

Sir Joshua Reynolds
Discourse I

*Delivered at the Opening of the Royal Academy, January 2nd, 1769,
by the President*

Gentlemen,--An academy in which the polite arts may be regularly cultivated is at last opened among us by royal munificence. This must appear an event in the highest degree interesting, not only to the artists, but to the whole nation.

It is indeed difficult to give any other reason why an Empire like that of Britain should so long have wanted an ornament so suitable to its greatness than that slow progression of things which naturally makes elegance and refinement the last effect of opulence and power.

An institution like this has often been recommended upon considerations merely mercantile. But an academy founded upon such principles can never effect even its own narrow purposes. If it has an origin no higher, no taste can ever be formed in it which can be useful even in manufactures; but if the higher arts of design flourish, these inferior ends will be answered of course.

We are happy in having a prince who has conceived the design of such an institution, according to its true dignity, and promotes the arts, as the head of a great, a learned, a polite, and a commercial nation; and I can now congratulate you, gentlemen, on the accomplishment of your long and ardent wishes.

The numberless and ineffectual consultations that I have had with many in this assembly, to form plans and concert schemes for an academy, afford a sufficient proof of the impossibility of succeeding but by the influence of Majesty. But there have,

perhaps, been times when even the influence of Majesty would have been ineffectual, and it is pleasing to reflect that we are thus embodied, when every circumstance seems to concur from which honour and prosperity can probably arise.

There are at this time a greater number of excellent artists than were ever known before at one period in this nation; there is a general desire among our nobility to be distinguished as lovers and judges of the arts; there is a greater superfluity of wealth among the people to reward the professors; and, above all, we are patronised by a monarch, who, knowing the value of science and of elegance, thinks every art worthy of his notice that tends to soften and humanise the mind.

After so much has been done by his Majesty, it will be wholly our fault if our progress is not in some degree correspondent to the wisdom and, generosity of the institution; let us show our gratitude in our diligence, that, though our merit may not answer his expectations, yet, at least, our industry may deserve his protection.

But whatever may be our proportion of success, of this we may be sure, that the present institution will at least contribute to advance our knowledge of the arts, and bring us nearer to that ideal excellence which it is the lot of genius always to contemplate and never to attain.

The principal advantage of an academy is, that, besides furnishing able men to direct the student, it will be a repository for the great examples of the art. These are the materials on which genius is to work, and without which the strongest intellect may be fruitlessly or deviously employed. By studying these authentic models, that idea of excellence which is the result of the accumulated experience of past ages may be at once acquired, and

the tardy and obstructed progress of our predecessors may teach us a shorter and easier way. The student receives at one glance the principles which many artists have spent their whole lives in ascertaining; and, satisfied with their effect, is spared the painful investigation by which they come to be known and fixed. How many men of great natural abilities have been lost to this nation for want of these advantages? They never had an opportunity of seeing those masterly efforts of genius which at once kindle the whole soul, and force it into sudden and irresistible approbation.

Raffaello, it is true, had not the advantage of studying in an academy; but all Rome, and the works of Michael Angelo in particular, were to him an academy. On the site of the Capella Sistina he immediately from a dry, Gothic, and even insipid manner, which attends to the minute accidental discriminations of particular and individual objects, assumed that grand style of painting, which improves partial representation by the general and invariable ideas of nature.

Every seminary of learning may be said to be surrounded with an atmosphere of floating knowledge, where every mind may imbibe somewhat congenial to its own original conceptions. Knowledge, thus obtained, has always something more popular and useful than that which is forced upon the mind by private precepts or solitary meditation. Besides, it is generally found that a youth more easily receives instruction from the companions of his studies, whose minds are nearly on a level with his own, than from those who are much his superiors; and it is from his equals only that he catches the fire of emulation.

One advantage, I will venture to affirm, we shall have in our academy, which no other nation can boast. We shall have nothing to unlearn. To this praise the present race of artists have a just claim. As far as they have yet proceeded they are right. With us

the exertions of genius will henceforward be directed to their proper objects. It will not be as it has been in other schools, where he that travelled fastest only wandered farthest from the right way.

Impressed as I am, therefore, with such a favourable opinion of my associates in this undertaking, it would ill become me to dictate to any of them. But as these institutions have so often failed in other nations, and as it is natural to think with regret how much might have been done, and how little has been done, I must take leave to offer a few hints, by which those errors may be rectified, and those defects supplied. These the professors and visitors may reject or adopt as they shall think proper.

I would chiefly recommend that an implicit obedience to the rules of art, as established by the great masters, should be exacted from the YOUNG students. That those models, which have passed through the approbation of ages, should be considered by them as perfect and infallible guides as subjects for their imitation, not their criticism.

I am confident that this is the only efficacious method of making a progress in the arts; and that he who sets out with doubting will find life finished before he becomes master of the rudiments. For it may be laid down as a maxim, that he who begins by presuming on his own sense has ended his studies as soon as he has commenced them. Every opportunity, therefore, should be taken to discountenance that false and vulgar opinion that rules are the fetters of genius. They are fetters only to men of no genius; as that armour, which upon the strong becomes an ornament and a defence, upon the weak and misshapen turns into a load, and cripples the body which it was made to protect.

How much liberty may be taken to break through those rules, and, as

the poet expresses it,

“ To snatch a grace beyond the reach of art,”

may be an after consideration, when the pupils become masters themselves. It is then, when their genius has received its utmost improvement, that rules may possibly be dispensed with. But let us not destroy the scaffold until we have raised the building.

The directors ought more particularly to watch over the genius of those students who, being more advanced, are arrived at that critical period of study, on the nice management of which their future turn of taste depends. At that age it is natural for them to be more captivated with what is brilliant than with what is solid, and to prefer splendid negligence to painful and humiliating exactness.

A facility in composing, a lively, and what is called a masterly handling the chalk or pencil, are, it must be confessed, captivating qualities to young minds, and become of course the objects of their ambition. They endeavour to imitate those dazzling excellences, which they will find no great labour in attaining. After much time spent in these frivolous pursuits, the difficulty will be to retreat; but it will be then too late; and there is scarce an instance of return to scrupulous labour after the mind has been debauched and deceived by this fallacious mastery.

By this useless industry they are excluded from all power of advancing in real excellence. Whilst boys, they are arrived at their utmost perfection; they have taken the shadow for the substance; and make that mechanical facility the chief excellence

of the art, which is only an ornament, and of the merit of which few but painters themselves are judges.

This seems to me to be one of the most dangerous sources of corruption; and I speak of it from experience, not as an error which may possibly happen, but which has actually infected all foreign academies. The directors were probably pleased with this premature dexterity in their pupils, and praised their despatch at the expense of their correctness.

But young men have not only this frivolous ambition of being thought masterly inciting them on one hand, but also their natural sloth tempting them on the other. They are terrified at the prospect before them, of the toil required to attain exactness. The impetuosity of youth is distrusted at the slow approaches of a regular siege, and desires, from mere impatience of labour, to take the citadel by storm. They wish to find some shorter path to excellence, and hope to obtain the reward of eminence by other means than those which the indispensable rules of art have prescribed. They must, therefore, be told again and again that labour is the only price of solid fame, and that whatever their force of genius may be, there is no easy method of becoming a good painter.

When we read the lives of the most eminent painters, every page informs us that no part of their time was spent in dissipation. Even an increase of fame served only to augment their industry. To be convinced with what persevering assiduity they pursued their studies, we need only reflect on their method of proceeding in their most celebrated works. When they conceived a subject, they first made a variety of sketches; then a finished drawing of the whole; after that a more correct drawing of every separate part, heads, hands, feet, and pieces of drapery; they then painted the picture, and after all re-touched it from the life. The pictures,

thus wrought with such pain, now appear like the effect of enchantment, and as if some mighty genius had struck them off at a blow.

But, whilst diligence is thus recommended to the students, the visitors will take care that their diligence be effectual; that it be well directed and employed on the proper object. A student is not always advancing because he is employed; he must apply his strength to that part of the art where the real difficulties lie; to that part which distinguishes it as a liberal art, and not by mistaken industry lose his time in that which is merely ornamental. The students, instead of vying with each other which shall have the readiest hand, should be taught to contend who shall have the purest and most correct outline, instead of striving which shall produce the brightest tint, or, curiously trifling endeavour to give the gloss of stuffs so as to appear real, let their ambition be directed to contend which shall dispose his drapery in the most graceful folds, which shall give the most grace and dignity to the human figure.

I must beg leave to submit one thing more to the consideration of the visitors, which appears to me a matter of very great consequence, and the omission of which I think a principal defect in the method of education pursued in all the academies I have ever visited. The error I mean is, that the students never draw exactly from the living models which they have before them. It is not indeed their intention, nor are they directed to do it. Their drawings resemble the model only in the attitude. They change the form according to their vague and uncertain ideas of beauty, and make a drawing rather of what they think the figure ought to be than of what it appears. I have thought this the obstacle that has stopped the progress of many young men of real genius; and I very much doubt whether a habit of drawing correctly what we see will not give a proportionable power of drawing correctly what we

imagine. He who endeavours to copy nicely the figure before him not only acquires a habit of exactness and precision, but is continually advancing in his knowledge of the human figure; and though he seems to superficial observers to make a slower progress, he will be found at last capable of adding (without running into capricious wildness) that grace and beauty which is necessary to be given to his more finished works, and which cannot be got by the moderns, as it was not acquired by the ancients, but by an attentive and well-compared study of the human form.

What I think ought to enforce this method is, that it has been the practice (as may be seen by their drawings) of the great masters in the art. I will mention a drawing of Raffaello, "The Dispute of the Sacrament," the print of which, by Count Cailus, is in every hand. It appears that he made his sketch from one model; and the habit he had of drawing exactly from the form before him appears by his making all the figures with the same cap, such as his model then happened to wear; so servile a copyist was this great man, even at a time when he was allowed to be at his highest pitch of excellence.

I have seen also academy figures by Annibale Caracci, though he was often sufficiently licentious in his finished works, drawn with all the peculiarities of an individual model.

This scrupulous exactness is so contrary to the practice of the academies, that it is not without great deference that I beg leave to recommend it to the consideration of the visitors, and submit it to them, whether the neglect of this method is not one of the reasons why students so often disappoint expectation, and being more than boys at sixteen, become less than men at thirty.

In short, the method I recommend can only be detrimental when there are but few living forms to copy; for then students, by always

drawing from one alone, will by habit be taught to overlook defects, and mistake deformity for beauty. But of this there is no danger, since the council has determined to supply the academy with a variety of subjects; and indeed those laws which they have drawn up, and which the secretary will presently read for your confirmation, have in some measure precluded me from saying more upon this occasion. Instead, therefore, of offering my advice, permit me to indulge my wishes, and express my hope, that this institution may answer the expectations of its royal founder; that the present age may vie in arts with that of Leo X. and that “the dignity of the dying art” (to make use of an expression of Pliny) may be revived under the reign of George III.