CATALOGUE OF THE SIXTEENTH EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS AT THE BOSTON ATHENAEUM MDCCCXLII

I. B. WRIGHT [W. W. STORY]

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Edited and Annotated by Reid Dempsey
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The Athenaeum gallery of paintings[1] has as usual been open during the last season, affording an opportunity to all who are interested in the Fine Arts to gratify their taste or at least their curiosity. We have for a long time wished that this exhibition was free to the public, and its necessary expenditures borne by subscription, or by some fund raised for that purpose. The object of such an institution is evidently to awaken and extend an interest in Art, and not to exhibit pictures as a means of trade and for the sake of compensation. We very well know the liberal feeling which animates the directors of the Athenaeum and governs their exertions. The public certainly owes them its thanks for the beneficent labors, and we have a cheerful satisfaction, in acknowledging, that Art is much indebted to this institution for a kindly nurture, while it was struggling against prejudice and ignorance. Yet it seems to us that the only true ticket of admission should be a love of Art, and we would gladly see no barriers interposed to prevent our common people from cultivating and refining their minds by a contemplation of Art. It is from the middle and lower classes that he greatest artists have sprung. But beside this, in order to modify the spirit of a people, Art must be made as common and open as sunshine.

The exhibition contains as usual all grades of pictures, from those which have been conceived and executed in the spirit of poetic truths down to the feeblest abortions[2] of Art.

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[1] The Boston Athenaeum, one of the oldest independent libraries in the United States, held annual art exhibitions in its gallery spaces in the early to mid-19th century.

[2] In the sense of an ill-formed, ill-conceived, or badly-executed action; a failure or even a monstrosity. Oxford English Dictionary, "abortion." *Oxford English Dictionary*. www.oed.com accessed May 4th, 2015.

Every such exhibition impresses us with the fact, that nature, which is uniform in itself, becomes multiform in Art, and is endowed by the mind of every individual with a different hue and sentiment. No two persons can see alike, because no two persons are alike. Thus we find some pictures which evince that the artist had eyes and exercised them faithfully, and others, the painter of which must either have been blind or willful or most strangely heedless. Very few of us in this world actually see anything. We see generalities, we get a vague vision of what passes before us, but into the heart and reality of the thing our eyes do not pierce. The eye cannot see of itself, but through the mind, and our hearts, feelings and modes of thought are the colored glasses through which all nature represents itself to us.

Most of our pictures are bad, however, not because the painters were heedless, but because there were willful and fearful. That is, they either slavishly adhere to prescribed rules, and, lacking the boldness of self-reliance, become mere imitators—or else beginning with a crude and imperfect notion of the ideal, soon learn to distort nature into what they in their wisdom consider improvements, and aim to produce not what is real but what is false and untrue. Until we again shall sit down before nature as children, willing to learn, as humble and ignorant scholars, and without attempting to wrench her teachings into those creeds which are the result of a futile and absurd attempt to procrusteanize[3] her to our preconceived notions, we shall see no great works of Art.[4] It requires more boldness and daring to follow strictly her leading, and more genius to comprehend her as she plainly is—than to acquaint oneself with all the history, means, and outward appliances of Art. It is a very hard thing to paint well, even with the most sincere determination to adhere to nature—but without such a determination it is impossible. We are now in the della-cruscan period of Art.[5]

The subject is an endless one—and we would that we had time and space to handle it, but there is other work to be done, and we must sheath the broad sword and substitute the rapier. Our purpose is not to discuss the ethics of Art, but to criticize some of its productions. IN so doing, our consideration will be first directed to the older pictures, and then to those of the present day.

Our object in visiting the room was to see the "Boys and Melons" (no. 40) by Murillo.[6] Nor were we disappointed. The color and texture of the flesh is leathery and hard; but the absence of trickery, the sincere reality of the picture, and its plain matter of fact had a great charm. Nor is there wanting poetic feeling an happy insight, for they are but the blossom while the fact is but the stem. Throughout there was a unity in the design, skill in producing the result, and a quiet keeping which harmonized the whole. And when we glanced aside from the homely truth of this picture to the cold lifeless Madonna which stands beside it, and is of the so-called ideal school**,** we could not but wish that Murillo had always confined himself to the real, and allowed the ideal to take care of itself. The luxurious

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[3] To enforce uniformity or conformity without regard to natural variation or individuality; to stretch or contract unnaturally. "Procrusteanize", *Oxford English Dictionary*. www.oed.com accessed May 4th, 2015.

[4] A view deeply characteristic of American romanticism, a philosophical movement with roots in the work of various German philosophers including August Wilhelm and Friedrich von Schlegel, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, amongst others.

[5] A reference to the Della Cruscans, an 18th century group of sentimental poets.

[6] Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Spanish Baroque painter.

epicureanism of the reclining boy, who suspends over his open mouth a bunch of purple grapes, and leers with askant eyes at his companion, is finely contrasted with the serious yet vibrating attention of the other boy, who having just crammed his mouth with a slice of a luscious yellow melon, which lies in his lap, glances in greedy sympathy at the grapes, while almost surfeiting in the delicious flavor of hi own share of the feast. The poetic refraining of the one who dallies with a certain pleasure and postpones its enjoyments, and the eager sensuous delights expressed in the humorous desire of the other, are admirably conceived. This is what our picture-dealers would affect to call "a delicious bit."

No. 65 is a St. John by Leonardo da Vinci**,** and beside it a head of Raphael by his Master Perugino**.**[7] When we glanced down the page and read these names there was a quicker beating of the heart, a thousand remembrances flocked around us and we quitted Murillo without a regret. Were we not repaid? They were sure to be by Leonardo and Perugino because it was so stated in the catalogue, and who ever knew a catalogue to lie. It was printed and it must be true. But the picture of the St. John was so remarkable that it was a long time before we gained a thorough comprehension of it. At first we laughed, but recollecting that all great works must be studied ere they can be understood, and must be understood to be admired, we looked again and soon its reality dawned upon us. Here was the true ideal—nature had never stood in this man's way. It had been our lot to hear that Leonardo da Vince was a great painter—now it was realized to us if never before. Allston[8] has passed for a tolerable painter among us, yet compare for a moment that fleshly motley which is "nature's only wear**,"** that luminous color and broken surface of the skin in the Jew's head with this St. John. What a contrast. One was nothing but a real head—we may see a hundred such in any Jewish population—but the other as a pure ideal, and gave no hint of nature. Yes thought we this is a great work. Then falling into reverie we seemed to see the forms of the old masters, walking again their earthly paths and revisiting the scenes over which they have spread such a glory. We seemed to see them as with startled air they beheld the innumerous pictures which bear their names. Poor fellows after their passage through the waters of Lethe[9] it was foolish to expect them to remember all their works. How should they, when we ourselves can scarcely count them? No cell or corner of the world they find without some genuine specimen from their pencils, and their tour through America is but a series of extatic[10] surprises. Italy may boast of some few hasty sketches, but in the American galleries these noble spirits gaze in rapture upon their greatest works. We thought we saw the mild-eyed and long-bearded Leonardo pause before this very St. John. "It was my favorite," said he, "how many an hour have I lingered over that head, touching and retouching and never finishing, while in the palmiest[11] days of manhood." Who laughed?

All that we can say of No. 28 is that we did not know that Guido Reni[12] painted such kind of pictures and we are sorry for it. If " 'tis true 'tis pity."[13] It must have been quite

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[7] Pietro Perugino, renaissance painter and master to Raphael.

[8] Washington Allston, American poet and landscape painter.

[9] In classical myth, one of the five rivers of the underworld; consumption of its waters led to complete forgetfulness.

[10] Ecstatic

[11] Triumphant, flourishing, successful. "Palmy," *Oxford English Dictionary*. www.oed.com. Accessed May 5th, 2015

[12] Seventeenth-century Italian Baroque painter.

disagreeable to Neptune, and especially to Neptune's horse, to be obliged to compress his limbs into so small a canvas, and not very agreeable to the artist to be reduced solely to vermilion and the reds. However, considering the difficulties, it is surprising how much Guido did.

Benjamin West's[14] reputation we always thought as not warranted by his works, and we never chanced to see a picture more utterly deficient in grace, sentiment, drawing and color than his "Venus detaining Adonis from the chase," (No. 34.) Yes there is one worse, we beg pardon, his "Death on the Pale Horse**."** All his figures are lay figures, with stereotyped faces—all his action forced and unnatural, and all his ideas common-place. We used to wonder at the unnatural taste of Adonis in preferring the chase to the embraces of Venus, but Benjamin West has solved the riddle. If this be Venus, we do not wonder at Adonis—and if this be Adonis, Venus was a greater fool that we took her to be.[15]

No. 39. "Jacob's Dream" by Baroccio,[16] we should take to be a cavalier asleep, in a very uncomfortable position and dressed in very bad taste. The temerity of the persons in the back-ground is trusting to the such a ladder is also remarkable, and saving that the Hebrews were a rash people (witness Jephtha[17]) we should almost doubt whether they really ever were so foolish. The Archangel Michael must have visited France when Mr. J. B. Chatelain**[18]** improved upon Guido in No. 14.

No. 35. "La Volupteuse," by Greuze[19] ought to be burned—it is badly painted and exceedingly disgusting. We are sorry for Mr. Greuze's sake that he ever painted such a picture.

A few of the old pictures are good, and a good painting does not weary them by acquaintance. The two pictures of Judith and Holofernes[20]**—**the "Christ mocked" of Maranari**[21]—**the Winter Scene by Vermeulen[22], and one or two others are agreeable and well painted. The Luxembourg Gallery, copied from Rubens[23] by Girod[24], is exceedingly uninteresting, though it may be very wonderful. The original pictures, which are full of free dashing execution, and touched off with the careless magnificence of the princely Rubens, are chiefly valuable as coming from his pencil, but the copies must necessarily be a toilsomely elaborate imitation, and of course we are wholly destitute of the interest attaching to the originals.

We now come to the modern pictures. We find no fault with any one for painting bad pictures. There are many persons who have not the power to paint well, who must paint

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13 *Hamlet,* 2.2.

14 Anglo-American painter, especially of New England and colonial history.

15 From Ovid's *Metamorphoses.*

16 Frederico Barocci, Italian Renaissance painter and printmaker.

17 Biblical judge of Israel.

18 John Baptist Chatelain, 18th century English engraver and landscape painter.

19 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, 18th century French painter.

20 Biblical episode from the Book of Judith. Judith, a beautiful widow, beheads the Assyrian general Holofernes who had planned to destroy her home, the city of Bethulia.

21 Onorio Marinari, Baroque Italian

22 Andries Vermeulen, 18th century Dutch landscape painter.

23 Peter Paul Rubens, Flemish Baroque painter.

24 Likely Anne-Louis Girodet, French Romantic painter and pupil of Jacques-Louis David.

somehow. We ourselves have painted some very bad pictures, but we never exhibited them. So long as such things are hushed up among one's friends, they are an innocent monomania,[25] with which no one has a right to meddle, inasmuch as they injure no one. But when a picture is exhibited to the public, and makes a claim upon the public attention, betakes itself to a richly ornamented frame, and seems to dare us to find a single fault with it, we think it is fair game. When a man exhibits a picture, he invites all to criticize it, and if it be in good part, has no right to find fault with any one for so doing. There are many persons of most unexceptional character, and of hearty good fellowship, who nevertheless will paint shockingly; and though for the sake of such a person one would be tender, yet for the sake of justice the truth should be spoken. Indiscriminate praise is always an injury, for he who praises what is bad denegrades the standard of excellence, and disallows the claims of merit. For all injurious remarks we shall be sorry, insasmuch as every man who tries his best is deserving of praise, even though the result be absolutely bad. But we will never consent that art shall be a Limbo, in which any ignorant and awkward person may disport himself, and win praise from his ungainly motions.

No. 98. "The Custom House Scene" by S. B. Foster[26]**,** has much merit. The story is well told, the arrangement and disposition of the figures good, and the expressions humorous and characteristic. The picture is painted carefully, and though it savors somewhat of the French school, it is devoid of that disagreeable peculiarity so well known as French nature.

We think Mr. T. T. Spear[27] should better have employed himself in painting from some real head, than in indulging himself in so poor a recollection of the **"**Beatrice**"** of Allston. His memory must be very miserable, and his portraits are by far the best of his pictures.

No. 75. A portrait by J. Eames,[28] is one of the finest pieces of color that we have seen for a long time. It is freely and boldly handled, and full of nature. The picture bears reference to no school, and was not done by trick, but is a successful attempt to transfer to canvass the broken and stippled effects of light, shade, and color, which are visible in every human face. The tints are clear and pure, and the blues, reds, and yellows are felicitously dispersed, and nowhere obtrusive, and the gradations good. If we find any fault, it is that the shadows are too glowing; but we were so charmed by the many graces and beauties of the picture, that we will no pick flaws. We hope to see some more sincere readings out of nature from Mr. Eames.

No. 5. "The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds**"** is the largest canvass in the room.[29]

There were three pictures by Henry Peters Gray,[30] Nos. 8, 11, 25,) which possess much merit. The best of the whole, in point both of color and drawing, is the "Portrait in the Character of Rosalia.**"** The color was harmoniously and agreeably arranged, and though deficient in force and vigor, was sweet and delicate in tone. The figures in all the pictures are

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[25]Obsession.

[26]19th century American painter, largely of landscapes.

[27] Thomas Truman Spear, 19th century portrait, genre, and history painter.

[28] Joseph Eames, internationally recognized 19th century portraitist.

[29] by Thomas Cole; roughly 101.5 x 185.5 inches.

[30] 19th century American portrait and genre painter.

too small and contracted for the heads, but full of quiet and subdued sentiment. A little more strength and decision of touch would be a great improvement.

The principal charm in paintings of dead game and still life, resides in the truth off color, and in delicacy and finish in penciling. Mr. Burnham[31] mistook his talent, when he tried his pencil on the subject, (No. 9.) We commend to him to paint some more pictures in the style of his "Boys Playing Props," exhibited at the Athenaeum some seasons since. The drawing of that group was excellent, and the humor in a true vein.

The "Kentucky Beach Forest" by Miss S. Clarke,[32] is a clear and pleasant sketch, and has the predominant characteristics of many of Allston's landscapes.

No. 80. "**T**he Sisters**"** is the best picture we have seen from the brush of Mr. Healey.[33] There is, in all that we have seen of this artist's productions, a simpering affectation and a got-up expression, which is peculiarly disagreeable. They are what might be called society pictures; portraits, with that fashionable smile which makes every true person ashamed. If Mr. Healey would seek to paint faces as they are, and not as he thinks they ought to be, he would paint better. It may jump with French taste to paint simpering pictures, but the Americans are a very serious people, and this millinery of expression does not suit their faces.

We do not wish to say anything harsh about the pictures of J. Greenough,[34] but we think his friends should not have allowed him to exhibit them, and most particularly "The Ribbon Picture**,"** No. 120. His "Sketch from Nature" (No. 115,) is by far the best of his pictures.

"The Landscape," No. 79, by Mr. Allston, had much of his great merit. Among the many daub**s**, it shone like a bright particular star, although it was by no means one of his most agreeable pictures. The pine tree in it Lives, and one can almost hear the wind whispering through its leaves. Some one has pressed the very life out of this picture in cleaning it, and reduced the surface of it to a porcelain polish, which very much impairs its beauty.

No. 77, "The Great Carbuncle of the White Mountains," is probably a misprint for Blue Mountains; for no one would ever dream of calling them white if this representation be correct.

No. 69, a portrait, by Alexander**,** is the best picture of his we ever saw; but the half-length of a girl with a doll, (No. 66,) is the most shabby piece of careless daubing that ever met our eyes. Indeed, with the exception of a Cupid, by Mr. Hubard**,**[35] which we once saw in this gallery, it is about the worst picture conceivable. Mr. Alexander should be ashamed to fall so grossly below himself.

We have understood that it was the plan of the Directors to make exchanges of the pictures in the gallery for works of the old masters, with Mr. J. W. Brett.[36] If we could get good pictures thereby, the plan would be admirable; but if those sent this season by Mr.

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31 Thomas M. Burnham.

32Sarah Anne Freeman Clarke, landscape painter.

33 George Peter Alexander Healy, illustrious and prolific American portrait painter.

34 John Greenough, American portraitist and landscape painter.

35 William John Hubard, *Infant Cupid.*

36 British landscape painter.

Brett, are a fair sample of his future intentions, we, for one, exclaim against the project. We are the most credulous people in the world with regard to art, and are imposed upon yearly by the names which picture-dealers (who are first-cousins to horse-jockeys,) set against the vilest daubings. Do we not all know that no picture-dealer could, by any possible chance, have a bad picture in his possession? Did we not see, within two months past, the most wretched abortions ever palmed upon the public sold as Leonardo da Vincis, Raffaelles, Correggios, and Salvator Rosas? In fact, every red group is a Rubens, every dark landscape a Salvator Rosa, every Madonna a Guido, and every scene which it is impossible to see, from dirt and blackness, a Rembrandt. The Athenaeum has owned good pictures—where are they?

There are one or two pictures, of which we forbear to speak, for various reasons. We have understood that one of our old favorites, "The Lake of the the Clouds," we think it was called, by Doughty,[37] and which we have missed for some time, was exchanged for the curious picture of the "Angel appearing to the Shepherds." We are very sorry to hear it. First, because Doughty's landscape was a beautiful picture, in his best style; second, because we ought to be proud of him, as an American painter; and lastly, because the exchange picture is the worst specimen of Cole that we know. We do not like to see foreign artists receiving so great a portion of the public patronage, while art is begging at home. Americans can paint, and do paint, the best pictures of the present day; but while this is acknowledged most liberally abroad, our artists cannot support themselves in their native land, for want of that encouragement which is showered upon every foreigner who visits us. Love of Art has almost become a sentence of expatriation. All our artists flee the country, so soon as they can accumulate sufficient means, and, until they have taken the Italian tour, are looked down upon as mere beginners, whose knowledge and taste has not been chastened by the study of the old masters.

Much as we reverence those great names, which loom in beauty above their age, and cast a light over their century, yet we verily believe, that if every picture in Italy were destroyed, it would be like the lifting of a weight from art, which now presses it to the ground. What has been done is a great fact, what is to be done is only a great theory; and even the boundless hope and lofty enthusiasm, which bears the young artist to Italy, the loved vision of his dreams, quails aghast before those great monuments of labor and genius. For centuries, with a steady perseverance, directed by a lofty spirit, has art built up her massive walls, and now the youthful aspirant, in that happy garden of the world, may sigh, like Rasselas,[38] for freedom, but may never overlook those barriers which shut from him the clear and limitless horizon of hope. The deadly hand of the past gripes at the throat of genius, and a brooding nightmare palsies its efforts. Our artists go forth with promise of great excellence, full of keen perception, of ready talent, of sincere originality; they spend a few years, and then return, without energy, without spirit, a band of feeble imitators. Do we wonder at this? How should it be otherwise?—When they behold the consummate works of those old masters, they do not see the labor and the struggle, the spontaneous energy, and the invincible trust in their own perceptions, which lie behind their works; they only see the

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[37] American artist of the Hudson River School.

[38] Fictional Prince of Abyssinia, confined to a beautiful, happy valley until such a time as he would succeed his father, the king. From Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia.*

facts, and their own efforts are so dwarfed by the comparison, that in despair they yield, and fall into that vacuum of imitation wherein no great spirit can exist. Are there no faces and forms, are there no lives and deaths, burials and marriages, within our own land, and next our own doors? Shines not the sun upon America, gilding and coloring its landscape with as various hues as when the masters breathed the atmosphere of this earth? Is nature used up?—is character gone?—is virtue extinct?—is vice rooted out? Where were the old masters that taught the old masters? Where was their Italy, but in their eyes and soul? Who told them how to paint, and held their hands, and guided their pencils? Let our artists come home, and when they have exhausted nature here, then let them seek her in a foreign clime. Let them dare to look that truth calmly in the face, which stands ever before them, and let them believe that the only true lessons to be learned from the lives of the great masters are, "Trust thyself,"[39] and "Forget that any ever lived before."

[39]Attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string…" From his "Self-Reliance", in *Essays: First Series.*

EDITOR'S NOTE

James Russell Lowell, Fireside poet, author, critic, and editor, had this to say of his short-lived literary magazine *The Pioneer:* it was to be a publication that would "furnish the intelligent and reflecting portion of the reading public with a rational substitute for the enormous quantity of thrice-diluted trash, in the shape of namby-pamby love tales and sketches, which is monthly poured out to them by many of our popular magazines" (Sullivan, 211). Sickened by the profusion of disposable print, *The Pioneer* was a serious affair, filled with criticism, poetry, and short works intended not only to entertain but to elevate. To that end, we find such pieces as "Catalogue of the Sixteenth Exhibition of Paintings at the Boston Athenaeum", which appears under the name I. B. Wright, a pseudonym attributed to influential American sculptor, poet, and art critic William Wetmore Story (Phillips, 293).

For nearly fifty years, the gallery spaces of the Boston Athenaeum Library exhibited historic and contemporary works of art, regularly including a number of Baroque and Renaissance masterworks. In the sixteenth annual exhibition, a total of 118 paintings, 9 miniatures, and 99 sculptures were on display, and it is these pieces that Wetmore reviews (Perkins, 3). Historic or contemporary, however, he has little love here for any works of art produced under the dogma of the masters hanging nearby. In his nearly martial summary, Wetmore calls for individualism, encouraging Americans to forget the cultural burden of Europe and forge a fresh character for their young nation. Beyond an inventory or an entertainment piece, "Catalogues" is a 19th century call-to-arms in the pursuit of a distinct American creative identity, an opinion that is certainly at home in such a high-minded publication as *The Pioneer*.

REID DEMPSEY
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