

Sir Joshua Reynolds
Fifth Discourse

*Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy on the
Distribution of the Prizes, December 10, 1772, by the
President.*

Gentlemen,--I purpose to carry on in this discourse the subject which I began in my last. It was my wish upon that occasion to incite you to pursue the higher excellences of the art. But I fear that in this particular I have been misunderstood. Some are ready to imagine, when any of their favourite acquirements in the art are properly classed, that they are utterly disgraced. This is a very great mistake: nothing has its proper lustre but in its proper place. That which is most worthy of esteem in its allotted sphere becomes an object, not of respect, but of derision, when it is forced into a higher, to which it is not suited; and there it becomes doubly a source of disorder, by occupying a situation which is not natural to it, and by putting down from the first place what is in reality of too much magnitude to become with grace and proportion that subordinate station, to which something of less value would be much better suited.

My advice in a word is this: keep your principal attention fixed upon the higher excellences. If you compass them and compass nothing more, you are still in the first class. We may regret the innumerable beauties which you may want: you may be very imperfect: but still, you are an imperfect person of the highest

order.

If, when you have got thus far, you can add any, or all, of the subordinate qualifications, it is my wish and advice that you should not neglect them.

But this is as much a matter of circumspection and caution at least as of eagerness and pursuit.

The mind is apt to be distracted by a multiplicity of pursuits; and that scale of perfection, which I wish always to be preserved, is in the greatest danger of being totally disordered, and even inverted.

Some excellences bear to be united, and are improved by union, others are of a discordant nature; and the attempt to join them only produces a harsher jarring of incongruent principles.

The attempt to unite contrary excellences (of form, for instance) in a single figure, can never escape degenerating into the monstrous, but by sinking into the insipid, taking away its marked character, and weakening its expression.

This remark is true to a certain degree with regard to the passions. If you mean to preserve the most perfect beauty in its most perfect state, you cannot express the passions, which produce (all of them) distortion and deformity, more or less, in the most beautiful faces.

Guido, from want of choice in adapting his subject to his ideas and his powers, or in attempting to preserve beauty where it

could not be preserved has in this respect succeeded very ill. His figures are often engaged in subjects that required great expression: yet his “Judith and Holofernes,” the “Daughter of Herodias with the Baptist’s Head,” the “Andromeda,” and even the “Mothers of the Innocents,” have little more expression than his “Venus attired by the Graces.”

Obvious as these remarks appear, there are many writers on our art, who, not being of the profession, and consequently not knowing what can or what cannot be done, have been very liberal of absurd praises in their descriptions of favourite works. They always find in them what they are resolved to find. They praise excellences that can hardly exist together, and above all things are fond of describing with great exactness the expression of a mixed passion, which more particularly appears to me out of the reach of our art.

Such are many disquisitions which I have read on some of the cartoons and other pictures of Raffaello, where the critics have described their own imagination; or indeed where the excellent master himself may have attempted this expression of passions above the powers of the art; and has, therefore, by an indistinct and imperfect marking, left room for every imagination, with equal probability to find a passion of his own. What has been, and what can be done in the art, is sufficiently difficult; we need not be mortified or discouraged for not being able to execute the conceptions of a romantic imagination. Art has its boundaries, though imagination has none. We can easily, like the ancients, suppose a Jupiter to be possessed of all those

powers and perfections which the subordinate Deities were endowed with separately. Yet, when they employed their art to represent him, they confined his character to majesty alone. Pliny, therefore, though we are under great obligations to him for the information he has given us in relation to the works of the ancient artists, is very frequently wrong when he speaks of them, which he does very often in the style of many of our modern connoisseurs. He observes that in a statue of Paris, by Fuphranor, you might discover at the same time three different characters; the dignity of a judge of the goddesses, the lover of Helen, and the conqueror of Achilles. A statue in which you endeavour to unite stately dignity, youthful elegance, and stern valour, must surely possess none of these to any eminent degree.

From hence it appears that there is much difficulty as well as danger in an endeavour to concentrate upon a single subject those various powers which, rising from different points, naturally move in different directions.

The summit of excellence seems to be an assemblage of contrary qualities, but mixed, in such proportions, that no one part is found to counteract the other. How hard this is to be attained in every art, those only know who have made the greatest progress in their respective professions.

To conclude what I have to say on this part of the subject, which I think of great importance, I wish you to understand that I do not discourage the younger students from the noble attempt of uniting all the excellences of art, but to make them aware

that, besides the difficulties which attend every arduous attempt, there is a peculiar difficulty in the choice of the excellences which ought to be united; I wish you to attend to this, that you may try yourselves, whenever you are capable of that trial, what you can, and what you cannot do: and that, instead of dissipating your natural faculties over the immense field of possible excellence, you may choose some particular walk in which you may exercise all your powers, in order each of you to be the first in his way. If any man shall be master of such a transcendent, commanding, and ductile genius, as to enable him to rise to the highest, and to stoop to the lowest flights of art, and to sweep over all of them unobstructed and secure, he is fitter to give example than to receive instruction.

Having said thus much on the union of excellences, I will next say something of the subordination in which various excellences ought to be kept.

I am of opinion that the ornamental style, which in my discourse of last year I cautioned you against considering as principal, may not be wholly unworthy the attention of those who aim even at the grand style; when it is properly placed and properly reduced.

But this study will be used with far better effect, if its principles are employed in softening the harshness and mitigating the rigour of the great style, than if in attempt to stand forward with any pretensions of its own to positive and original excellence.

It was thus Lodovico Caracci, whose example I formerly recommended to you, employed it. He was acquainted with the works both of Correggio and the Venetian painters, and knew the principles by which they produced those pleasing effects which at the first glance prepossess us so much in their favour; but he took only as much from each as would embellish, but not overpower, that manly strength and energy of style, which is his peculiar character.

Since I have already expatiated so largely in my former discourse, and in my present, upon the styles and characters of painting, it will not be at all unsuitable to my subject if I mention to you some particulars relative to the leading principles, and capital works of those who excelled in the great style, that I may bring you from abstraction nearer to practice, and by exemplifying the propositions which I have laid down, enable you to understand more clearly what I would enforce.

The principal works of modern art are in fresco, a mode of painting which excludes attention to minute elegancies: yet these works in fresco are the productions on which the fame of the greatest masters depend: such are the pictures of Michael Angelo and Raffaele in the Vatican, to which we may add the cartoons, which, though not strictly to be called fresco, yet may be put under that denomination; and such are the works of Giulio Romano at Mantua. If these performances were destroyed, with them would be lost the best part of the reputation of those illustrious painters, for these are justly considered as the greatest efforts of our art which the world

can boast. To these, therefore, we should principally direct our attention for higher excellences. As for the lower arts, as they have been once discovered, they may be easily attained by those possessed of the former.

Raffaelle, who stands in general foremost of the first painters, owes his reputation, as I have observed, to his excellence in the higher parts of the art. Therefore, his works in fresco ought to be the first object of our study and attention. His easel-works stand in a lower degree of estimation; for though he continually, to the day of his death, embellished his works more and more with the addition of these lower ornaments, which entirely make the merit of some, yet he never arrived at such perfection as to make him an object of imitation. He never was able to conquer perfectly that dryness, or even littleness of manner, which he inherited from his master. He never acquired that nicety of taste in colours, that breadth of light and shadow, that art and management of uniting light, to light, and shadow to shadow, so as to make the object rise out of the ground with that plenitude of effect so much admired in the works of Correggio. When he painted in oil, his hand seemed to be so cramped and confined that he not only lost that facility and spirit, but I think even that correctness of form, which is so perfect and admirable in his fresco works. I do not recollect any pictures of his of this kind, except perhaps the “Transfiguration,” in which there are not some parts that appear to be even feebly drawn. That this is not a necessary attendant on oil-painting, we have abundant instances in more modern painters. Lodovico Caracci, for instance, preserved in

his works in oil the same spirit, vigour, and correctness, which he had in fresco. I have no desire to degrade Raffaele from the high rank which he deservedly holds: but by comparing him with himself, he does not appear to me to be the same man in oil as in fresco.

From those who have ambition to tread in this great walk of the art, Michael Angelo claims the next attention. He did not possess so many excellences as Raffaele, but those he had were of the highest kind. He considered the art as consisting of little more than what may be attained by sculpture, correctness of form, and energy of character. We ought not to expect more than an artist intends in his work. He never attempted those lesser elegancies and graces in the art. Vasari says, he never painted but one picture in oil, and resolved never to paint another, saying it was an employment only fit for women and children.

If any man had a right to look down upon the lower accomplishments as beneath his attention, it was certainly Michael Angelo: nor can it be thought strange that such a mind should have slighted or have been withheld from paying due attention to all those graces and embellishments of art which have diffused such lustre over the works of other painters.

It must be acknowledged likewise, that together with these, which we wish he had more attended to, he has rejected all the false though specious ornaments which disgrace the works even of the most esteemed artists; and I will venture to say, that when those higher excellences are more known and

cultivated by the artists and the patrons of arts, his fame and credit will increase with our increasing knowledge. His name will then be held in the same veneration as it was in the enlightened age of Leo the Tenth: and it is remarkable that the reputation of this truly great man has been continually declining as the art itself has declined. For I must remark to you, that it has long been much on the decline, and that our only hope of its revival will consist in your being thoroughly sensible of its depravation and decay. It is to Michael Angelo that we owe even the existence of Raffaelle; it is to him Raffaelle owes the grandeur of his style. He was taught by him to elevate his thoughts, and to conceive his subjects with dignity. His genius, however, formed to blaze and to shine, might, like fire in combustible matter, for ever have lain dormant if it had not caught a spark by its contact with Michael Angelo: and though it never burst out with that extraordinary heat and vehemence, yet it must be acknowledged to be a more pure, regular, and chaste flame. Though our judgment will upon the whole decide in favour of Raffaelle: yet he never takes that firm hold and entire possession of the mind in such a manner as to desire nothing else, and feel nothing wanting. The effect of the capital works of Michael Angelo perfectly correspond to what Bourchardon said he felt from reading Homer. His whole frame appeared to himself to be enlarged, and all nature which surrounded him diminished to atoms.

If we put those great artists in a light of comparison with each other, Raffaelle had more taste and fancy, Michael Angelo more genius and imagination. The one excelled in beauty, the

other in energy. Michael Angelo has more of the poetical inspiration; his ideas are vast and sublime; his people are a superior order of beings; there is nothing about them, nothing in the air of their actions or their attitudes, or the style and cast of their very limbs or features, that puts one in mind of their belonging, to our own species. Raffaelle's imagination is not so elevated; his figures are not so much disjoined from our own diminutive race of beings, though his ideas are chaste, noble, and of great conformity to their subjects. Michael Angelo's works have a strong, peculiar, and marked character; they seem to proceed from his own mind entirely, and that mind so rich and abundant, that he never needed, or seemed to disdain, to look abroad for foreign help. Raffaelle's materials are generally borrowed, though the noble structure is his own. The excellency of this extraordinary man lay in the propriety, beauty, and majesty of his characters, his judicious contrivance of his composition, correctness of drawing, purity of taste, and the skilful accommodation of other men's conceptions to his own purpose. Nobody excelled him in that judgment, with which he united to his own observations on nature the energy of Michael Angelo, and the beauty and simplicity of the antique. To the question, therefore, which ought to hold the first rank, Raffaelle or Michael Angelo, it must be answered, that if it is to be given to him who possessed a greater combination of the higher qualities of the art than any other man, there is no doubt but Raffaelle is the first. But if, according to Longinus, the sublime, being the highest excellence that human composition can attain to, abundantly compensates the absence of every other beauty, and atones for all other deficiencies, then

Michael Angelo demands the preference.

These two extraordinary men carried some of the higher excellences of the art to a greater degree of perfection than probably they ever arrived at before. They certainly have not been excelled, nor equalled since. Many of their successors were induced to leave this great road as a beaten path, endeavouring to surprise and please by something uncommon or new. When this desire after novelty has proceeded from mere idleness or caprice, it is not worth the trouble of criticism; but when it has been in consequence of a busy mind of a peculiar complexion, it is always striking and interesting, never insipid.

Such is the great style as it appears in those who possessed it at its height; in this, search after novelty in conception or in treating the subject has no place.

But there is another style, which, though inferior to the former, has still great merit, because it shows that those who cultivated it were men of lively and vigorous imagination. This I call the original or characteristical style; this, being less referred to any true archetype existing either in general or particular nature, must be supported by the painter's consistency in the principles he has assumed, and in the union and harmony of his whole design. The excellency of every style, but I think of the subordinate ones more especially, will very much depend on preserving that union and harmony between all the component parts, that they appear to hang well together, as if the whole proceeded from one mind. It is in the works of art, as in the

characters of men. The faults or defects of some men seem to become them when they appear to be the natural growth, and of a piece with the rest of their character. A faithful picture of a mind, though it be not of the most elevated kind, though it be irregular, wild, and incorrect, yet if it be marked with that spirit and firmness which characterises works of genius, will claim attention, and be more striking than a combination of excellences that do not seem to hang well together, or we may say than a work that possesses even all excellences, but those in a moderate degree.

One of the strongest marked characters of this kind, which must be allowed to be subordinate to the great style, is that of Salvator Rosa. He gives us a peculiar cast of nature, which, though void of all grace, elegance, and simplicity; though it has nothing of that elevation and dignity which belongs to the grand style, yet has that sort of dignity which belongs to savage and uncultivated nature. But what is most to be admired in him is the perfect correspondence which he observed between the subjects which he chose, and his manner of treating them. Everything is of a piece: his rocks, trees, sky, even to his handling have the same rude and wild character which animates his figures.

To him we may contrast the character of Carlo Maratti, who, in my own opinion, had no great vigour of mind or strength of original genius. He rarely seizes the imagination by exhibiting the higher excellences, nor does he captivate us by that originality which attends the painter who thinks for himself. He

knew and practised all the rules of art, and from a composition of Raffaele, Caracci, and Guido, made up a style, of which its only fault was, that it had no manifest defects and no striking beauties, and that the principles of his composition are never blended together, so as to form one uniform body, original in its kind, or excellent in any view.

I will mention two other painters who, though entirely dissimilar, yet by being each consistent with himself, and possessing a manner entirely his own, have both gained reputation, though for very opposite accomplishments.

The painters I mean are Rubens and Poussin. Rubens I mention in this place, as I think him a remarkable instance of the same mind being seen in all the various parts of the art. The whole is so much of a piece that one can scarce be brought to believe but that if any one of them had been more correct and perfect, his works would not be so complete as they now appear. If we should allow a greater purity and correctness of drawing, his want of simplicity in composition, colouring, and drapery would appear more gross.

In his composition his art is too apparent. His figures have expression, and act with energy, but without simplicity or dignity. His colouring, in which he is eminently skilled, is, notwithstanding, too much of what we call tinted. Throughout the whole of his works there is a proportionable want of that nicety of distinction and elegance of mind which is required in the higher walks of painting; and to this want it may be in some degree ascribed that those qualities which make the excellency

of this subordinate style appear in him with their greatest lustre. Indeed, the facility with which he invented, the richness of his composition, the luxuriant harmony and brilliancy of his colouring, so dazzle the eye, that whilst his works continue before us we cannot help thinking that all his deficiencies are fully supplied.

Opposed to this florid, careless, loose, and inaccurate style, that of the simple, careful, pure, and correct style of Poussin seems to be a complete contrast.

Yet however opposite their characters, in one thing they agreed, both of them having a perfect correspondence between all the parts of their respective manners.

One is not sure but every alteration of what is considered as defective in either, would destroy the effect of the whole.

Poussin lived and conversed with the ancient statues so long, that he may be said to be better acquainted with them than with the people who were about him. I have often thought that he carried his veneration for them so far as to wish to give his works the air of ancient paintings. It is certain he copied some of the antique paintings, particularly the "Marriage in the Albrobrandini Palace at Rome," which I believe to be the best relique of those remote ages that has yet been found.

No works of any modern has so much of the air of antique painting as those of Poussin. His best performances have a remarkable dryness of manner, which, though by no means to

be recommended for imitation, yet seems perfectly correspondent to that ancient simplicity which distinguishes his style. Like Polidoro he studied them so much, that he acquired a habit of thinking in their way, and seemed to know perfectly the actions and gestures they would use on every occasion.

Poussin in the latter part of his life changed from his dry manner to one much softer and richer, where there is a greater union between the figures and the ground, such as the "Seven Sacraments" in the Duke of Orleans' collection; but neither these, nor any in this manner, are at all comparable to many in his dry manner which we have in England.

The favourite subjects of Poussin were ancient fables; and no painter was ever better qualified to paint such subjects, not only from his being eminently skilled in the knowledge of ceremonies, customs, and habits of the ancients, but from his being so well acquainted with the different characters which those who invented them gave their allegorical figures. Though Rubens has shown great fancy in his Satyrs, Silenuses, and Fauns, yet they are not that distinct separate class of beings which is carefully exhibited by the ancients and by Poussin. Certainly when such subjects of antiquity are represented, nothing in the picture ought to remind us of modern times. The mind is thrown back into antiquity, and nothing ought to be introduced that may tend to awaken it from the illusion.

Poussin seemed to think that the style and the language in which such stories are told is not the worse for preserving some relish of the old way of painting which seemed to give a

general uniformity to the whole, so that the mind was thrown back into antiquity not only by the subject, but the execution.

If Poussin, in imitation of the ancients, represents Apollo driving his chariot out of the sea by way of representing the sun rising, if he personifies lakes and rivers, it is no ways offensive in him; but seems perfectly of a piece with the general air of the picture. On the contrary, if the figures which people his pictures had a modern air or countenance, if they appeared like our countrymen, if the draperies were like cloth or silk of our manufacture, if the landscape had the appearance of a modern view, how ridiculous would Apollo appear instead of the sun, an old man or a nymph with an urn instead of a river or lake.

I cannot avoid mentioning here a circumstance in portrait painting which may help to confirm what has been said.

When a portrait is painted in the historical style, as it is neither an exact minute representation of an individual nor completely ideal, every circumstance ought to correspond to this mixture. The simplicity of the antique air and attitude, however much to be admired, is ridiculous when joined to a figure in a modern dress. It is not to my purpose to enter into the question at present, whether this mixed style ought to be adopted or not; yet if it is chosen it is necessary it should be complete and all of a piece: the difference of stuffs, for instance, which make the clothing, should be distinguished in the same degree as the head deviates from a general idea.

Without this union, which I have so often recommended, a work

can have no marked and determined character, which is the peculiar and constant evidence of genius. But when this is accomplished to a high degree, it becomes in some sort a rival to that style which we have fixed as the highest.

Thus I have given a sketch of the characters of Rubens and Salvator Rosa, as they appear to me to have the greatest uniformity of mind throughout their whole work. But we may add to these, all these artists who are at the head of the class, and have had a school of imitators from Michael Angelo down to Watteau. Upon the whole it appears that setting aside the ornamental style, there are two different paths, either of which a student may take without degrading the dignity of his art. The first is to combine the higher excellences and embellish them to the greatest advantage. The other is to carry one of these excellences to the highest degree. But those who possess neither must be classed with them, who, as Shakespeare says, are men of no mark or likelihood.

I inculcate as frequently as I can your forming yourselves upon great principles and great models. Your time will be much misspent in every other pursuit. Small excellences should be viewed, not studied; they ought to be viewed, because nothing ought to escape a painter's observation, but for no other reason.

There is another caution which I wish to give you. Be as select in those whom you endeavour to please, as in those whom you endeavour to imitate. Without the love of fame you can never do anything excellent; but by an excessive and undistinguishing thirst after it, you will come to have vulgar views; you will

degrade your style; and your taste will be entirely corrupted. It is certain that the lowest style will be the most popular, as it falls within the compass of ignorance itself; and the vulgar will always be pleased with what is natural in the confined and misunderstood sense of the word.

One would wish that such depravation of taste should be counteracted, with such manly pride as Euripides expressed to the Athenians, who criticised his works, "I do not compose," says he, "my works in order to be corrected by you, but to instruct you." It is true, to have a right to speak thus, a man must be a Euripides. However, thus much may be allowed, that when an artist is sure that he is upon firm ground, supported by the authority and practice of his predecessors of the greatest reputation, he may then assume the boldness and intrepidity of genius; at any rate, he must not be tempted out of the right path by any tide of popularity that always accompanies the lower styles of painting.

I mention this, because our exhibitions, that produce such admirable effects by nourishing emulation, and calling out genius, have also a mischievous tendency by seducing the painter to an ambition of pleasing indiscriminately the mixed multitude of people who resort to them.