

ON ART AND ARTISTS

William Blake

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i

Advice of the Popes who succeeded the Age of Raphael

ON ART AND ARTISTS

Degrade first the Arts if you'd mankind degrade,
Hire idiots to paint with cold light and hot shade,
Give high price for the worst, leave the best in disgrace,
And with labours of ignorance fill every place.

ii

On the great encouragement given by English nobility and gentry to Correggio, Rubens, Reynolds, Gainsborough, Catalani, Du Crow, and Dilbury Doodle

As the ignorant savage will sell his own wife
For a sword, or a cutlass, a dagger, or knife;
So the taught, savage Englishman, spends his whole fortune
On a smear, or a squall, to destroy picture or tune;
And I call upon Colonel Wardle
To give these rascals a dose of caudle!

iii

I askèd my dear friend Orator Prig:
`What's the first part of oratory?' He said: `A great wig.'
`And what is the second?' Then, dancing a jig
And bowing profoundly, he said: `A great wig.'
`And what is the third?' Then he snored like a pig,
And, puffing his cheeks out, replied: `A great wig.'
So if a great painter with questions you push,
`What's the first part of painting?' he'll say: `A paint-brush.'
`And what is the second?' with most modest blush,
He'll smile like a cherub, and say: `A paint-brush.'
`And what is the third?' he'll bow like a rush,
With a leer in his eye, he'll reply: `A paint-brush.'
Perhaps this is all a painter can want:
But, look yonder that house is the house of Rembrandt!

iv

`O dear Mother Outline! of wisdom most sage,
What's the first part of painting?' She said: `Patronage.'
`And what is the second, to please and engage?'
She frowned like a fury, and said: `Patronage.'
`And what is the third? She put off old age,
And smil'd like a siren, and said: `Patronage.'

v

On the Foundation of the Royal Academy
When nations grow old, the Arts grow cold,
And Commerce settles on every tree;
And the poor and the old can live upon gold,
For all are born poor, aged sixty-three.

ON ART AND ARTISTS

vi

These are the idiots' chiefest arts:
To blend and not define the parts
The swallow sings, in courts of kings,
That fools have their high finishings.

And this the princes' golden rule,
The laborious stumble of a fool.
To make out the parts is the wise man's aim,
But to loose them the fool makes his foolish game.

vii

The cripple every step drudges and labours,
And says: `Come, learn to walk of me, good neighbours.'
Sir Joshua in astonishment cries out:
`See, what great labour! pain in modest doubt!

`He walks and stumbles as if he crep,
And how high labour'd is every step!'
Newton and Bacon cry `Being badly nurst,
He is all experiments from last to first.'

viii

You say their pictures well painted be,
And yet they are blockheads you all agree:
Thank God! I never was sent to school
To be flogg'd into following the style of a fool.
The errors of a wise man make your rule,
Rather than the perfections of a fool.

ix

When you look at a picture, you always can see
If a man of sense has painted he.
Then never flinch, but keep up a jaw
About freedom, and `Jenny sink awa!'
As when it smells of the lamp, we can
Say all was owing to the skilful man;
For the smell of water is but small:
So e'en let ignorance do it all.

x. The Washerwoman's Song

I wash'd them out and wash'd them in,
And they told me it was a great sin.

xi. English Encouragement of Art: Cromek's opinions put into rhyme

If you mean to please everybody you will
Set to work both ignorance and skill.
For a great multitude are ignorant,
And skill to them seems raving and rant.
Like putting oil and water in a lamp,
'Twill make a great splutter with smoke and damp.
For there is no use as it seems to me
Of lighting a lamp, when you don't wish to see.

xii

When I see a Rubens, Rembrandt, Correggio,
I think of the crippled Harry and slobbering Joe;
And then I question thus: Are artists' rules
To be drawn from the works of two manifest fools?
Then God defend us from the Arts I say!
Send battle, murder, sudden death, O pray!
Rather than be such a blind human fool
I'd be an ass, a hog, a worm, a chair, a stool!

xiii

Give pensions to the learned pig,
Or the hare playing on a tabor;
Anglus can never see perfection
But in the journeyman's labour.

xiv. On Sir Joshua Reynolds' disappointment at his first impressions of Raphael

Some look to see the sweet outlines,
And beauteous forms that Love does wear;
Some look to find out patches, paint,
Bracelets and stays and powder'd hair.

xv

Sir Joshua praised Rubens with a smile,
By calling his the ornamental style;
And yet his praise of Flaxman was the smartest,
When he called him the ornamental artist.
But sure such ornaments we well may spare
As crooked limbs and lousy heads of hair.

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xvi

Sir Joshua praises Michael Angelo.
'Tis Christian mildness when knaves praise a foe;
But 'twould be madness, all the world would say,
Should Michael Angelo praise Sir Joshua
Christ us'd the Pharisees in a rougher way.

xvii

Can there be anything more mean,
More malice in disguise,
Than praise a man for doing what
That man does most despise?
Reynolds lectures exactly so
When he praises Michael Angelo.

xviii

To the Royal Academy
A strange erratum in all the editions
Of Sir Joshua Reynolds' lectures
Should be corrected by the young gentlemen
And the Royal Academy's directors.

Instead of `Michael Angelo,'
Read `Rembrandt'; for it is fit
To make mere common honesty
In all that he has writ.

xix. Florentine Ingratitude

Sir Joshua sent his own portrait to
The birthplace of Michael Angelo,
And in the hand of the simpering fool
He put a dirty paper scroll,
And on the paper, to be polite,
Did `Sketches by Michael Angelo' write.
The Florentines said `Tis a Dutch-English bore,
Michael Angelo's name writ on Rembrandt's door.'
The Florentines call it an English fetch,
For Michael Angelo never did sketch;
Every line of his has meaning,
And needs neither suckling nor weaning.
'Tis the trading English-Venetian cant
To speak Michael Angelo, and act Rembrandt:
It will set his Dutch friends all in a roar
To write `Mich. Ang.' on Rembrandt's door;
But you must not bring in your hand a lie
If you mean that the Florentines should buy.

ON ART AND ARTISTS

Giotto's circle or Apelles' line
Were not the work of sketchers drunk with wine;
Nor of the city clock's running . . . fashion;
Nor of Sir Isaac Newton's calculation.

XX

No real style of colouring ever appears,
But advertising in the newspapers.
Look there you'll see Sir Joshua's colouring:
Look at his pictures all has taken wing!

xxi

When Sir Joshua Reynolds died
All Nature was degraded;
The King dropp'd a tear into the Queen's ear,
And all his pictures faded.

xxii

A Pitiful Case
The villain at the gallows tree,
When he is doom'd to die,
To assuage his misery
In virtue's praise does cry.

So Reynolds when he came to die,
To assuage his bitter woe,
Thus aloud did howl and cry:
'Michael Angelo! Michael Angelo!'

xxiii

On Sir Joshua Reynolds
O Reader, behold the Philosopher's grave!
He was born quite a Fool, but he died quite a Knave.

xxiv

I, Rubens, am a statesman and a saint.
Deceptions both and so I'll learn to paint,

XXV

On the school of Rubens
Swelled limbs, with no outline that you can descry,
That stink in the nose of a stander-by,
But all the pulp-wash'd, painted, finish'd with labour,

ON ART AND ARTISTS

Of an hundred journeymen's how-d'ye do neighbour?

xxvi

To English Connoisseurs

You must agree that Rubens was a fool,
And yet you make him master of your School,
And give more money for his slobberings
Than you will give for Raphael's finest things.
I understood Christ was a carpenter
And not a brewer's servant, my good Sir.

xxvii. A Pretty Epigram for the encouragement of those who have paid great sums in the Venetian and Flemish ooze

Nature and Art in this together suit:
What is most grand is always most minute.
Rubens thinks tables, chairs and stools are grand,
But Raphael thinks a head, a foot, a hand.

xxviii

Raphael, sublime, majestic, graceful, wise
His executive power must I despise?
Rubens, low, vulgar, stupid, ignorant
His power of execution I must grant,
Learn the laborious stumble of a fool!
And from an idiot's action form my rule?
Go, send your Children to the Slobbering School!

xxix. On the Venetian Painter

He makes the lame to walk, we all agree,
But then he strives to blind all who can see.

xxx

A pair of stays to mend the shape
Of crookèd humpy woman,
Put on, O Venus; now thou art
Quite a Venetian Roman.

xxxii

Venetian! all thy colouring is no more
Than bolster'd plasters on a crooked whore.

xxxii. To Venetian Artists

That God is colouring Newton does show,
And the Devil is a black outline, all of us know.
Perhaps this little fable may make us merry:
A dog went over the water without a wherry;
A bone which he had stolen he had in his mouth;
He cared not whether the wind was north or south.
As he swam he saw the reflection of the bone.
`This is quite perfection one generalizing tone!
Outline! There's no outline, there's no such thing:
All is chiaroscuro, poco-pen it's all colouring!'
Snap, snap! He has lost shadow and substance too.
He had them both before. `Now how do ye do?'
`A great deal better than I was before:
Those who taste colouring love it more and more.'

xxxiii

All pictures that's painted with sense and with thought
Are painted by madmen, as sure as a groat;
For the greater the fool is the pencil more blest,
As when they are drunk they always paint best.
They never can Raphael it, Fuseli it, nor Blake it;
If they can't see an outline, pray how can they make it?
When men will draw outlines begin you to jaw them;
Madmen see outlines and therefore they draw them.

xxxiv

Call that the public voice which is their error!
Like as a monkey, peeping in a mirror,
Admires all his colours brown and warm,
And never once perceives his ugly form.