

**ART'S TRUE
MISSION
IN AMERICA**

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Art's True Mission in America by Augustine Duganne

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ART'S TRUE MISSION.

THERE is no more blessed influence super-acting on the world than the love of art nourished by the education of our higher feelings. It is never individual in its operation, never selfishly confined to the object upon which it was first directed ; but it effuses like the atmosphere, radiates like light, enveloping, pervading, and ameliorating all surrounding things, and transforming the rudest antagonisms into the tenderest sympathies. An enlarged and educated scholar recognizes kindred in every intellect which is marked by his own breadth of thought ; the soul of a true artist glides into and claims affinity with that of a brother in art, of whatever clime or caste ; and it is indeed a divine sympathy which unites the sensitive natures of

true-born children of music—whose lives are broken melodies, and whose deaths the subsidence of an exhausted cadence. There is, in effect, nothing "foreign" in the higher world of literature and art. The true poet or artist cannot descend to the consideration of clime, or age, or rank. There are no English, no Americans, no Italians, nor Germans, nor French, in the grand congress of mind and heart manifesting itself through thought, light, and song. The exalted artist has no country, or, rather, he claims all countries; for his birth-place is the soul of all true men, and the nourishment which gives him life comes not from one breast alone, but from all that throb with the love of which his genius is the expression. Therefore does the high-souled, heaven-anointed artist recognize all pure children of his divine *alma mater* as brethren in his path; therefore will he never regard the accident of birth as of a snow-flake's weight in his estimate of genius; therefore will he welcome to his heart of hearts all feelings, all impulses, all influences born of the beautiful spirit which inspires his own conceptions.

So much as regards the *Artist*: and I under-

stand this word to comprise somewhat more than the signification of a mere class or profession. I use the word "artist" in the high sense to which poet should ever be confined—conveying the idea of a creator of new beauties in the world—an interpreter of dumb spirit—an exalted Cadmus giving form and expression to impalpable and mute feeling. The Poet and the Artist are, each in his sphere, the divine chemists of all spiritual affinities around them. The inner things of men's natures,—hidden sympathies and mysterious promptings—howsoever nameless and subtile they be,—are reduced to substance, shape, and character, in that strange alembic the mind of genius, and thence thrown out to the world's recognition, on the painter's canvas, the scholar's page, or through

— "the secret power
Of harmony, in tones and numbers hit
By voice or hand, and various measured verse,
Æolian charms and Dorian lyric odes."

It is true that there exists a marked distinction between the merely sensuous and primary effects of poetry, and those of painting, and that the processes of conception and execution through

which the poet and the painter arrive at their result or object—i. e., a perfect work—are exactly inverse. It has been said that in all canvas representations, even the greatest, there must appear an unsatisfactory incompleteness, rendering them inferior to a finished poem; that, for example, a hand raised to strike, in a picture, must forever remain in that position, threatening only, and that the flying horse of a painter never advances, and therefore fails to suggest to us the end of his career;—whereas in a poem the action is continuous—the arm falls, the steed dashes onward, bearing the reader with its flight. Whether the power of thus continuing and elucidating the action of its subject be an advantage to Poetry, may, however, in its turn, be questioned; inasmuch as the scope allowed to the imagination by a painting might be suggestive of more interest than could be awakened through the detailed description of the poet. Perhaps, moreover, the *tout ensemble* that is at once embraced by a single *coup d'œil* at the picture is more satisfactory to the mind than the necessarily slower induction by which the argument of a poem must lead to its consummation.

But, in fact, the inceptive processes through which the excellences of both poem and painting become recognized, involve two diverse mental operations in the beholder or auditor. Thus, it is the impressive *coup d'œil*, or *first view*, in the one case, regarding the painting, and it is the inductive process in the other, regarding the poem, which reveals to us the true merit of each as a perfect work of art. And herein, perhaps, lies the æsthetic distinction between the two, that the one appeals to our analytic, the other to our synthetic, mental powers. There is a dual gratification in the contemplation of all perfect or nearly perfect creations—that springing from the composite or complete view, and that arising from a mental dissection or disintegration of the merits. This double pleasure has for its base one of the two faculties of analysis or synthesis. The object, therefore, of the true painter or poet will be to exercise to its proper degree whichever of these faculties his subject or work is fitted to call into action; and his success will be according to the nicety of art and fidelity to nature of which his work shall give evidence.

So in Homan's picture of "HARVEY EXPLAIN-

ING THE CIRCULATION OF THE BLOOD"—the principal figure at once fixes the eye, and gives tone to the whole scene; and our analytic powers then separate the components of the work: the thoughtful monarch, the careless courtier, the wondering boy, and finally, the stag's head, with its swelling veins, furnishing the philosopher's illustration; satisfaction with all being our artistic quest.

In viewing or criticising a picture like Wilkie's "PREACHING OF KNOX," for instance, the analytic process is peculiarly called into action. Our first glance is arrested by the masterly grouping, and perfect keeping, in position and tone, of the accessories. The foreground of the picture, occupied with figures whose attitude and expression suggest a powerful present feeling, directs us at once to the chief actor, the bold Reformer, JOHN KNOX. His animation, so graphically delineated in every line of the figure, suggests at once a mental inquiry as regards the effect of such preaching upon the other witnesses of the scene; and we proceed, therefore, to note the expression and attitude of all the listening figures. Thus we unconsciously