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PRACTICAL HINTS

ON

COMPOSITION IN PAINTING.

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ILLUSTRATED BY

Examples from the Great Masters

OF THE

ITALIAN, FLEMISH, AND DUTCH SCHOOLS.

BY JOHN BURNET.

"Invention is one of the great marks of genius; but, if we consult experience, we shall find, that it is by being conversant with the inventions of others that we learn to invent, as reading the thoughts of others, we learn to think."—SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS.

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PREFACE.

THE Plates hereto annexed were originally intended to illustrate the first part of a Practical Essay on Painting, which I have long had in contemplation to publish; but have delayed from year to year, from its interruption to my professional engagements, from doubts respecting its utility, and a love of ease which, after the day's employment, suggests a more natural recreation than the investigation of an abstruse study: I now publish the plates with a few loose hints thrown together, in the hope of their being useful. Should they be thought of advantage to the younger students of painting, in directing their minds to a regular mode of investigating the intricacies of the art, I shall follow them with others illustrative, in the first instance, of light and shade, and, ultimately, of the arrangement of colour. On the contrary, should the work not be considered a desideratum, by publishing only a first part, I escape a heavy responsibility and expense—a tax to which I do not wish that either my vanity or my love for the fine arts should subject me.

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PRACTICAL HINTS

ON

COMPOSITION IN PAINTING.

COMPOSITION.

Composition is the art of arranging figures or objects, so as to adapt them to any particular subject. In composition four requisites are necessary; —that the story be well told; that it possess a good general form; that it be so arranged as to be capable of receiving a proper effect of light and shade; and that it be susceptible of an agreeable disposition in colour. *The form* of a composition is best suggested by the subject or design, as the fitness of the adaptation ought to appear to emanate from the circumstances themselves: hence the variety of compositions.

The point of time being fixed upon, the action, expression, and incidental circumstances oblige us often to determine on a particular arrangement that we may be enabled to place the most interesting objects in the most prominent places. Unless our attention be directed to such arrangement in the first instance, we shall often be obliged to put an emphasis on an insignificant object, or throw into repose an interesting point in the action, when we come to consider their relation to a good effect of light and shade.

To secure a good general form in composition, it is necessary that it should be as simple as possible. A confused complicated form may hide the art, but can never invite the attention. Horace, in his Art of Poetry, inculcates the same doctrine, "Denique sit quod vis, simplex duntaxat et unum." Whether this is to be produced by a breadth of light and shade, which is often the case with Rembrandt, even on a most complicated outline, or by the simple arrangement of colour, as we often find in Titian, or by the construction of the group in the first instance, evident in many of Raffaelle's works, must depend upon the taste of the artist: it is sufficient to direct the younger students to this particular, their minds being generally carried away by notions of variety and contrast.

In giving a few examples of composition, I have confined myself to the four simple and principal forms; not only from their being most palpable, but also from their possessing a decided character, which is at all times desirable. To those who imagine that such rules tend to fetter genius, I shall merely quote Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose works, if properly understood, render all other writings on the subject of painting superfluous. "It must, of necessity, be, that even works of genius, like every other effect, as they must have their cause, must likewise have their rules; it cannot be by chance, that excellencies are produced with any constancy or any certainty, for this is not the nature of chance; but the rules, by which men of extraordinary parts and such as are called men of genius work, are either such as they discover by their own peculiar observations, or of such a nice texture as not easily to admit being expressed in words; especially as artists are not very frequently skilful in that mode of communicating ideas. Unsubstantial, however, as these rules may seem, and difficult as it may be to convey them in writing, they are still seen and felt in the mind of the artist; and he works from them with as much certainty as if they were embodied, as I may say, upon paper. It is true, these refined principles cannot be always made palpable, like the more gross rules of art; yet it does not follow, but that the mind may be put in such a train that it

shall perceive, by a kind of scientific sense, that propriety which words, particularly words of unpractised writers such as we are, can but very feebly suggest.' *Sixth Discourse.*

To assist in putting the mind in such a train is all that these examples aim at ; and to render apparent to the young artist what he will find wrapped up in theoretical disquisition.

The specimens here given merely happened to be in my possession ; there are many others that will serve the student, perhaps better, for illustration, which he ought by all means to procure, or make sketches of ; as it is only by rendering himself master of the subject, that he can hope to avoid the commonplace effects which swim upon the surface, and, being palpable, are adopted by every one whose judgment cannot carry him into the intricacies of the art.

Concealing the art is one of its greatest beauties ; and he best can accomplish that who can discover it under all its disguises. I ought however, to caution the young artist on this head, not to be too fastidious in trying to conceal what can be obvious only to a small number ; for, in endeavouring to render his design more intricate, he may destroy character, simplicity, and breadth ; qualities which affect and are appreciated by every one.

ANGULAR COMPOSITION.

Explanation of Plate 1.

Fig. 1. In commencing a composition, it is customary to mark the middle of the space, for the purpose of arranging those points we consider of most importance to the subject ; dividing the picture for the regulation of the masses of light and shade, of ascertaining and fixing the horizontal line, &c. This mode of constructing the composition is often suggested from the perspective effect requiring a length of line, thereby obliging us to place the point of sight at one side of the picture : sometimes from the group requiring a large space ; which a diagonal line secures, as in the Elevation of the Cross by Rubens, or from the conduct of light, as in his picture of the Descent from the Cross, &c.

Cuyp, in adopting this mode of composition in most of his pictures (which are generally Sunset or Sunrise), places the focus of light at the bottom of the sky, thereby enabling the distant part of the landscape to melt into it by the most natural means ; while the strongest part of his sky, being at the opposite angle, produces the greatest expanse, and mixes and harmonizes with the dark side of the picture. Thus the eye is carried round the composition, until the two extremes are brought in contact, the most prominent with the most retiring.

In compositions constructed on this principle (particularly where the landscape occupies a large portion), many artists carry the lines of the clouds in a contrary direction, to counteract the appearance of all the lines

Plate 1.

Angular Composition.

Fig. 1.

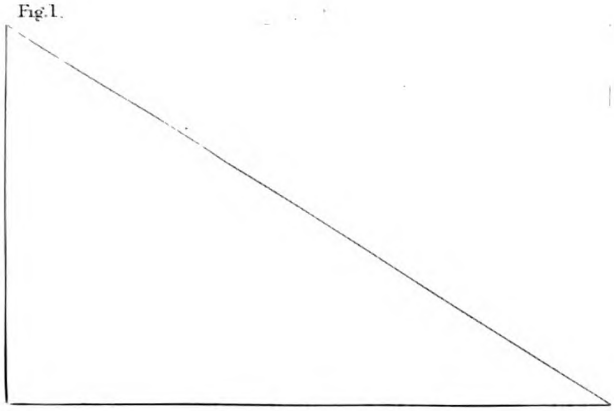


Fig 2.

Fig 3.

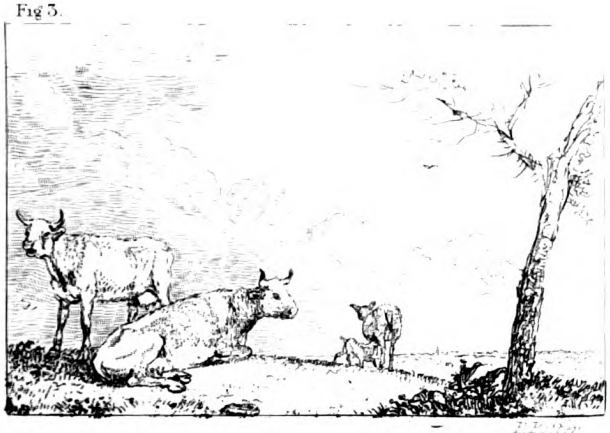


Fig 4.

Fig 5.

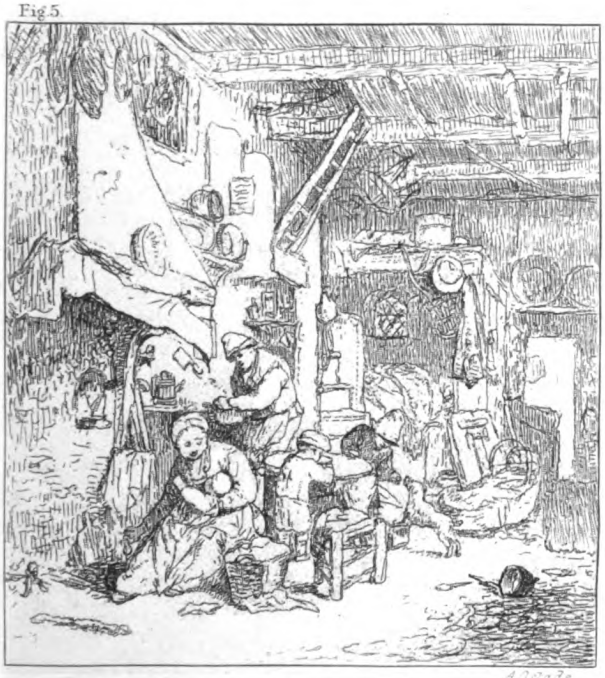


Fig 6.

John Pannell Sc.

running to one point. Thus using the darks of the clouds, &c. *to antagonize*, as it is termed, may apparently produce a better equipoise, but sacrifices many advantages; for we observe in many of the pictures of Cuyp, Rubens, and Teniers, where the figures, landscape, and sky are all on the same side of the composition, that a rich and soft effect is produced; the strong light and dark touches of the figures telling with great force against a background of houses, trees, &c. which are prevented from being harsh and cutting, by mixing their edges with the clouds, or dark blue of the sky. This doubling of the lines, (if I may so express it) gives a picture that rich fulness which we often perceive in a first sketch, from its possessing several outlines. Those who imagine that, by thus throwing the whole composition on one side, a want of union will be produced, will be convinced of their error by perceiving how small an object restores the balance; since, by its being detached and opposed to the most distant part, it receives a tenfold consequence.

Plate I. figs. 3 *and* 4. In these compositions Potter has made use of the sky as a background, by which mode the high lights of his group have more value, and it is rendered less harsh and cutting; which is the case with his famous picture of the Bull, the figures in which are brought up against the light side of the sky. If deception and strong relief were all he aimed at, he has gained them both, though at the expense of some of the higher qualities of the art, "a melting and union," as Reynolds terms it, of the figures with the background. The art is now too far advanced to allow us to be gratified with violent contrast; and a *small portion* of the group coming firm off the ground, is found to be sufficient to give the appearance of natural solidity to the whole.

Fig. 5. The original of this sketch, a small etching by Ostade, ought to be in the possession of every artist, for its beautiful arrangement of light and shade, and the skilful way in which they are woven together. As I

ought to have noticed above, that the principal mass of light in out-of-door scenes, (both in nature and the best masters) is generally placed in the sky, or upper part of the picture, I may here remark, that in interiors (especially such as are constructed upon this plan) it is generally reversed, the roof and background being reserved for a mass of shadow and repose. Ostade, in his compositions, displays such an ingenuity in their construction as to render his pictures an endless source of gratification and study to the artist. In some of his works, the art is so completely hid as to make it difficult to say, whether his background or figures were the first composed. We have not only objects intersecting each other in the most natural and picturesque manner, but the figures carried up against them; thus coming in contact with various forms, different in size, distance and colour. This, when done with judgment, gives a rich and inartificial effect. On the contrary, in the pictures of Teniers, we often find a number of objects cast down in one corner, evidently for the mere purpose of being painted; which, however, from their situation, their picturesque arrangement, and the mechanical skill of the execution, acquire a force, natural sharpness, and beauty, that amply compensate for the ostentatious display of such excellencies. Teniers' backgrounds are also totally different from Ostade's principle; his figures being generally surrounded with blank spaces of shadow or half tint. When a story is to be told that requires the spectator to be directed to the heads and hands for expression and action, this breadth is more allowable; but breadth, as Mr. Fuseli justly observes, ought never to have the appearance of "flatness or insipidity." It is observable that, in an exhibition where there are a number of objects to distract the attention, those pictures please us most on which the eye is allowed to rest, from their possessing a vacant space; but those very pictures uniformly look blank and unfurnished when hung up singly in a room.

Plate I. fig. 6. Claude, in many of his compositions, displays very little address in bringing up his strong dark against the light. In him, it

often looks like unaffected primitive simplicity; but it might not be so considered in an artist of the present day. When Claude introduces a figure for such purpose, or in order to give a retiring delicacy to his distance, we often find it of a strong dark blue, which serves also to bring down the same colour from the opposite angle of the sky, thereby producing a union between both sides of the picture.

Plate II. fig. 1. As this is merely a further illustration of the principle noticed in Plate I., I can only refer to the remarks contained in the explanation of that plate. I may here, however, point out the length of line produced by the cattle, goats, &c. as it assists the perspective effect in conveying the eye into the picture, serving also as a base-line for the landscape to rest upon. When the sun is placed near the point of sight, we sometimes see shadows made use of for the same purpose. A straight line is often necessary also for the sake of variety; and when architecture is not present, we must get it how and where we can.

Fig. 2. Rubens in this landscape has carried the lines of the clouds, trees, and ground, all in the same direction; and from his placing the sun near the point of sight, even his shadows take the same course. When the most prominent or strong dark of the foreground is detached from the side of the picture, it has not only a less formal appearance, but acquires a force from its being cut out on both sides by light; as we shall find when we come to treat of Chiaroscuro. The lights also acquire a force and brilliancy from their being surrounded with dark, and the extent of the distance and continuity of the line are not altogether interrupted.

Fig. 3. In this subject, "Huntsmen going out in the Morning," we have the principal group of a complete form in itself, yet forming a part of a whole, in consequence of its being carried round by the

two dogs in the foreground, and connected by the principal dog in the other group turning round to the noise. As it is a doubt in the minds of some artists, how far it is agreeable to the rules of composition to admit a figure complete in itself as a portion of a group, I shall only observe here, that, as far as form is concerned, their objection cannot apply; and as to individual parts, we see not only heads and hands complete as to form and light and shade; but we find that even an eye is capable of possessing all the characteristic beauties of the art. In fact, this application of it in the abstract, as well as in the aggregate, pervades everything.

An object must not only appear to possess those properties adapted by nature for its purpose and protection, but also those qualities which have been found by the experience of the best masters productive of beauty: this renders it a source of gratification; and it is then said to be true to nature and art. For example, if we examine an eye turned from the light, we perceive a breath of chiaroscuro; the white, or cornea, producing a mass of light, the iris and pupil a mass of shade. We find each of these focussed, and a small portion of the strong dark and strong light brought into contact; and the light passing through the iris gives it its transparency, and serves instead of reflected light to clear up the shadow: the watery fluid, in the bottom of the eye and on the under eyelid, gives us that portion of minute finish necessary in all works of art, to which even the protecting hairs contribute. We have here a picture complete in itself; but if we carry our examination to the surrounding lines in the orbit, we perceive an harmonious communication and extension of its form, lights, and darks, by which its harshness is softened and diffused, and it becomes a part of the composition of the whole countenance.

Plate II. fig. 4. I have given a gradual advancement of the most prominent and dark part of a composition, until, in this example, we

Singular Comparison.

Fig. 1.

Claude.

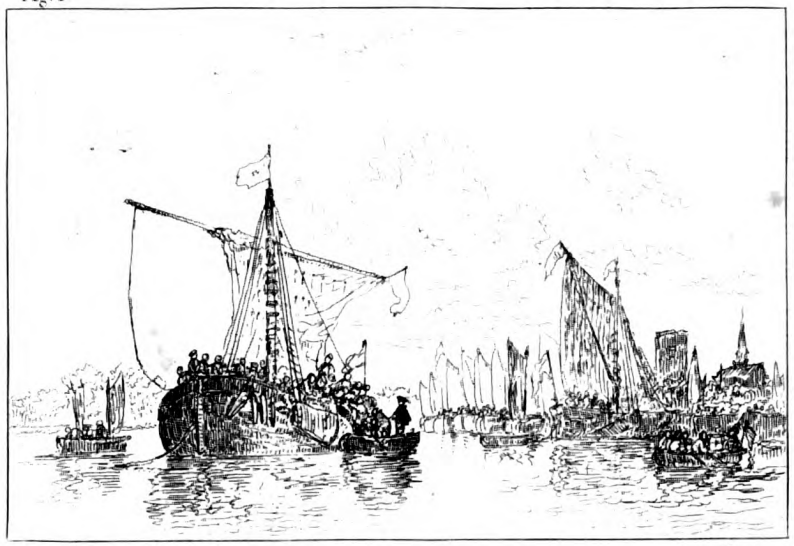
Fig. 2.

Berchem.

Fig. 3.

P. De Laer.

Fig. 4.



Cuyp.

have the strongest point brought into the centre. In the original, "The Embarkation of the Prince of Orange," the two principal figures are dressed in strong red, and strong black, and are the most cutting part of the group; and, from their being brought into the centre and against the most retiring part, and surrounded by light, Cuyp has rendered them of the greatest importance, though occupying only a very small portion of the picture.

ANGULAR COMPOSITION.

Plate III. fig. 1. THE plan of composition I have here taken up is in the form of a diamond ; which we find often adopted, either as a complete group, or as forming part of a more complicated arrangement. In commencing a composition, I have mentioned, "that it is of importance to mark in those points most necessary to our purpose." For example, when a story is to be told, the heads and hands, the seats of action and expression, are often referred to each other for the completion of form or extension of light ; as by such means the eye of the spectator is led to the commencement and operation of the incident. After arranging the principal points, what are called the "secondary" require the greatest consideration ; whether for the repetition of the lines, extension of the form, or conduct of the light and shade. Sometimes we are actuated by our requiring a second or third group for the better illustration of the story, which naturally leads us in the direction that affords us the greatest space ; sometimes by the principal group demanding a considerable portion of the ground for a mass of shadow, beyond which a strong point is required, as a link of communication between the figures and the background. By making this point the strongest of a secondary group of objects, either from its size, lights, or darks, the eye is carried into the most remote circumstances, which become a part of the whole from the principal group being made to depend upon *such point* for the completion of its form, the extension of the light, or the repetition of colour.

Fig. 2. In designs constructed upon this plan (especially of the Dutch School), we generally find the lower part of the form strongly pronounced, either by colour, or by light upon a dark ground, or vice versâ : this gives the group a firm foundation, and also enables the artist to keep the other

Plate 3

Angular Composition.

Fig 1

Fig 2.

A. Ostade.

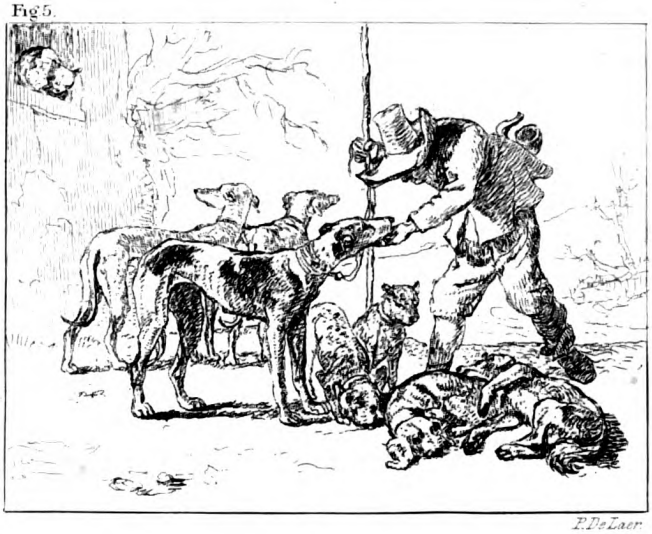
Fig 3.

J. Burnet.

Fig 4

Teniers.

Fig 5.



P. De Laer.

Fig 6.

Metzu.

Fig 7

Rembrandt.

Plate 3

Angular Composition.

Fig 1

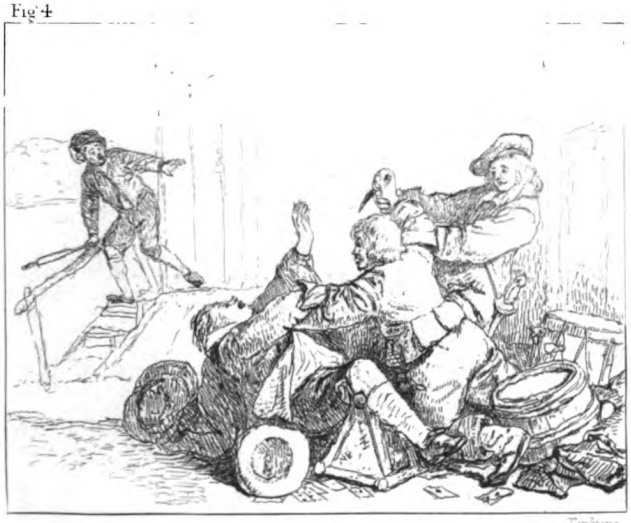
Fig 2.

A. Ostade

Fig 3.

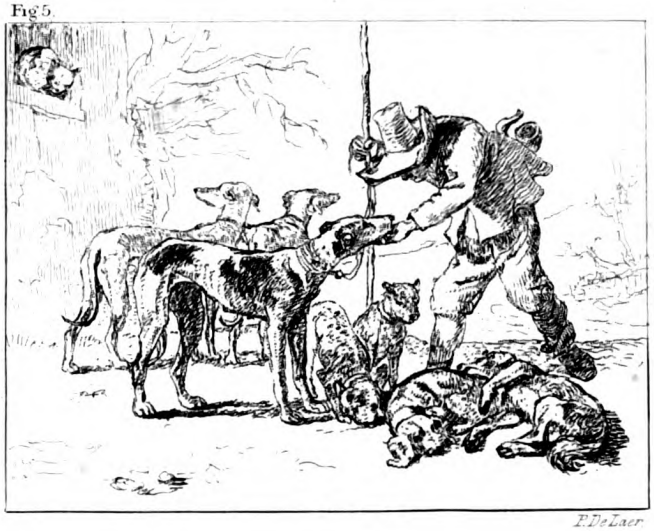
J. Burnet

Fig 4



Terburg

Fig 5.



P. De Laer

Fig. 6.

Metzu.

Fig 7

Rembrandt.

objects in their proper situations as to distance from the eye. I wish particularly to direct the student's attention to this particular, as a doctrine, founded upon the rays of vision, has been attempted to be established, viz. that objects as they recede from the centre of the picture, either to the sides or bottom, ought to be deprived of part of their force of light and shade and colour. This is neither nature nor art. If the subject requires those objects to be kept subordinate, true art does not deprive them of their natural force, by robbing them of their lights, darks, or colours: it renders them less obtrusive by the ground which surrounds them or substitutes other objects of a less attractive quality.

Plate III. fig. 3. By making the circumstance from which the story springs a strong point (either from situation, force, or colour), and surrounding it with those objects more immediately connected, and most illustrative of its effects, the picture explains itself at a glance; which is one of the strong distinctions of painting from poetry,—the one proceeding in a circuitous route to hide the denouement, and keep hold of the attention, the other proclaiming instantaneously the beginning and end of the story. I do not mean that the circumstance ought always to occupy the centre, any more than that the hero should always occupy the centre; but, as it is of use to explain the cause of his action and expression, it has, in my mind, a prior claim to consideration.

Plate III. figs. 4 *and* 6. *Plate IV. fig.* 5. We have the strongest light coming in contact with the strong dark in the most cutting manner, in the knee and leg of the falling figure, the arm of the man writing, and in the head of the infant Christ. When this can be done without interfering with the breadth of light, it is of the greatest consequence, both on account of its giving a thickness or rotundity to the group, and also because it enables us to keep the most projecting points and the most retiring in their proper places by analogy to one another. I am aware that the management of light and shade often requires a sacrifice of this

principle; where we can accomplish our object without such a sacrifice it has always the most natural appearance. Many accidental combinations and beautiful effects of nature arise, not merely from their possessing a good general form and a pictorial arrangement of light and shade, but also from the most projecting points being often assisted by a combination of a harsh cutting line, strong dark and light, or opposition of local colour, and hence they strike the artist as being applicable to painting; these being the means he finds frequently adopted by the best masters. It is only under such favourable circumstances, that the artist can enter the lists with nature; and, having but a flat surface to work upon, he is warranted in availing himself of every assistance science can afford. In arranging objects scientifically, to give them at the same time the appearance of natural accident, is one of the perfections of the art.

As the best practical hints are derived from accidental combinations in nature, whose sudden changes prevent the possibility of sketching, the mind ought to be trained to the most regular and even mechanical mode of arranging the ideas; that in an instant we may be able to determine whether the effects, which we perceive, depend upon a particular form, upon particular arrangement of the light and shade, or upon the manner in which the hot and cold colours are brought in contact. By thus tracing effects to their proper causes, we secure the principal points as a sort of shorthand notes to guide and assist the memory. This practice will also open a road of communication between the eye and the operations of the mind, which neither a hasty sketch nor the most learned dissertation can, separately, produce. At first it may seem more difficult than it really is; but a few trials will convince the student of its practicability, especially as the effects that strike him to be the most pictorial are generally the most simple.

Plate III. fig. 4. The cards lying on the ground, in this subject, indicate the cause of the quarrel; and the figure entering from an adjoining apartment

gives us a hint of the noise generally attending such brawls. As a moral is here introduced, I shall make a few remarks (otherwise irrevelant to the purpose) in this place. When a picture possesses a moral, it is certainly a great advantage, provided we are not disgusted by its vulgarity, as is the case in the representations of drunkenness, &c. in some of the Dutch school, or by affected sentiment, as in many of the present works of all the schools. The moral must also never injure the picture in its higher requisites. In the early ages, representations of vice were necessary as strong lessons of morality; but as mankind grew more enlightened, they were referred to books, not pictures, for improvement. Besides, an artist ought always to recollect, that he paints for the higher, not for the lower classes of men; and as his business is to convey pleasure, not pain, a little intercourse with society will convince him, that men in all ranks have often enough to vex them, or to produce a variance with their fellow-creatures, without hanging up on their walls representations tending to increase either the one or the other feeling. The absence of these considerations in an artist (of which we see daily proofs) dooms his works to that neglect which he ascribes to the want of encouragement to the arts generally. Representations of tragical events also (though possessing a fine moral or sentiment) have received but little patronage in this country; whether it is that they are not suited to the character of the nation, who, though not averse to the representation of a tragedy on the stage, are unwilling to choose a constant companion from such a class, or that there are few of those connoisseurs whose feelings are completely absorbed in the contemplation of high art, is a question which this is not the proper place to discuss: the fact is, however, indisputable.

Plate III. fig. 6. As this composition consists of a single figure, I shall notice here the method Metzu has taken to render it a part of the whole, especially as we shall have to refer to other plates, when we come to treat of light and shade and colour. The figure is dressed in black and white, coming in contact and contrast in the strongest manner; the black

is repeated by the hat, and diffused by the black marble in the floor, the white is referred to the white marble in the floor and collected into a mass by the white wall; the carpet which is of red and warm colours, focussed at the light by a stick of wax, is repeated by the back of the chair, and carried up by the outside of the window on the edge of the picture, which is painted of a pale red; the forms are echoed and repeated with the same simplicity, and the picture-frame on the wall, from being smaller than the frame of the window, serves at the same time to assist the perspective effect: even the fastening of the casement is not without its use in the composition. In thus obliging a design to depend on its ground for support, consists the principle of union and harmony; but, as I have at present only to draw the student's attention to the arrangement of form and that portion of composition that arises from the repetition and connexion of lines, I shall notice one good plan amongst many others, which is, to mark in strongly those points in the ground which of necessity must be introduced from natural circumstances, at the same time contriving the group so that those points become of the greatest consequence to the composition. This often gives a characteristic stamp of nature to the whole.

Plate III. fig. 7. We have here the strong dark point coming in contact with the light ground in the most cutting manner; which is more naturally accounted for by its being the most projecting; as it is the inside of an empty drinking cup, it perhaps indicates the commencement of the story as well as any other means.

Plate IV. fig. 1. As an outline can give us little idea of this arrangement, I may be allowed to observe, that the four points of light are the upper halves of both the figures (being of a pale yellow) the white dog and a light wall above the fireplace brought in contact with a black powder-horn.

Plate IV. fig. 2. Ostade's pictures have the peculiarly valuable property

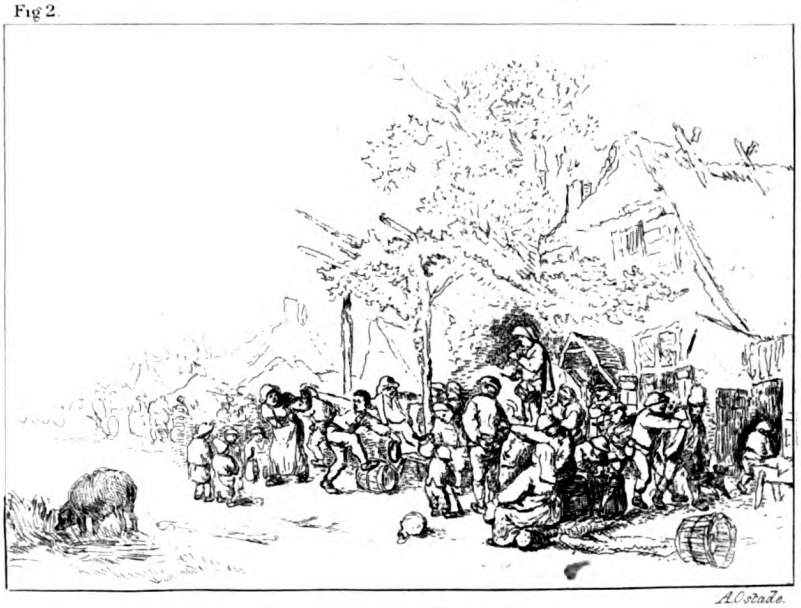
Plate 4.

Angular Composition.

Fig 1

Terburg

Fig 2.



A. Ostade.

Fig 3

P. De Laer.

Fig 4.

Reubens.

Fig 5.

Corregio

John Burnet

of looking well at a distance, thereby attracting the attention of the spectator towards them. When we come nigh to examine, we find that this is produced by their possessing a decided mass of light, obtained by means of a light wall, sky, &c. His heads and hands form a number of luminous spots in a mass of half tint, and are rendered of more value by the introduction of blue and dark draperies; this requires much consideration, in order that those spots may take agreeable and decided forms to prevent confusion. In Ostade's works it is rendered the more easy, as he has seldom any particular story to interfere with the arrangement. His pictures call to my mind a passage in Hervey, which appears like the language of a painter, so completely consonant is it to the principles on which he constructs his work. Speaking of the stars, Hervey says, "On a careless inspection, you perceive no accuracy or uniformity in the position of the heavenly bodies, they appear like an illustrious chaos, a promiscuous heap of shining globes, neither ranked in order nor moving by line; but what seems confusion is all regularity; what carries a show of negligence is really the result of the most masterly contrivance."

Fig. 3. P. De Laer, from his long residence amongst the Italian painters, has constructed most of his pictures, though generally in the low walks of art, on the most regular and severe principles of their grandest compositions. As this regularity is considered by some to be incompatible with the negligence of arrangement which they suppose necessary to the picturesque, I shall here make a few observations on that doctrine. I consider it to be false, and not tenable, when referred to the operations of nature; for we find her conducting and exhibiting the most beautiful appearances and effects in the humblest and most trifling of her works, by the same laws that regulate her in the formation of the most sublime. Abernethy says, "That work is beheld with admiration and delight, as the result of deep counsel, which is complicated in its parts, yet simple in its operations, where a variety of effects are seen to arise from one principle

operating uniformly." When we refer to the great masters in poetry, we find that the Idyls of Theocritus are not less regular than the Iliad of Homer; or the Georgics and Eclogues of Virgil than the Eneid. The English pastorals have failed in giving pleasure, not by the regularity of their construction, but in consequence of their not being founded on truth; the language and scenery not being that of nature in such situations.

Let me here caution the student against supposing that I mean grossness and vulgarity as proper accompaniments in his representations of common nature; he must convey such scenes to us with the appearance of their having passed through a susceptible and amiable mind, anxious to render nature agreeable, not to make her disgusting.

In the works of the best painters in the lower walks of the art, there are numberless examples of this regularity. Even Wouvermans, whose soft and delicate touch seems ill suited to severe regularity of form, or light and shade, has received an advantage by its adoption: his best pictures being founded on the simple construction of his rival. A regular form can always be rendered sufficiently irregular by the means of light and shade; and if P. De Laer's pictures possess this property of light and shade too decidedly for such a purpose, we must recollect that from his painting upon a dark red ground (as was used at the time by many of the Italians) his works often look harsh; the lights, from being thickly painted, having resisted the influence of the ground, while his half tints are absorbed and indented in the shadow.

As the student will have occasion to refer to the prints after the different designs here given, I beg leave to remark, that, in most of the Italian prints which I compared with the original pictures, I found the characteristic points often not attended to. The strong lights wanted their value, either from the shadows being deficient in their proper strength and quietness, or from the introduction of aerial perspective (a circumstance

seldom influencing the conduct of the great masters either of the Italian or Venetian schools), or from the manner in which the strong darks and lights were brought in contact. I believe sufficient has already been written on engraving, nor am I against its being considered a liberal translation ; the beauty of lines is, perhaps, the only substitute engravers can give for the absence of colours ; but surely it is not too much to request, that a strong red, or a strong blue (however ornamented by lines), be referred to its proper scale, either as the extension of light, or the production of shadow. These errors seem to have arisen from contemplating the picture in the twilight, for the more easy detection of the light and shade ; a most fallacious method ; for, in such case, the most projecting and the most retiring colours are rendered similar.

Plate IV. fig. 5. As in figure 2, we may observe this form influencing the arrangement of the whole group ; we have here the heads composed on the same principle, and repeating each other with a simplicity which is safe only in the hands of the best painters. I have mentioned regularity as a quality to be found in the most sublime subjects in painting ; but to infer from that, that regularity constituted sublimity, were as absurd as to say, irregularity constituted the picturesque.

CIRCULAR COMPOSITION.

We come now to speak of the circular form of composition, which is applicable to the highest walks of art from its simplicity and extensive sweep ; and to the lowest, from its being finely adapted for the purposes of light and shade.

Plate V. fig. 1. In this Cartoon we have a fine specimen of this form of composition. In the design, a strict adherence to the plan laid down has secured a decided character to the picture. With Raffaelle this seems to have been invariably of the first importance ; his worst compositions have always a strong feature to recommend them. In this design we have the figures gradually declining from the sides to the centre of the circle on the foreground, which enables the spectator to view the whole of the persons employed: to assist which arrangement, Raffaelle has placed the Apostles on an elevated plane ; and, by placing the principal in the centre, has enabled them to acquire that consequence their diminution would otherwise have deprived them of. The regularity of the composition is also increased by the division of the group into seven figures on each side, and no one, except Ananias and Sapphira, performs an action that is not repeated. Thus simply has Raffaelle contrived not only to tell his story, but also those circumstances which preceded and followed it. This regularity will strike the student as being particularly suited to religious subjects ; but a few attempts, to make such uniformity appear a natural emanation, will compel him to exclaim with the poet,

"Within that circle none durst walk but he."

Plate 5.

Circular Composition.

Fig 1.

Raffaelle.

Fig 2.

Corregio.

Fig 3

Guido.

As I shall have occasion to speak of the repetition of form, as being no less essential towards the production of harmony than the repetition of colour, I may call the student's attention to it in this place. In compositions embracing many figures, a repetition of form and action is often found to be indispensable; a single figure, in such case, being found too small to give importance to any action, is referred to the next for assistance; as, in colouring, one colour is often made to depend upon the adjoining for its shadow or enlargement. But, independently of its acquiring a consequence by such extension, harmony requires, that a strong action should be as it were broken down and diffused through the group. In writing, this is generally the case, and the reader is prepared for one sentence by what has preceded it. This simplicity and harmonious communication is to be found in nature, in the antique, in the best Italian masters, and in many of the Dutch, particularly Ostade. It is seldom to be met with in the French school, which is fond of sudden contrast, and insulated action, light, and colour.

Plate V. fig. 2. In compositions of out-of-door scenes, this circular form of arrangement is often the only opportunity we have of procuring a mass of shade so necessary to the group in a pictorial point of view. I am aware that some *sculptors* consider the arrangement of their figures degraded by any attention to the picturesque effect of light and shade, which to *painters* seems more extraordinary, as sculptors have not the means of local colour to produce it. With sculpture, however, it is not our province to interfere; I shall only observe that such reasoning never seems to have influenced Coreggio. The most picturesque arrangements in form, and in light and shade, are to be found in his grandest compositions. We have here six heads placed in the most unequal manner, numerically speaking; the shadow is increased by the dark blue dress of the Virgin, and the two most projecting points by the light drapery of the Magdalen and the strong red of St. Jerome; yet this picture is not less sublime than that of "the Doctors of the Church" (*Fig.* 3), where the six heads are placed in the most

regular manner; four round the altar, and one at each side, for the purpose of connecting the lower and upper half of the picture; the consultation of the doctors, and the vision expressive of the subject of their research. The prominent points in this work are the same as in *fig.* 2, the figure with the book being in a strong red, and the other in white.

Plate VI. fig. 1. In this subject Rubens displays all the easy fluency of a great master, who would consider such a design only as an amusement. The manner in which the figures are interwoven with each other, the mode resorted to, to assist the projecting and retiring points, and the velocity with which the whole appears to move, are all worthy of the artist's attention.

Fig. 2. The student may compare this admirable design of West's, "The Death of General Wolfe," with figure 4, "The Death of St. Jerome:" as Domenichino has adopted the same means to produce his mass of shadow in the middle of the group, and to bring it in contact with the light on the principal figure.

Fig. 3. As I shall have occasion to refer to the examples of this great master of light and shade in their proper place, it would be unfair to make any observations on him here, where he appears, as Milton would express it, "shorn of his beams." I may, however, remark, that, from his making use of mean materials, he often destroys the beauty of that structure which the splendour of his light is so well calculated to adorn.

Fig. 5. As the merits of this composition have been descanted on by every critic,—being a subject well suited for a display of the powers of eloquence,—I shall merely offer one or two practical remarks. Raffaelle has made the principal figure of the lower group (an interesting young female) detach itself from the ground by a strong warm light cutting against the shadow, and by a dark blue mantle coming in contact with the

Circular Compositions

Plate 6.

Fig 1.

Rubens.

Fig 2

B. West.

Fig 3.

Rembrandt.

Fig 4. Domenichino.

Fig 5. Raffaelle.

Plate 7.

Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.

light ; by her addressing the Apostles and pointing to the demoniac, the two sides are united, and the figures are so linked together that the eye is carried round until we arrive at the most projecting points, the hands and feet of the Apostle with the book. The Disciples express their inability to perform the cure ; and, by two of them pointing to the mount, refer the people to Christ, who has retired thither to pray. This is the arrangement, but it was not alone by the expression or arrangement of his figures that Raffaelle holds his rank in the art ; it was also by the bold and original conception of his subject. He has here displayed the vision of the Transfiguration in the most sublime manner, and by raising his figures from the ground (one of those movements of the mind which are above restraint) has stamped them with the strong feature of immortal beings. Mr. Fuseli luminously describes them rising like "a flame:" (if not too metaphorical) he might have said, "like a bright flame issuing as if from a sacrifice, and ascending unto God."

Plate VII. It is not only necessary that a group should have hollows for the reception of shadow, but also projections for the light to rest upon; it not only ought to possess a good general form in the outline which defines it, but the figures must also be linked together in such a way as to lead the spectator in amongst them. They must appear to have room to stand upon, and every figure must keep his place in its relative distance from the eye: hence a form composed of a concave and convex line has been often adopted as the simplest and best, and possessing the greatest variety of advantages. That it is so generally used will cease to surprise us, when we find it applicable both to the regularity of Raffaelle and the irregularity of Rembrandt.

Plate VIII. fig. 1. In this design, "The Landing of Charles II." West has placed the principal figure in the middle of the picture. Commencing his composition at the nighest point, he carries on his group until it ends in the distance. Neither in the situation of the hero, nor in the form of the group, does he seem solicitous to hide the science. He has brought the nigh point in contact with the shadow, and strengthened it by the female whom the boy accompanies, being dressed in strong dark: when this is brought sharp off the ground, as is the case also in *fig.* 2, it enables us to keep the other figures in their places better than by diminishing the firmness of their shadows or colours.

Fig. 2. "Cattle returning Home in a Shower." In this composition the principal light falls on the convex part of the group, and the depth of the shadow is assisted by the local colour of the objects placed in it. The goat in the foreground is connected to the rest by some white flowers of an elder bush, which cannot be expressed in an outline. As this is from a design of my late brother's, I cannot allow this opportunity to pass without expressing the great loss I feel in not having his assistance, not only in these notes, but in everything connected with the art: though practising painting but for a short time of a short life, his strength of mind, his fine eye for colour, and a taste for the beauties of pastoral painting, convince me the English School has lost one that would have been an ornament to that department of the science.

Fig. 3. Is a repetition of the same form.

Plate IX. This plate consists of Wilkie's admirable composition of the Blind Fiddler, the Salutation of the Virgin by Rembrandt, and a Dance by Ostade. I shall leave it to the student's own judgment to investigate the various forms on which these compositions depend.

By making the principal heads depend upon one mode of arrangement,

Plate 8.

Fig 1.

B. West.

Fig 2

Jas. Burnet.

Fig 3.

Jas. Burnet.

Plate 9.

Fig 1.

D. Wilkie.

Fig 2.

Fig 3.

the general appearance of the group on a different mode, the background on a third, and so on with the minor points (provided they all tend to the assistance of one another), his composition will not only have intricacy without confusion, but that variety which is so characteristic in nature. A beautiful combination in nature will often appear to evade every rule, by her being perfect in every mode of examination. All her varieties emanate from a straight line and a curve. A judicious arrangement of objects possessing these various forms gives the strongest natural appearance to a picture; nor ought the artist to leave out rashly what he may conceive to be void of beauty. In colouring, harsh tints are admitted to produce harmony in the other colours; and the most picturesque arrangements often depend on the presence of what might be otherwise considered ugly forms.

As I have made use of the terms "beautiful and agreeable arrangements," it is proper to give an explanation of the sense in which they are applied. By a beautiful arrangement, I mean a proper adaptation of those principles that arrest a common observer, and give a pleasurable sensation, which to a cultivated mind increases (not diminishes) by the investigation of the cause which produces it. For example, a beautiful appearance in nature affects the savage and the philosopher from their sensations merely as men; but a painter, whose life is spent in a constant competition with nature in producing the same effects, receives a tenfold gratification, in following her through those assemblages which to the world beside are, as it were, "a fountain sealed and a book shut up." Hence, in art, a beautiful arrangement must be a selection of those forms, lights, and colours that produce a similar result; and the taste of an artist is shown, in heightening their effect by the absence of those circumstances which are found by experience to produce the contrary. Did an investigation of the means pursued by the great masters tend to abridge an artist's pleasurable sensations, instead of being the most favoured, he would be rendered the most miserable of beings; but the opposite is the case, as by

such means he is taught an alphabet that enables him to understand the language of nature. It may be supposed that, in my search after so desirable an object, I have perused all the works written to define Beauty and Taste, and which endeavour to circumscribe with a line that endless variety and omnipresence which make nature a source of gratification to all nations under every alteration of the mind; but as I wish to avoid all controversy on the subject, which we often find merely renders the most sublime truths more obscure, I shall only remark, that, as far as painting is concerned, the authors of many of these works have done an irreparable injury. Artists generally prefer the opinions of untutored children to the remarks of the most learned philosophers, whose advancement in other sciences really seems to increase their ignorance of this. If I have explained my definition of the terms sufficiently for the artist's comprehension, I am satisfied. To explain them to others would be equally impossible as that those others should be able to define them to us. The mind must have received its education through the medium of the eye, not of the ear, to enjoy the faculty of conceiving such ideas, or the power of tracing them to their original source in nature or in art, as a test of their truth.

Before I conclude, I have to apologize for the paucity and brevity of these observations, and beg the reader's constant reference to the plates, as the only method of making myself correctly understood. Painting is a practical branch of philosophy, and can only be rendered clear by satisfying the observations of the eye, as well as the reflections of the mind: this, perhaps, is one reason why so much has been written on the subject without those truths being made sufficiently obvious, which the writers wished to demonstrate.

I have also been anxious to avoid tautology, as it will be necessary to go over, in a great measure, the same ground, when I come to treat of light, and shade, and colour; when many observations which appear to be