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MASTERPIECES
IN COLOUR
EDITED BY . .
T. LEMAN HARE

REYNOLDS

1723-1792

IN THE SAME SERIES

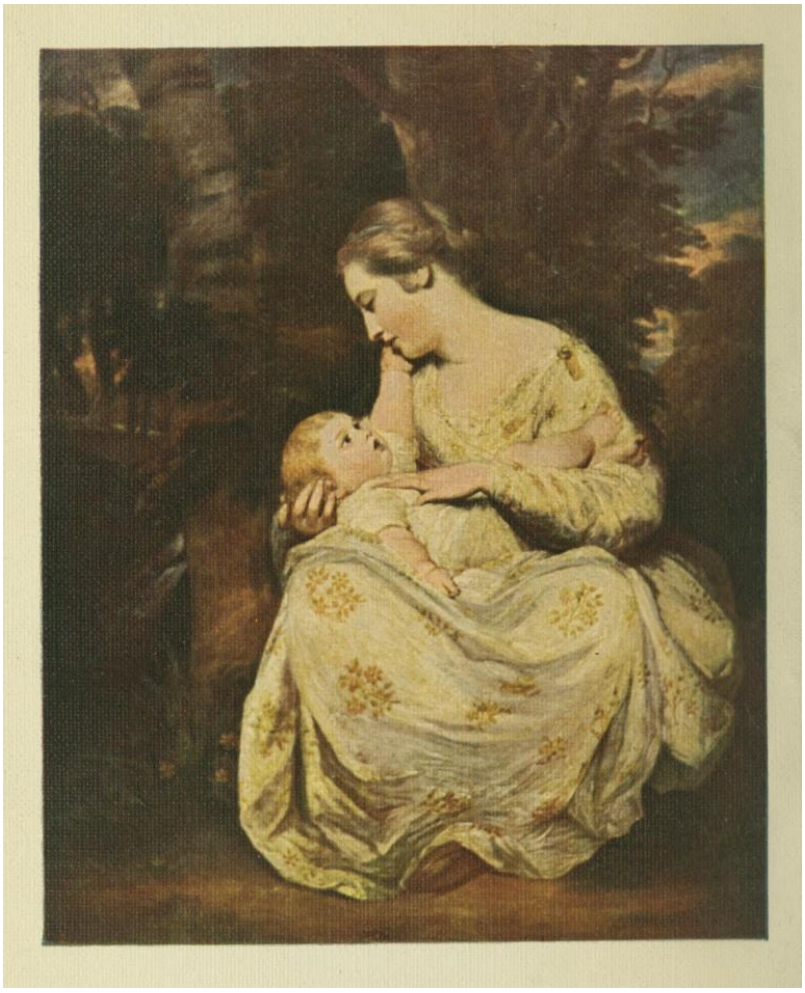
ARTIST.	AUTHOR.
VELAZQUEZ.	S. L. BENSUSAN.
REYNOLDS.	S. L. BENSUSAN.
TURNER.	C. LEWIS HIND.
ROMNEY.	C. LEWIS HIND.
GREUZE.	ALYS EYRE MACKLIN.
BOTTICELLI.	HENRY B. BINNS.
ROSSETTI.	LUCIEN PISSARRO.
BELLINI.	GEORGE HAY.
FRA ANGELICO.	JAMES MASON.
REMBRANDT.	JOSEF ISRAELS.
LEIGHTON.	A. LYS BALDRY.
RAPHAEL.	PAUL G. KONODY.
HOLMAN HUNT.	MARY E. COLERIDGE.
TITIAN.	S. L. BENSUSAN.

MILLAIS.	A. Lys Baldry.
CARLO DOLCI.	George Hay.
GAINSBOROUGH.	Max Rothschild.
TINTORETTO.	S. L. Bensusan.
LUINI.	James Mason.
FRANZ HALS.	Edgcumbe Staley.
VAN DYCK.	Percy M. Turner.
LEONARDO DA VINCI.	M. W. Brockwell.
RUBENS.	S. L. Bensusan.
WHISTLER.	T. Martin Wood.
HOLBEIN.	S. L. Bensusan.
BURNE-JONES.	A. Lys Baldry.
VIGÉE LE BRUN.	C. Haldane MacFall.
CHARDIN.	Paul G. Konody.
FRAGONARD.	C. Haldane MacFall.
MEMLINC.	W. H. J. & J. C. Weale.
CONSTABLE.	C. Lewis Hind.
RAEBURN.	James L. Caw.
JOHN S. SARGENT.	T. Martin Wood.

Others in Preparation.

PLATE I.—MRS. HOARE AND CHILD. In the Wallace Collection, London. (Frontispiece)

This picture is perhaps one of Sir Joshua Reynolds' most beautiful compositions. The flesh painting is very fine and the handling of the dress remarkably free, its delicate colouring being in beautiful harmony with the surroundings. The painter gave us a portrait of the same child when he was a boy; it is now in the collection of Baron Albert de Rothschild. Sir Joshua made for this picture a sketch in oils which hangs in the Gallery at Bridgewater House.



REYNOLDS

BY S. L. BENSUSAN

ILLUSTRATED WITH EIGHT REPRODUCTIONS IN COLOUR

LONDON: T. C. & E. C. JACK
NEW YORK: FREDERICK A. STOKES CO.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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There are certain men born to every generation who approach life with the complete assurance of distinction in any work that they may have chosen for the exercise of their gifts. They are strangers to doubt and uncertainty; they disarm Fortune by claiming freely as a right what she is accustomed to grant grudgingly as a favour—"they ride Life's lists as a knight might ride." One feels that these fortunate few are destined for success just as the majority are doomed to failure, that nothing save a long series of mishaps can keep them from the goal of their ambition. They have the temperament that makes achievement easy, and a steadfast determination that the demons of mischance cannot resist for long.

[Pg 10]

When one turns to consider English art in the eighteenth century, the name of Joshua Reynolds stands out in a brighter light than any other. One would not say that he was the greatest painter of his time—Gainsborough's gifts exceeded his in many directions, and Romney enters into competition too—but Reynolds was born under a fortunate star, and Nature gave him as a birthday present a rare mixture of talent, industry, and common-sense, together with a sober judgment that could not be turned aside by passion or emotion. Such gifts, if they do not always create a genius, may enable their possessor to achieve work that has certain affinities with the masterpieces of the immortals. Nobody in these days would deny for a moment that Reynolds possessed qualifications of the highest order; but ours is an age of hero-worship, and we are rather inclined to go beyond our brief in dealing with a representative man whose work has survived the criticism (though, alas, it has not always survived the atmosphere) of nearly two centuries. Reynolds is not the less a great painter because he did not happen to be the great man so many of his biographers have seen, nor was he a heaven-sent genius of the kind that flutters the musical dovecots from time to time. Infant prodigies are hardly known in the world of art, and Reynolds started life as a clever young man determined to make a name. He became soon a painter strong enough to realise his own limitations and those of his age, and to take the best possible steps to secure for his own art, and incidentally for that of his country, the highest position in the esteem of the world at large. Had there been no Reynolds there might have been no Royal Academy—the Institution in its earliest days was indebted very deeply to him. Himself far above the squabbles of the hour, he raised the Royal Academy into the serene and almost untroubled atmosphere in which he lived his life.

[Pg 11]

[Pg 12]

PLATE II.—NELLY O'BRIEN.
(In the Wallace Collection)

This portrait is one of the best examples of Sir Joshua's art, and was painted in 1763. The shadow on the face is most skilfully managed. The lace round the arm and the skirt are painted in the artist's best manner. It will be remembered that Sir Joshua painted other portraits of this fascinating woman.

"I will be a painter, if you will give me the chance of being a good one," he is said to have remarked when quite a lad, and this is but one of the simple sentences that hold and in a sense [Pg 15] reveal the keynote of his character. Reynolds was determined to succeed. When he started his work there were few people in England who could guide him in the right way, and consequently we must not look for any great achievement in the early portraits. The painter may be said to have owed his first success to Commodore Keppel, who took him on a cruise in the Mediterranean and helped him to come into touch with the great masterpieces that will probably stimulate artists for all time. In return, the painter gave the sailor a measure of fame that his naval achievements would hardly have secured.

Italy turned the dross of Reynolds' art to fine gold, and he never shrank from acknowledging the debt. Had he stayed in England he might have been a greater man than all his [Pg 16] contemporaries, save Gainsborough and Romney, but he could not have given the world any one of the pictures that are reproduced here. Art will not yield to inspiration alone. The musician, or the literary man, with very simple education may be able to achieve wonders, but the artist who looks to brushes and colours for his medium must sacrifice diligently for many years at the shrine of technique before his hand can express what is in his brain. The years between 1749 and 1752, devoted by Reynolds to studying and copying the Vatican frescoes and the pictures of Padua, Milan, Turin, and Paris, were invaluable. Indeed he was one of the greatest copyists of his time, and Sir Walter Armstrong thinks that one of his copies of a Rembrandt is classed among the originals in the National Gallery to-day! [Pg 17]

Down to the year of the Italian journey the young painter's life had been quite uneventful. Born in 1723 at Plympton in Devonshire, where his father was a school-master, he was apprenticed in London to Thomas Hudson, a portrait painter of the day and a Devon man too. Hudson gave his pupil Guercino's drawings to copy. Before the time of apprenticeship had expired Reynolds had quarrelled with his master and gone back to Devonshire, where he painted work that was of no great importance, under the patronage of the first Lord Edgcumbe. At his house Reynolds met the Commodore Keppel, whose kindness enabled him to see Italy, and it was the sojourn in that real home of art that brought Reynolds back to England a portrait painter of the first class.

Michelangelo had impressed him deeply. In later days he never lost an opportunity of advising [Pg 18] students to sit at the feet of the great master, and the influence of the work in the Sistine Chapel may be noted in the famous picture of Mrs. Siddons, now to be seen in the Dulwich Gallery. Ludovico Caracci and Guido had given him hints that were of infinite value in the moulding of his technique; for colour he had gone to Titian, Tintoretto, and Rubens, of whom the last named was beginning to lose his appeal in the last years of Reynolds' life. Sir Joshua had a supreme facility for taking from every artist the best that was in him, melting it in the crucible of his own thought, and applying the product to his pictures. There is no doubt that the sixteenth-century Venetians impressed Reynolds as much as they impressed Ruskin at a later date, but in the middle of the eighteenth century the school of Bologna was in the ascendant in England, and it is through [Pg 19]

Reynolds' actions rather than his words that we see how Venice had influenced him. Sir Walter Armstrong thinks that Reynolds lived well rather than wisely in Italy, and that when he came back to town his wild oats were all sown, but it is hard to find any justification for the belief that Reynolds was at any time of his life a free liver. The pleasures of the table may have claimed him when he reached middle age; indeed, Dr. Johnson said to him on one occasion, "You complain about the tea I drink, but I do not count the glasses you empty," or words to that effect. As far as other forms of dissipation go, there is no evidence that Reynolds was ever a victim to them. He was always perfect master of his self-control, and when the years had toned down certain faults of thought and manner, he became mellowed, like old wine, and not less stimulating. [Pg 20]

Students of the famous discourses that Sir Joshua addressed annually to the Royal Academy after he became first President of the new institution, may be justified if they suspect that the great painter adopted the same rule in dealing with his students that skilled musical composers use when dealing with their pupils. A musican knows that the laws of harmony and counterpoint are not fixed, that the musical horizon widens year by year, and that rules may often be disregarded by a composer who has something to say; but, in order that composition may grow from some definite form, it is necessary that the rules should be mastered before they are disregarded. So in dealing with things of art, Reynolds said much to his audience that his own practice did not bear out. He would not hint at his own preferences quite so frankly as his [Pg 21] canvases did and it is not at all unlikely that he realised as well as we do, that while students, like the poor, are always with us, great artists are few and far between, and will survive all academic limitations.

When Reynolds came back to England in 1752, he went down to Devonshire to recruit his health. While his sojourn abroad had been productive of so much that had been invaluable to him, he had met with two unfortunate accidents. In Minorca he had fallen from his horse and sustained injuries that had left his face scarred for all time. In the Vatican he had sustained a chill that brought about the deafness destined to be a life-long infirmity. So he took holiday in the county he loved so well, and after his return he opened a studio in St. Martin's Street, acting on [Pg 22] the advice of his friend and patron, Lord Edgcumbe. There was no period of weary waiting. Thanks to the quality of his work and the patronage granted so freely, he began at once to enjoy the success that belongs to the popular portrait painter. A little later he moved to Great Newport Street, where the accommodation was better suited to the growing claims of sitters, and in 1760 he went to 47 Leicester Square, now an auction-house, where he lived for the remainder of his life. As he moved he raised his prices, but nobody seemed to mind. Everybody who was anybody, paid cheerfully. So did some of the other people.

PLATE III.—THE THREE GRACES.
(In the National Gallery)

This picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1774 and called, "Three Ladies adorning a Term of Hymen." It was bequeathed to the National Gallery by the Earl of Blessington. The Graces are the three daughters of Sir W. Montgomery. The one on the left kneeling down is the Hon. Mrs. Beresford, in the centre is the Hon. Mrs. Gardener, mother of Lord Blessington, and on the right is the Marchioness Townsend.

Many artists remain painters all their lives. Meet them in a studio or at a private view and they are illuminating; talk about another lying outside their immediate interests and they are [Pg 25] dumb, or worse, for some talk without saying anything, as though they were mere politicians.

Perhaps we have no right to complain of this lack of mental dimensions, but it is permissible to note with pleasure the few cases in which an artist reveals himself as an accomplished man of the world. Reynolds would never have been content to be nothing more than a painter, and he chose his friends so wisely that the living served him as well as the dead. If the great artists of Italy had shed light upon his path in one direction, what did he not owe to the men of his own generation, whose society must have been a source of inspiration to any intelligent man? Dr. Johnson himself could only have been inspiring company, even though we may think in our heart of hearts that [Pg 26] the benefit of the inspiration was not without serious drawbacks. Reynolds enjoyed also the intimate friendship of Garrick, Goldsmith, Gibbon, and Burke, he consorted with many other men who made some mark in the world of thought, and in this atmosphere the extraordinary receptivity of his mind must have served him to great advantage. He had human weaknesses to live down, and it is to his credit that he conquered all or most of them. Like so many honest Englishmen, there was a touch of the snob about him—witness his correspondence with Lord Edgcumbe during the first visit to the Continent. He was not without jealousy, as may be seen from his pettish condemnation of the work of Liotard, the miniature painter and pastellist, and his references to Gainsborough and Romney, whose success and accomplishments galled him not [Pg 27] a little. He was vulgar, until he learned refinement from the distinguished people with whom he was brought into contact—witness the gilded coach and gaudy liveries he bought when he established himself in Leicester Square, the coach in which his unfortunate sister Frances was compelled to drive in order that the man in the street might stare open-mouthed and talk about her brother. There is hardly a “Lion Comique,” or a lady of the music halls drawing prime minister’s salary for songs blatant or obscene, who would commit such an offence to-day, and against these lapses from taste Sir Joshua’s acquaintance with the best minds of his day failed to save him. Perhaps the atmosphere of Leicester Square in the eighteenth, as in the twentieth, century was a little theatrical. Of course the faults of a man and the merits of his work are [Pg 28] distinct and stand apart from one another, but we are too apt to look at Reynolds the man in the light of Goldsmith’s epitaph, and it is the failing of popular biography to supply popular people with a measure of moral equipment that would make a saint self-conscious. It is far more interesting to see great men as they lived, and understand that, like the rest of us, they had a fair, or unfair, share of faults. Had Sir Joshua possessed twice as many failings, he would still remain one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of British portrait painters. Had he associated all the virtues with less achievement, he could not have interested us, because happily we do not judge art by the moral standard of the artist.

Perhaps the most remarkable side of Reynolds’ mind was seen in its response to the real [Pg 29] truths that underlie all the arts. He held his work to be a mode of expressing human experience, he knew that there was a domain lying beyond the reach of rules, and bade his students look “with dilated eye,” sacrificing detail to general effect for the sake of the best and most imaginative work. He declared without any reservations, that he had found art in England in the lowest possible state, he compared some of his contemporaries’ work with sign-post painting, but his fine courage was only stimulated by the bad conditions that prevailed. He sought to raise them, and as a portrait painter, made it his business to discover the perfections of his sitters, with the result, that, as his genius was wholly interpretative, his pictures stand rather less for his sitters than for their time. [Pg 30]

A weak man might have succumbed to the temptations that beset Reynolds when he had established himself in Leicester Square. He was in a sense the darling of society, earning a larger income than had been gained by any of his contemporaries, although he painted for prices that a third-rate man could gain to-day, if we do not regard the changed value of money. But Reynolds never succumbed to society; he conquered it, showing himself worthy of all the success that came to him. He did his best, he worked hard, relaxing his efforts only when his position was unassailable, took his enjoyment temperately, if we consider the age in which he lived, and never forgot that his chief aim and object in life was to paint portraits, and to paint them as well as he could. There were years in which he completed from three to four portraits every week, but by [Pg 31] the time he was President of the Royal Academy, the output had fallen to sixty or seventy a year, no small achievement for a man who was at liberty to enjoy all that was best, and brightest, and most enduring in London society, and everything most attractive in the country.

The life and times of Sir Joshua have a special interest for British artists, even apart from his work, because he lived through the years of storm and strife that saw the development of the R.A. It is not easy to tell in full the story of its establishment without long and detailed references to the quarrels and intrigues of the artists of the day and even then it is not easy to see the truth clearly through the mists of controversy. None of Sir Joshua’s biographies goes uncontradicted, and it is safe to say that we must be content to forego for all time exact knowledge of certain [Pg 32] incidents in the life of Reynolds. He had considerable reserve, a fair sense of diplomacy, and was not without knowledge that there were foes as well as friends in the crowd that surrounded him. His contemporaries were often baffled by his silence, and the secrets of his tastes and intimate likes and dislikes died with him. He had friends, but no confidantes. A brief outline of the creation of the R.A. is all that needs be given here.

PLATE IV.—THE AGE OF INNOCENCE.
(In the National Gallery)

This picture was bought at the sale of Mr. Harman’s pictures. It has been engraved two or three times and is one of the most popular examples of the master’s work.

In the year 1760, when Reynolds was approaching the zenith of his fame, an art exhibition was held in London, attracted a great deal of attention, and became an annual institution. Thereafter, we begin to hear of the Society of Artists, which received from George III. a certificate of Incorporation in 1765, blossomed out with the grandiloquent title of the “Incorporated Society of [Pg 35]
Artists of Great Britain,” and published a list of two hundred and eleven members, including Joshua Reynolds. An offshoot from this society was known as the Free Society of Artists; in the history of art there have always been some men “agin the government.” Heart-burning and jealousy were associated with the work of the Incorporated Society, and William Chambers the architect, who had the king’s ear, brought about the foundation of the R.A. Reynolds took no visible part in the intrigue, in fact he was abroad during the months when the squabbles were most violent, and when the Presidency was offered to him, he asked for time to discuss the matter with Dr. Johnson and Edmund Burke. Apparently he had studied Shakspere’s “Julius Cæsar.” In December 1768, the constitution of the Royal Academy was signed by the King, and [Pg 36]
the Incorporated Society was left to linger for a few years in the cold shades of opposition and then depart from a world that had no further use for it. William Chambers and Benjamin West seem to have done all that was necessary to bring King George on to the side of the new venture, which had a very wide constitution, and thirty-six original members, including two ladies, Angelica Kaufmann and Mary Moser. William Chambers became Treasurer, Dalton was appointed Antiquary, Goldsmith was Professor of Ancient History, and Dr. Johnson stood for Ancient Literature. Curiously enough, it was the foundation by Captain Coram of the Foundling Hospital that led indirectly to the creation of the Royal Academy. Hogarth, who was a great friend of Coram, gave pictures for the gallery in the Hospital, Reynolds’ old master, Hudson, Reynolds [Pg 37]
himself, and Wilson, a contemporary painter of great achievement, did the same. Mr. Claude Phillips, whose life of Sir Joshua Reynolds is one of the best written and most discerning tributes to the master extant, thinks that the success of the gallery at the Foundlings led to the opening of the first exhibition of pictures by living masters in 1860. The Society of Arts was then six years old, and the Society of Artists was established in friendly rivalry. We have remarked that at the time when the Incorporated Society of Artists was engaged in the final quarrel that led to the foundation of the Academy, Sir Joshua was travelling abroad with Richard Burke. His absence from the scene of strife is more likely to have been diplomatic than unintentional. [Pg 38]

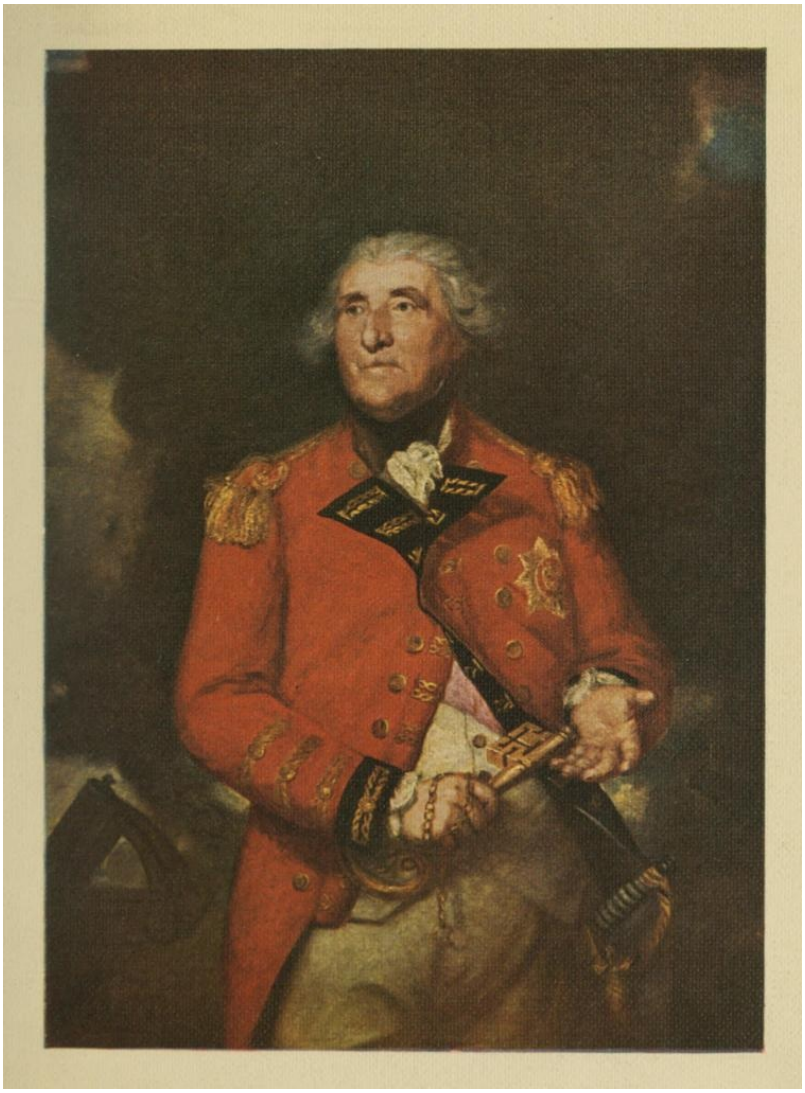
II

We have now come down to the year 1769, and may pause with advantage to recall some of Sir Joshua’s achievements and experiences that have been omitted from a rather hurried survey. He has already painted many of the most famous men and women of his time, and his contributions to the exhibitions of the Society of Artists have been the admiration of all who take an interest in pictures. Here some of his most famous pictures have been hung, the “Lady

Elizabeth Keppel as a bridesmaid," the "Countess Waldegrave," "Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy" (now in Lord Rothschild's town house) and many others too numerous to be mentioned in such a brief review as this.

PLATE V.—LORD HEATHFIELD.
(In the National Gallery)

This work which is held by good judges to be one of the most characteristic portraits painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds was commissioned by Alderman Boydell in 1787. In the background there is a view of the Rock of Gibraltar much obscured by smoke, for the picture commemorates the defence of the Rock from 1779 to 1783 by Lord Heathfield, then General Eliott. The gallant soldier holds the key of the fortress in his hand. The picture was purchased by the Government for the National Gallery in 1824.



He has made another pleasant journey into Devonshire, this time in company with Dr. Johnson, whose consumption of cider and cream has created a mild sensation. He has visited Wilton and Longford, where some of his works may be seen to-day; he has enlarged his circle of friends, while his acquaintances are as the sands upon the seashore for multitude. He belongs to the once famous Dilettanti Society, founded in 1732 to study antiquities and arts; he has painted his own portrait to celebrate his election, and presented it to the Society. It may be seen in the Grafton Gallery to-day, together with two groups of members painted at a later date. [Pg 41]

His drawing has become strong, his modelling firm, and his colour has many of the qualities that distinguished the Venetian masters he loved so well, but, alas, he has not learned the secrets of permanent colouring, and some of his most brilliant glazes are beginning to fade before the eyes of the troubled owners of the pictures. He has surrendered to the pseudo-classicism of his age, and some of his compositions are absurdly indebted to mythology; but the fault was a virtue then, and while we complain it is only right to refer the grievance to the time rather than to the man, and a study of Boswell explains the painter's attitude, even though it cannot justify it. [Pg 42]

He has found time to enjoy the pursuits of a country gentleman; he shoots and hunts in the best sporting circles. His home in Leicester Square is open to all sorts and conditions of men; the leading lights of the day—Gainsborough and Romney excepted—are welcome. He keeps a liberal but ill-served table, and his friends will find a welcome if they call in time for dinner at five o'clock, even if they must scramble for a fair share of the meal. He has lost the raw manners of early years, *faux pas* are few and far between. From Johnson he has acquired a certain literary style, rather heavy and turgid, perhaps, but precise and final. It is possible, but not certain, that [Pg 43]

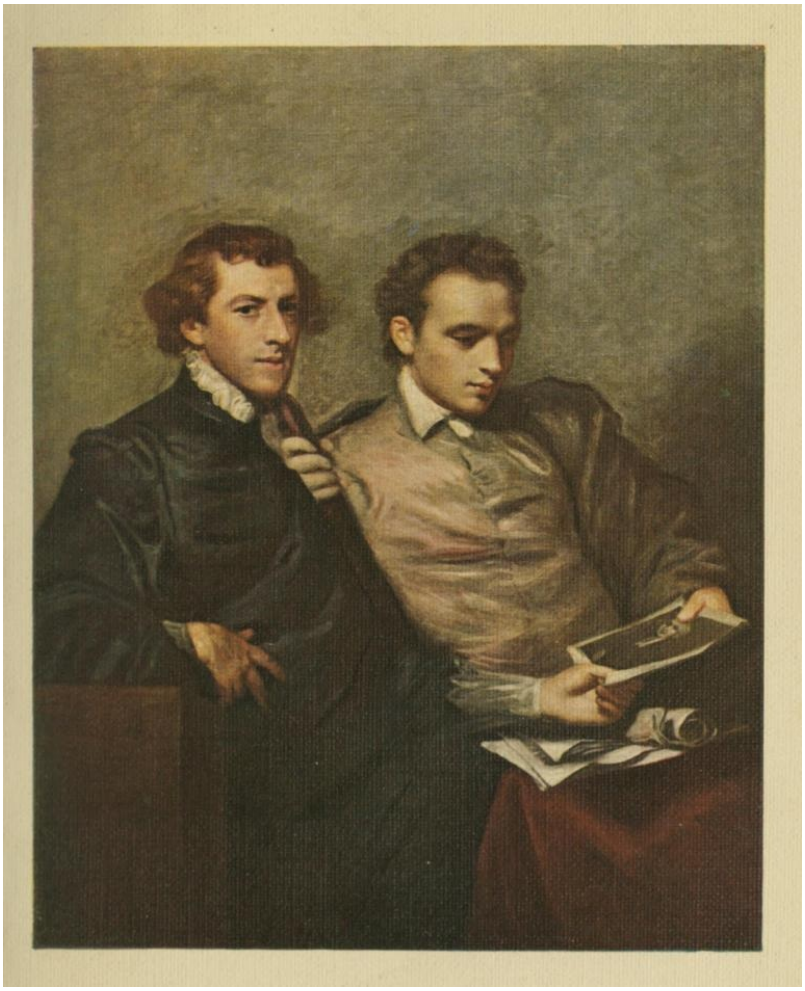
“The Club” has been established, and that the twelve original members are meeting for supper at the sign of the Turk’s Head in Gerrard Street. He has pupils, for whom he does little or nothing, and assistants who paint draperies for him, and receive a little useful instruction now and again. Northcote, who is to publish his “Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds” nearly half a century later, and become the one successful painter from the Leicester Square establishment, has met the great man in Devonshire with emotions similar to those that Reynolds felt in the far away days when, [Pg 44] an unknown pupil of Hudson, he saw the great and distinguished author of “The Rape of the Lock” in the centre of an admiring and respectful crowd.

Who shall do justice to the crowds that thronged the studio? Certainly mere words cannot picture the scenes that the old house in Leicester Square witnessed in those stirring times. Deafness could hardly have been an unmixed evil to a man whose sitters were of the most diverse kind. Leslie and Taylor in their voluminous work, “The Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds,” have written at length upon this aspect of the painter’s daily life, and have described the constant stream of men and women who could not have been placed side by side for five minutes save on the walls of the exhibition. Representatives of the most opposed school of politics, High Church [Pg 45] dignitaries, courtesans, soldiers, flaneurs, society women, sailors, ambassadors, actors, children, members of the Royal Family, men from the street, like White the paviour—one and all claimed the measure of immortality that his brush confers, and if his best work could but have retained its qualities, the latter half of the eighteenth century would be preserved for us in fashion calculated to make future generations envious. Unfortunately, Sir Walter Armstrong, the painter’s most trenchant latter day critic, is justified when he writes: “Speaking roughly, Sir Joshua’s early pictures darken, the works of his middle period fade, those of his late maturity crack. The productions of his first youth and of his old age stand best of all.” When the worst has been said, it is a glorious heritage that the painter left to his country, but who can avoid regrets when thinking what it might have been if Reynolds had mastered the secrets of permanent colour, if [Pg 46] the carmine and lake had endured, and the more brilliant effects had not been so largely experimental—if he had given them a fair trial in studies before he used them for his best work? Perhaps his success left no time for experiments. Sitters were urgent and could not wait while the painter studied the question of the chemistry of pigments.

There is a curiously sane and optimistic note about all the Reynolds portraits. Even where he does not succeed—in painting portrait groups, for example—the fault is merely one of composition, he keeps to his earliest intention of expressing what is best in the sitter, and seeing him “with dilated eye"; he is merely unable to set several figures upon the same canvas. Save for ever increasing deafness and a little trouble with sister Frances, who keeps house for him and is [Pg 47] not cast in the same placid mould, nothing occurs to disturb the even tenor of his happy life. Intellect rules emotions—either he has no feeling for intrigue or he can keep his emotions beyond the reach of prying eyes. Even his relations with Angelica Kaufmann, now in her twenty-eighth year, and an original member of the Royal Academy, baffle the censors who would fain discover that she was the painter’s mistress. “His heart has grown callous by contact with women,” says one of his contemporaries or biographers, and this may well be so. Angelica Kaufmann was one of the women who attract men, and there is no evidence to show that Reynolds was more than a good friend to her. Long years later, when the visits to Leicester Square could have been no more [Pg 48] than a memory, she attracted Goethe, who used to read to her some of his unpublished work. The painter’s self-control has made some of his biographers angry; they write as though fearful lest, on account of his virtue, there shall be no more cakes and ale, and ginger shall no longer be hot in the mouth. If they could but catch him tripping, he might return to the highest place in their affections, and all would be forgiven. There is something so human in this attitude that it becomes almost tolerable, though it is hard to avoid a smile when one finds that the subject of the relations between Sir Joshua and Miss Kaufmann have been discussed quite seriously by foreign writers. If Sir Joshua could have made the lady a better artist, if it can be shown that he saved her from being a worse one than she was, there is something to write about; the subject of [Pg 51] their personal relations cannot possibly concern the world at large, and is not worth a tithe of the ink that has been spilt in attack or defence.

PLATE VI.—PORTRAIT OF TWO GENTLEMEN.
(In the National Gallery)

This picture was painted in 1778 and presented to the National Gallery in 1866 by Mrs. Plenge. The gentleman on the right examining the prints and holding a violin in his right hand is one J. C. W. Bampfylde, the one on the left is the Rev. George Huddersford who was for some years a painter and a pupil of Sir Joshua.



III

We owe an apology to the new President whom we left standing upon the threshold of the Royal Academy, which opened its doors with a first exhibition of one hundred and thirty-six pictures! The memory of this commendable modesty should not be allowed to fade in these days when canvas stretches by the acre over the long-suffering walls of Burlington House, when artists appear not singly but in battalions and the cry is “still they come.” In April 1769 Reynolds received the honour of knighthood and this seems to have put the finishing touches to his social claims. Henceforward he painted fewer portraits; the records of 1771 credit him with a mere [Pg 52] seventy, and though this figure may make modern men gasp, it compares but feebly with the one hundred and eighty-four that stood to the credit of an earlier year. The President increased the number of his clubs, enlarged his dining circle, became more and more dignified, mellow, gracious, and urbane, farther removed than before from the turmoil that was going on in art circles of the less successful men around him. Having all the cream he required, he was not concerned with quarrels about skimmed milk. Some of his biographers think that Romney was beginning to compete with the master, and that this competition accounts for the diminishing number of his sitters, but it is reasonable to suppose that a man who can make his own prices and is beyond the reach of want may regard seventy portraits as a very satisfactory output for [Pg 53] one year, when he has other duties to fulfil and is by temperament a lover of the world’s good things. Fortune could have given him nothing more, unless the hearing that passed in the old days of the pilgrimage to Rome had been restored, and if such a miracle could have been vouchsafed, the painter’s splendid indifference to matters that annoy quick, nervous temperaments might have passed, and the latter days might have been clouded. If wisdom at one entrance was nearly shut out, there was plenty left, as may be gathered from a study of the Discourses. Their vitality is proved by the fact that new editions are still called for, and many members of the more modern schools of painting declare that Reynolds saw some aspects of painting with twentieth-century eyes. [Pg 54]

In 1773 Plympton remembered its famous artist and elected him mayor, an honour that touched him nearly. One cannot help thinking that it was more to him even than the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, conferred in the same year by Oxford University *de honoris causa*, though this too helped him to paint his own portrait in flamboyant style, and the artist loved colour. One portrait of himself was sent to the town of Plympton and hung between two pictures that were “old masters” according to the leading lights of the Corporation. In truth, they were two of Sir Joshua’s own early works, and from this simple story we may learn that artists come and artists go, but the mental calibre of corporations is constant and not subject to change. He sent another picture of himself to the Uffizzi Gallery in Florence, where so many Masters stand self-committed [Pg 55]

to canvas in pictures that do not err upon the side of making the sitters lack distinction.

The next eight years were uneventful, save for the fact that the President was doing some of his best work and enjoying life in the fullest and most complete fashion imaginable. Nearly all who knew him loved him, and to the great majority of men and women he was just and kind. For a man so completely free from emotion and self-revelation, Reynolds claimed a very large circle of intimates, and it was hardly an age of introspection. Men confessed themselves to their Maker but not to their friends; the formalities of life and speech presented an effective barrier to the emotions, even the stage was as artificial and pompous as it could be. One may perhaps acknowledge an uneasy feeling that David Garrick himself would make a very small impression [Pg 56] upon a latter-day audience, if he confronted it with the mid-eighteenth-century style of speech and action.

In 1780 the Academy Exhibition was transferred from Pall Mall to Somerset House, where it was destined to remain until 1838, the year of its removal to the National Gallery, where it stayed thirty-one years on the way to Burlington House. Among the portraits painted by the President in that year was one of General Oglethorpe, who, according to the “Table Talk” of Samuel Rogers (quoted by Sir Walter Armstrong), could tell of the days when he had shot snipe in Conduit Street. In the following year Reynolds painted the wonderful picture of the Ladies Horatia, Laura, and Maria Waldegrave, one of the few groups whose arrangement is beyond cavil. Few will look [Pg 57] in vain to that picture for any of the finest qualities of Sir Joshua’s art. He had very little to learn, though in the summer and autumn of 1781 he visited the Low Countries, staying in Bruges, Brussels, The Hague, Amsterdam, and other cities, and showing himself strangely indifferent to the pictures of Franz Hals, though these might have been presumed to appeal to any portrait painter. His records and impressions of the journey were set down most carefully, and are preserved; they show that success had not impaired discernment, and that the painter was responsive to most of the thoughts that stir educated visitors to the Dutch galleries to-day.

In 1782, the year in which Romney painted his first picture of Mistress Hart, afterwards Lady Emma Hamilton, Reynolds sat to his great rival Gainsborough, now at the height of his fame and [Pg 58] in the last years of his life; the two men disliked each other, and the picture was never completed. Some say that Reynolds made a hasty remark about his fixed determination not to paint Gainsborough’s portrait in return, and some mischief-maker carried the words to Gainsborough. Others think that the touch of palsy or slight attack of paralysis that came to Sir Joshua about the time of the sitting, brought it to a close. There must be more than this underlying the true story of the affair, for though a visit to Brighton and to Bath restored the President’s health, the sittings were not resumed, even when Reynolds wrote to say he was ready to sit again. In 1783 Sir Joshua sent ten portraits to the Academy, while Gainsborough, exhibiting there for the last time, sent twenty-five pictures, including the famous panels of George III., and [Pg 61] his children, now in Windsor. But Reynolds added to his fame in this year, for he painted the portrait of Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse. Then he paid another visit to the Low Countries, to find with regret that Rubens’ appeal was failing.

PLATE VII.—PORTRAIT OF LADY AND CHILD.
(In the National Gallery)

This portrait was purchased in 1871 with the Peel collection and is said to represent the Hon. Mrs. Musters and her son. The composition does not show Sir Joshua at his best, and the painting is perhaps rather thin. The identity is not very clearly established, although the names of Mr. and Mrs. Musters are to be found in Sir Joshua’s account books.

In the following year, 1784, Sir Joshua sent sixteen pictures to the Academy, including the famous Mrs. Siddons, Charles James Fox, and Mrs. Abingdon as Roxalana. Gainsborough had quarrelled with the R.A. and exhibited no more, though he lived until 1788. With December, Dr. Johnson's strenuous and useful life came to an end; he passed away exhorting his old friend never to paint on Sunday, and to read the Bible. Reynolds has left a very interesting study of the Doctor's character. In the following year, the President went for the third time to the Low [Pg 62] Countries, and bought a number of pictures; he also received the honour of a commission from Catherine, Empress of Russia, and painted the beautiful picture of the Duchess of Devonshire and her baby that hangs at Chatsworth to-day. Walpole said, "it is little like, and not good," but posterity has declined to accept the verdict. Sir Walter Armstrong considers that it ranks with the "Lady Crosbie" and "Nelly O'Brien" as the "most entirely successful creations" of the artist. In '87 the President sent thirteen pictures to the Academy, including the "Angel's Heads" now in the National Gallery. They are studies of Frances Isabella Gordon, daughter of Lord William Gordon, and the picture was given to the Gallery in 1841. A year later, London saw the picture that the Empress Catherine had commissioned, the subject is "The Infant Hercules" and the canvas hangs [Pg 63] in the Hermitage Gallery at St. Petersburg. It is one of the artist's failures, and he received fifteen hundred guineas for it. This is the date of the famous Marlborough family group that is to be seen at Blenheim.

A year later, when the President sent some dozen pictures to the R.A., his activity came to a sudden end. Some forty years and more had passed since he painted the first of his works that concerns us, and he had not known an idle season. His record would have brought honour to any three men; he had lived as a philosopher should, grateful for the gifts of the gods, and not abusing any. Suddenly, in mid-July of 1789, about the time of the fall of the Bastille, one eye failed him as he worked at his easel; he laid his brush aside. "All things have an end—I have come [Pg 64] to mine," he remarked, with the quiet courage that never deserted him, and he spent what remained to him of life making gradual preparation for the last day, sustained by memories of the past through hours that were not always free from pain and distress. Save for a quarrel with the Academy, arising out of the contest for membership between Bonomi and Fuseli, there was nothing to disturb the closing years of the old painter's public life, and even in this quarrel, he was the victor. The General Assembly apologised, and Reynolds withdrew his resignation, though Chambers, now Sir William, was obliged to act for him at Somerset House. In December of 1790 Reynolds delivered his final address to the students, the name of Michelangelo being last upon his lips. Little more than a year before he died, the President sat to the Swedish artist von Breda, [Pg 65] for a picture now in the Stockholm Academy. West did his presidential work for him in the last months of his life.

Many friends testify to the tranquillity of these last days, though failing sight and the deprivation of the liberal diet to which he was accustomed had lowered the spirits that were once bright as well as serene. Perhaps modern medical science would have availed to lengthen his life,

and make the last few years more worth living; but in the eighteenth century one needed a very sturdy constitution to endure the combined attack of a disease and a doctor. Sir Joshua was in his sixty-ninth year—he had lived in the fullest sense all the time—and when one evening in February 1792 Death came to the House in Leicester Square, his visit was quite expected, and was met with a tranquil mind. The body lay in state awhile in the Royal Academy, and was then taken to [Pg 66] St. Paul's Cathedral, and laid by the side of Sir Christopher Wren. To-day we look at the artist's work with a critical eye—he can no longer thrive by comparison with contemporaries, but must compete with all dead masters of portraiture; and it will be admitted on every side that he holds his own, that before every throne of judgment his best works will plead for him and vindicate the admiration of his countrymen.

It is not the least of his claims to high consideration that his art moved steadily forward, that the last work was the best.

IV

Naturally it is impossible within the limits of a small and unpretentious monograph to give an adequate idea of the range and variety of the labours that occupied Sir Joshua Reynolds for half a [Pg 67] century or more, and no attempt will be made in this place to do more than indicate the forces that seem to have directed his brush, the masters whose labour inspired it. It has been pointed out in these pages that Reynolds was a great assimilator. He took from everybody, but he was always judicious, because, quite apart from his executive faculties, he had a critical gift of the first order. One has but to turn to his diaries to realise that his instinct was singularly sound. He could stand before an admitted masterpiece and enjoy all its beauties, without losing sight of any defect however small, and because his mind was beautifully balanced, the small points of objection did not spoil his appreciation of the whole work. They simply taught him what he should avoid. In the very early days of his career, before he had left Devonshire, he made the [Pg 68] acquaintance of one Gandy, an artist of some small repute, whose father, also a painter, had studied Van Dyck, and had taught his son to appreciate the fine qualities of Rembrandt. The younger Gandy afforded Reynolds his first glimpse of the world lying beyond the reach of the rank and file of British students, gave him his earliest appreciation of Rembrandt, and taught him to look for that master's work when he visited Rome. As soon as Reynolds reached Italy, he examined the great masters with a critical eye, and set himself to copy Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt, Guido, Raphael, and many others. He soon saw that each of these masters had achieved supreme success in some department of their life's work, and he had the idea of uniting all the excellences that he saw around him, and leaving the defects alone. He sought for the [Pg 71] colour of Rubens and Titian the drawing of Raphael, the splendour of design of Michelangelo, and the chiaroscuro of Rembrandt. Naturally this must sound ambitious enough; but we should remember that Reynolds was far from standing alone in his ambitions. Mengs, who did so much to proclaim the merits of Velazquez and achieved a great but temporary success as a painter in Madrid before Goya's wonderful gifts threw him into well-merited obscurity, had the same ideals, but whereas the best of his accomplishments were but dull and short-lived, Reynolds was able to force some way through all the gifts with which he sought to surround himself and to reach a style of his own. The journey lasted very many years, and the road is strewn with failures, chiefly due to an inability to grasp the secret of a durable glaze and, like many men who came before [Pg 72] and after him, the painter had to part company with some at least of his ambitions. Had his own capacity for self-criticism been less, had he allowed his feeling for fine colour to prevail over the sound judgment that bade him look for other and more enduring excellencies, he would not occupy the place he holds to-day, while on the other hand, if a Titian or a Rubens had been able to give him the secret of manipulating pigments, he would have stood side by side with the greatest masters of all time.

PLATE VIII.—DUCHESS OF DEVONSHIRE AND CHILD.
(Chatsworth House, Derbyshire)

This picture, to which reference has been made in the text, hangs at Chatsworth, and has been reproduced by permission of His Grace the Duke of Devonshire. Although Walpole sneered at it when he saw it for the first time, the composition stands to-day among the most admired of the master's works.

Artists tell us that painting should be no more than a harmony of colour and line, that it should not attempt to cross the borderline that separates painting from literature. They are justified in their attitude, but at the same time we cannot discuss painters in terms of paint, or tell of our [Pg 73] admiration of their work by expressing that admiration on canvas. Those of us who are not painters, can only approach art through literature, and seek to find in a man the explanation of his works, and in the works, the revelation of the man.

Joshua Reynolds possessed a master mind. He had wonderful capacity for synthesis and analysis, and something akin to the skilled physician's gift of diagnosis. As soon as he had built up the foundations of his own art and found a new method of presentation, he turned all his mental capacity to the study of the people who sat for him. As soon as he had achieved technique, the other gifts that no technique could develop came into play, and then his work revealed its extraordinary qualities, side by side with the few limitations that beset his mode of life. In [Pg 74] society, Reynolds would seem to have been courtly and reserved. He did not expand to women as he did to men, for he looked upon women and children as subjects for classical treatment. He made them extremely beautiful; he gave them graces and gifts that flatter the imagination of those who gaze upon his pictures to-day: but there are not too many portraits of women among those painted by Reynolds in which there is a large quality of humanity. He suppresses a great part of the human interest that may have been in them, and replaces it with beauty of colour and line. Now and again, of course, he is very fortunate. When he painted the great courtesans of his day, Polly Fisher, Nelly O'Brien, and others of that frail sisterhood, the qualities he omitted left the sitters quite human. There was no suggestion of the classic about them. A Nelly O'Brien at [Pg 75] her best is just a woman, while some of the high-born ladies at their best became a little too cold, a little too stately, a little too well-posed for the wicked world they lived in. Even when we consider the famous "Jumping Baby" that hangs at Chatsworth, it is impossible to avoid the thought that if the little one had really been so happy and so playful, the mother's fine feathers must have been considerably ruffled, and she must have made haste to give the child back to the nurse.

His children, too, are seldom of this world. Reynolds was a hardened old bachelor with an eye for beauty. He had not studied Bellini and Correggio for nothing, and many of his little ones are far more like Italian angels in modern dress than English boys and girls. Of course there are notable exceptions. "Master Crewe as Henry the Eighth" is delightfully English. "The Strawberry [Pg 76] Girl" is another picture painted in hours of delightful inspiration, but "The Age of Innocence," for all its supreme beauty, has a certain quality of conception that is artificial. To look at Reynolds' women and children is to feel assured that the painter lived a celibate life, and that the stories about intrigues with Angelica Kaufmann and others are misleading and unfounded. We have but to turn to the work of his great contemporaries, Gainsborough and Romney, to see the difference between women in whose veins the blood runs red, and women who feed on nectar and ambrosia and were never seen at a disadvantage in their lives. It seems to the writer that women and children were to Reynolds fit and proper subjects for the exercise of his gifts, but at the same time, folk in whom he had no abiding interest. Men interested him, and when he turned the best [Pg 77] of his attention to them, he gave the world work that will endure just as long as the pigments he put down upon the canvas.

The picture of Admiral Keppel, hanging to-day in the National Portrait Gallery, was the first ripe fruit of the painter's Italian journey, and had produced in the world of art something akin to a sensation. Thereafter Reynolds stood alone as the representative eighteenth-century painter of

great men. His rivals could not approach him there. He seemed to see right into the heart and brain of the men who sat for him, to realise clearly and judiciously the part they were playing in life, and he strove to set it down in such a fashion that the character and capacities of the sitter should impress themselves at once upon those who saw the portrait. Other painters might give [Pg 78] one aspect of a man, but Reynolds' vision was far larger—it was completely comprehensive; when he had dealt with a subject, it was well-nigh impossible to approach it again, save in the way of imitation. There was a finality about the treatment that must have baffled and exasperated his rivals. The portraits of Charles James Fox, David Garrick, Laurence Sterne, to name a few, are masterly in their simplicity, in the directness of their appeal, and in the splendid expression of character through features. To satisfy the claims of Reynolds' brush it was absolutely necessary that his sitters should have character, even if it was a bad one. That is why the portraits of courtesans arouse attention in fashion that women whose characters were undeveloped either for good or for evil will never succeed in doing. [Pg 79]

It is not always easy to realise what Reynolds' work was like at its best, because so many of his canvases have either lost their original tints or have suffered the final indignity of restoration. In his search after the secret of the Venetians he made many elaborate experiments at the expense of his sitters, and pictures that were remarkable in their year for colour that aroused the enthusiasm of connoisseurs grew old even sooner than the sitters. His solid foundations decomposed, the surface colour of many a celebrity is now as pale as the sitter's own ghost may be supposed to be. Here there is perhaps some excuse for looking at Reynolds' work from the literary standpoint, because though the harmony of line may remain, the harmony of colour has gone beyond recall, and there are some at least of Reynolds' pictures in which the colour, had it [Pg 80] been preserved, would have been the most effective quality. At times the great artist's draughtsmanship was far removed from excellence. And yet when criticism has said its last word, the name and fame of Sir Joshua Reynolds will remain the pride of British art and the admiration of the civilised world.

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