that is why the world cherishes the earliest works of art quite as much as the later ones.

Yet we are bound to admit that we can find traces of an evolutionary process even in the history of art, if we look diligently for them. I remember to have seen a book by a well-known Italian critic in which the representations of the Madonna are exhibited from this point of view (A. Venturi, "La Madonna," Milan, 1899). In it the pictures of the Madonna are treated as an organism which gradually develops, attains perfection, gets old, and dies. There is something to be said for this point of view. When you have a number of artists successively treating the same subject you naturally find that alterations and fresh ideas are imported into their work. These additions and modifications can quite fairly be regarded as developments of the subject-matter and its treatment. But such developments are always partial and one-sided, and they are accompanied with losses of another kind. If Raphael's Madonnas are more correctly drawn and modelled than those of Giotto, these gains are balanced by a corresponding loss in the spiritual qualities of sincerity and earnestness of religious conviction. It depends, therefore, on what narrow and strictly defined point of view we adopt whether we find development or decay in any particular series of artistic productions. From one point of view the history of art from Giotto to Raphael can be regarded as a process of growth and advance, from another, the same series can be taken, as Ruskin actually took it, as an exhibition of the processes of death and decay. The enlightened lover and student of art will look at the matter from both, and other, points of view, but he will realize that the theory of development does not help him in any way to find a standard of value for works of art.

Art must be judged by its own standards, and those standards tell us
that each individual masterpiece is perfect in its own marvellous way, whether it was produced like the *Cheik el Betel* or *The Scribe*, some five or six thousand years ago, or like the paintings of Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Turner within comparatively recent times.

(2) THE BEARING OF THESE REMARKS ON THE HISTORY OF BRITISH WATER-COLOUR PAINTING

The direct bearing of these remarks on our immediate subject-matter will, I hope, be evident to all who are familiar with the literature of the history of British water-colour painting. The first attempt to form an historical series of British water-colours for the public use was begun in 1857, by Samuel Redgrave for the Science and Art Department of what was then the Board of Education. Thanks to Redgrave’s knowledge and enthusiasm a worthy collection of examples of the works of the founders of the school was soon got together, and this nucleus was rapidly enlarged by purchases, gifts, and bequests. These drawings were housed and exhibited in what was then called the South Kensington Museum, and in 1877 Redgrave published an admirable “Descriptive Catalogue” of the collection. As an introduction to this catalogue he wrote a valuable account of the origin and historical development of the art. Both the official character of this publication as well as its intrinsic merits, literary and historical—for Redgrave and his brother Richard, who had assisted him in the work, were two of the best informed historians of English art in the last century—combined to make it at the time and for many years afterwards the standard and most authoritative book on this subject. But its historical part has one serious defect, due perhaps to some extent to the unfortunate association of science with art in the same museum. Redgrave’s conception of artistic development was evidently borrowed ready-made from the ideas of his scientific colleagues. He treats the chronological arrangement of the drawings in exactly the same way as the men of science treat the successive alterations and improvements which Stevenson’s first model steam-engine underwent; and as he found the earlier drawings approached very nearly to monochrome, while the later ones were highly coloured and fuller in the statement and realization of detail, he took it for granted that these changes marked the true line of progress and development in the art. The early “stained” drawings of Scott and Rooker were treated as the primitive and undeveloped models from which the later and more elaborate works of Turner, Copley Fielding, Sidney Cooper, John F. Lewis, Louis Haghe, and Carl Werner were developed. Every fresh complication of technique and elaboration of effect were hailed enthusiastically as signs of “progress,” and brilliance of colour, richness of effect, and fullness of realization were treated as the marks of “the full perfection” of which the art was capable. In this way water-colour “drawing” became
“elevated” into the “perfected” art of painting in water-colours, and the beneficent cosmic process triumphantly produced paintings in water-colour which could actually “hold their own” in force and brilliancy of effect with oil paintings.

As a temporary measure Redgrave’s excursus into evolutionary theory must have been extraordinarily successful. No more specious doctrine could well have been invented to flatter and gratify all parties concerned at the moment; the presidents and leading members of the two water-colour societies must have found peace and comfort in Redgrave’s theory, and the general public must have felt that “enlightenment and progress” even in artistic matters were being duly fostered by an efficient “Committee Council on Education.” But the theory has serious defects. It sets up a false standard of artistic value, it withdraws attention from the higher beauties of art to focus it upon merely materialistic and technical questions, and, what is perhaps still more serious, it prejudges the efforts of subsequent artists, and closes the door to future changes and developments.

The importance of these latter considerations will be seen as soon as we turn our attention to the art of the present day and that of the period which has intervened between it and the date of the publication of Redgrave’s catalogue. Consider for one moment the water-colours of Whistler, Clausen, Wilson Steer, D. Y. Cameron, Anning Bell, Charles Sims, A. W. Rich, Charles Gere, and Romilly Fedden, and judge them in terms of Redgrave’s formula! If we do we are bound to confess that they one and all stand condemned. If Redgrave’s idea of the line of progress and advance is correct we are bound to believe that the works of these fine artists represent, not progress and advance, but decay and loss. Indeed, the two chief movements in art in the last quarter of the last century, the discovery of atmosphere as the predominant factor in pictorial representation—what may be called for the sake of brevity the whole Impressionistic movement, and the later deliberate search for simplicity of statement, either in the interests of decorative effect or emotional expression, were seriously thwarted and hindered by the demands for “exhibition finish,” so-called conscientious workmanship, and a standard of professional technique—“real painting, as such,” as Ruskin called it—set up and maintained by the erroneous theories of artistic progress of which Redgrave was only one of the exponents.

It is therefore of the utmost importance that any attempt to deal fairly and generously with the art of more recent times shall consciously and deliberately dissociate itself from such theories.

(3) THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUBJECT-MATTER AND TECHNIQUE

AFTER what has been written above it is to be hoped that the dangers attending the use of the word “development” have been exorcised. We intend to use the word merely as a synonym for chronological sequence,