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Letters on Landscape Painting. Letter 1

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# THE CRAYON.

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## INTRODUCTORY.

In the midst of a great commercial crisis, while fortunes of years' growth have been falling around us, and the panic-stricken world of business has been gathering in its resources, to save what it may from wreck, an effort has been organized, having for its object the education of our countrymen to the perception and enjoyment of Beauty. And though the time seems unpropitious, we have a faith that to Beauty and its messengers, even times and seasons have a deference.

There is a little blue flower—the liver-leaf—which blossoms almost at the edge of our forest snows, springing up at the first instant of breath the earth gets after its winter-trance, and asserting, it might seem to a poetic fancy, its existence, simply by force of the beauty which it embodies. Buried fathoms deep under the snow-drift, it has still preserved its vitality, and breaks forth at the first loosening of its bonds.

So Art, which is Beauty's gospel, lies inert under the cold necessities of a national childhood, and the cares and storms of a political first existence; but when the winter of discontent is made summer, it bursts out to gladden and beautify life. Beauty, deep-rooted in every human mind, is its vitality, and it must therefore live. To us, and to our generation, it is given to determine its future in our country, whether free and healthy, or dwarfed and deformed by pride and conceit. To this glorious work of art-cultivation we have devoted this undertaking, and we hope to prove to all men that it is worthy the highest regard of all earnest minds—that the artist has a place in the heart of mankind, which you deprive him of only with the certain consequence of imperfect being for yourselves. It is fitting, then, that we should enter into action at this very crisis, when trade has shown its hollowness, and money-pride its brittleness, for after trials and sorrows come humility and love, and with these Beauty enters the heart.

In prosperity, we could have spoken words of caution, but they would have fallen into deaf ears. We could have whispered to a world rushing heedlessly along to the wreck of commerce, that there were things more gratifying to the intellect than

VOL. I. NO. 1.

the accumulation of property, or the gratification of pride—that to those who reverently seek her, Beauty has an elevation of enjoyment, compared to which, all self-glorification is a hollow show—a thing which the heart crushes in embracing it. We could have taught men that Beauty is the antidote to those wearing, consuming cares of the material life—that, as trade and money being by their very nature the origin of selfish influences, and bring men for ever into struggle with each other, not for mutual advantage, but for selfish appropriation; so Beauty and Art, belonging none the less to one, because given to all, widen our sympathies and unite us by a common delight. It is bitter to those who love their race, to see men shut themselves into themselves year after year, pursuing that which can belong to themselves alone, while around them everywhere lies that which, if once taken up, is theirs for ever, and yet is not diminished for the next comer. Do men realize this? Do they think of it, or are they skeptics with regard to Beauty, as well as the future? Does the world of nature absolutely lie around them a waste desert—only so much space to be got over, where they travel with blinded eyes until all that is most glorious and instinct with immortality in them has died for want of culture? There are too many such. Could we but reach them, could we open for an instant their sealed eyes to the perception of the outer world, life would be new to them, and in the perception of the great harmonies of nature, they would become tranquilized and elevated. The more entirely delight is based on the eternal and immutable, the more enduring and unchangeable it becomes, and we doubt much if there can be found a merchant, who has found time and disposition to cultivate his love for art, who does not feel that his daily routine of duty is gone through with better, from its effect upon his mind, and who does not feel that there is something in him better than his computing capacity, and something in life more profitable than cent-per-cent profits.

Passing through one of our bye-streets late last autumn, we were preceded by a group of boys rollicking through the street, after the fashion of the candidates for Bowery distinction. Just as we reached

them their boisterous merriment was checked by the sight of a quantity of flowers—the refuse of a neighboring garden thrown out into the street. They were the commonest kinds of flowers—marigolds, &c.,—yet none the less beautiful for being common. The boys made a simultaneous rush for them, not with pushing and squabbling, as they would have done for coppers or “valuables,” but with eagerness. One, keener-eyed than the rest, secured the gems of the collection, and the disappointed gathered round him with as great an intensity of satisfaction, as though themselves had been the fortunate finders. “Oh, ain't they pretty,” in various keys burst from their hearts, and so, locked arm in arm, they strolled slowly down the street, still admiring, but not as before, boisterous, rowdying. Their voices were softened, and their bearing harmonized, and we lost sight of them, bettered we could not, if only for the moment. Yet if bettered, then better for ever.

Could we but throw more flowers in the way of earth's unfortunates, who can tell what might be done by the ever-growing, never satiated thirst for Beauty? The softened tones and quiet manner of those rude boys, passing arm in arm through the city street, their whole souls poured out on a handful of cast-away flowers, was in itself the flowering of a better seed, a Beauty which the highest sense will feel. For ourselves we revered flowers more than ever, they seemed texts dropped from the Evangel of Art.

## Letters

### ON LANDSCAPE PAINTING.

LETTER I.\*

DEAR SIR:

I AM compelled to return an unfavorable answer to your application for admission into my studio as a pupil. Among the many instances in which I have found it necessary to return a refusal, your own case is most painful to me, on account of the earnest love of nature which you manifest, and the strong desire you have expressed to devote your whole time and energies to the study of Landscape Art. I

\* The numerous applications of young artists to Mr. Durand to be admitted into his studio as pupils, has suggested to him to reply at length through THE CRAYON for the benefit of all who have been, or might be hereafter, applicants for the like privilege.—ED. CRAYON.

hope the disappointment will not be regarded by you as discouraging, for I can readily imagine you may have overestimated the advantage of such lessons as you desire at my hands, and I take occasion to submit for your consideration, by way of encouragement, some remarks resulting from my own experience under circumstances very similar to your own. With the same *love* of beautiful nature from my childhood, and the corresponding desire for *its* development through the knowledge and practice of Art, I was, by several years, older than yourself before I was able to devote even a small portion of my time to the favorite pursuit. I then thought as you now think, that if I could but obtain a few lessons by seeing an experienced artist work, or working myself under his eye and direct instructions, most happy should I be. That privilege, however, I never enjoyed, and subsequent years of toil and study have somewhat modified my estimate of the value of such privileges. Indeed, I am almost certain that instead of any great final benefit resulting from it, the greater chance is, that in most instances its result will prove pernicious.

It is true that the pupil may thus save time in the acquisition of certain technical knowledge, mechanical processes, most suitable colors, &c., &c., at the same time, he is, at least, in danger of losing his own identity, and from the habit of seeing with the eyes and following in the track of his master, become in the end what is most degrading in the mind of every true artist, a mere imitator, a mannerist.

You need not a period of pupilage in an artist's studio to learn to paint; books and the casual intercourse with artists, accessible to every respectable young student, will furnish you with all the essential mechanism of the art. I suppose that you possess the necessary knowledge of drawing, and can readily express with the lead pencil the forms and general character of real objects. Then, let me earnestly recommend to you one Studio which you may freely enter, and receive in liberal measure the most sure and safe instruction ever meted to any pupil, provided you possess a common share of that truthful perception, which God gives to every true and faithful artist—the Studio of Nature.

Yes! go first to Nature to learn to paint landscape, and when you shall have learnt to imitate her, you may then study the pictures of great artists with benefit. They will aid you in the acquirement of the knowledge requisite to apply to the best advantage the skill you possess—to select, combine and set off the varied beauty of nature by means of what, in artistic language, is called treatment, management, &c., &c. I would urge on any young student in landscape painting, the importance of painting direct from Nature as soon as he shall have acquired the first rudiments of Art. If he is imbued with the true spirit to appreciate and enjoy the contemplation of her loveliness, he will approach her with veneration, and find in the conscientious study of her beauties all the great first principles of Art. Let him scrupulously accept *whatever* she presents him, until he shall, in a degree, have become intimate with her infinity, and then he may approach her on more familiar terms, even venturing to choose and reject some portions of her un-

bounded wealth; but never let him profane her sacredness by a wilful departure from truth. It is for this reason that I would see you impressed, imbued to the full with *her* principles and practice, and after that develop the principles and practice of Art; in other words, the application of those phenomena most expressive of the requisite sentiment or feeling. For I maintain that all Art is unworthy and vicious which is at variance with Truth, and that only is worthy and elevated which impresses us with the same feelings and emotions that we experience in the presence of the Reality. True Art teaches the use of the embellishments which Nature herself furnishes, it never creates them. All the fascination of treatment in light, and dark, and color, are seen in Nature; they are the luxuries of her store-house, and must be used with intelligence and discrimination to be wholesome and invigorating. If abused and adulterated by the poisons of conventionalism, the result will be the corruption of veneration for, and faith in, the simple truths of Nature, which constitute the true Religion of Art, and the only safeguard against the inroads of heretical conventionalism. If you should ask me to define conventionalism, I should say that it is the substitution of an easily expressed falsehood for a difficult truth.

But why discuss this point—is it not a truism admitted by all? Far from it! Or if it be admitted as a principle, it is constantly violated by the artist in his practice, and this violation sanctioned by the “learned” critic and connoisseur. The fresh green of summer must be muddled with brown; the pure blue of the clear sky, and the palpitating azure of distant mountains, deadened with lifeless grey, while the grey unsheltered rocks must be warmed up and clothed with the lichens of their forest brethren—tricks of impasto, or transparency without character—vacant breadth, and unmitigated darkness—fine qualities of color without local meaning, and many other perversions of truth are made objects of artistic study, to the death of all true feeling for Art,—and all this under the name of improvements on Nature! To obtain truthfulness is so much more difficult than to obtain the power of telling facile falsehoods, that one need not wonder that some delusive substitute occupies the place which Nature should hold in the artist's mind.

I have offered to you these remarks and opinions as the result of experience. I do not desire that my humble productions shall be regarded as the evidence of their correctness. I am more certain as to their aim in accordance with these opinions than in their successful attainment of that aim; and I will only add that neither their faults nor their merits are chargeable to any instructions received in the studios of artists, though many an useful lesson has been taught me by intercourse with professional brethren—even often from the student and the tyro. But by far my most valuable study has been

“Under the open sky”—

and there would I direct you to

“Go forth and list  
To Nature's teachings, while from all around  
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air,  
Comes a still voice”—

a voice that no student can disregard with impunity, nor heed without joy and gladness

—broken, it is true, too often by repeated failure, and by the conviction that the most successful transcripts that Art is able to produce must appear but abortions in her presence, and only tolerable when withdrawn and examined in the seclusion of the painting room.

There are, however, certain motives in Art which I am persuaded the young landscape painter may do well to consider with reference to directing his studies. These I will give you as opportunity offers, in some future letters.

Truly yours,  
A. B. DURAND.

#### SIMPLE IMITATION OF NATURE.

If an artist, in whom we must of course suppose a natural talent, in the first stage of progress, after having in some measure practised eye and hand, turns to natural objects, uses all care and fidelity in the most perfect imitation of their forms and colors, never knowingly departs from Nature, begins and ends in her presence every picture that he undertakes;—such an artist must possess high merit, for he cannot fail of attaining the greatest accuracy, and his work must be full of certainty, variety, and strength.

If these conditions are clearly considered, it will be easily seen that a capable but limited nature can in this way treat agreeable, but limited subjects. Such subjects must always be easy to find. They should be seen at leisure, and quietly imitated; the disposition that occupies itself in such works must be a quiet one, self-contained, and satisfied with moderate gratification. This sort of imitation will also be practised by men of quiet, true, limited nature, in the representation of dead or still-life subjects. It does not by its nature exclude a high degree of perfection.

#### MANNER.

But man finds, usually, such a mode of proceeding too timid and inadequate. He perceives a harmony among many objects, which can only be brought into a picture by sacrificing the individual. He gets tired of using Nature's letters each time to spell after her. He invents a way, devises a language for himself, so as to express in his own fashion the idea his soul has attained, and give to the object he has so many times repeated, a distinctive form, without each time he repeats it having recourse to Nature herself, or even recalling exactly the individual form. Thus a language is created, in which the mind of the speaker expresses and utters itself immediately; and as in each individual who thinks the conception of customary objects are formed and arranged differently,—so will every artist of this class see, understand, and imitate, the outward world in a different manner; will seize its appearances with more or less observant eye, and reproduce them more accurately or loosely. We see that this species of imitation is applied with the best effect, in cases where a great whole comprehends many subordinate objects. These last must be sacrificed in order to attain the general expression of the whole, as is the case in landscape, for instance, where the object would be missed, if we attended too closely to the details instead of keeping in view the idea of the whole.—*Goethe*.