



XXI. Cursory strictures on modern art, and particularly sculpture, in England, previous to the establishment of the Royal Academy

J. Flaxman Esq.

To cite this article: J. Flaxman Esq. (1807) XXI. Cursory strictures on modern art, and particularly sculpture, in England, previous to the establishment of the Royal Academy , Philosophical Magazine Series 1, 28:110, 152-160, DOI: [10.1080/14786440708563496](https://doi.org/10.1080/14786440708563496)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14786440708563496>



Published online: 18 May 2009.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2



View related articles [↗](#)

BEATING between the two BEATINGS.” And, by means of this *inequality* between the *two* original BEATINGS, the *inequality* of the *unaltered tri-equal quint*, and of the *altered* one, will immediately appear.

A good ear will perceive the *inequality* between the *two* original BEATINGS, in the case of those two *unequal quints* being struck even in succession. And, in like manner, any two imperfect quints, or any two imperfect major thirds, may be respectively compared by striking them in succession, and by carefully observing the *difference* between those BEATINGS which they respectively produce.

These are facts, with which Mr. FAREY appears to be wholly unacquainted; for, in his Observations on the Stanhope Temperament, he, throughout, considers BEATS and BEATINGS as *synonymous* terms; although it is most obvious that they are completely and distinctly *different*.

I think, however, that what I have said above will be quite sufficient to *beat* him out of his error, and also to *beat* into him those important musical truths which both you, Sir, and I, are equally desirous to be able generally to inculcate.

I am, Sir, very sincerely yours,
STANHOPE.

XXI. *Cursory Strictures on Modern Art, and particularly Sculpture, in England, previous to the Establishment of the Royal Academy.* By J. FLAXMAN, Esq.*

IN order to form a just estimate of the benefit which sculpture has derived from the exertions of the present æra in England, it will be necessary to take a cursory view of this art in Europe previous to the period at which the Royal Academy was established in London; and to observe with a little more accuracy its progress in our own country.

In Rome, the centre from which the arts have emanated for centuries past to the surrounding countries, about 150 years since, the taste of Bernini, the Neapolitan sculptor,

* From *The Artist*.

infected and prevailed over the Florentine and Roman schools. He had studied painting, and seems to have been enamoured with the works of Correggio, who, to avoid the dryness of his master, Andrea Mantegna, gave prodigious flow to the lines of his figures and redundancy to his draperies; of which Bernini's statues are only caricatures, totally devoid of the painter's ecstatic grace and sentiment. Before he was twenty years old he completed a marble group, the size of nature, of Apollo and Daphne, at the moment the nymph is changing into a laurel tree: the delicate character of the figures, the sprightly expression, the smooth finish of the material, and the light execution of the foliage, so captivated the public taste, that Michel Angelo was forgotten, the antique statues disregarded, and nothing looked on with delight that was not produced by the new favourite. It is true, Bernini showed respectable talents in the group above mentioned; and had he continued to select and study nature with diligence, he might have been a most valuable artist: but sudden success prevented him—he never improved; the immense works crowded on him made him spurn all example, and consider only how he might send out his models and designs most speedily. The attitudes of his figures are much twisted, the heads turned with a metreticious grace, the countenances simper affectedly or are deformed by low passions, the poor and vulgar limbs and bodies are loaded with draperies of such protruding or flying folds, as equally expose the unskilfulness of the artist and the solidity of the material on which he worked; his groups have an unmeaning connection, and his basso relievos are filled up with buildings in perspective, clouds, water, diminished figures, and attempts to represent such aerial effects as break down the boundaries of painting and sculpture, and confound the two arts. Pope Urban the Eighth was patron of this artist, and so passionately did he admire and promote his works, that, not contented with spending immense sums upon them, he took the antient bronze ornaments from the roof in the portico of the Pantheon, to the amount of 186,000 pounds, for Bernini to cast his bizarre and childish baldequin for St. Peter's, and then published their mutual

mutual shame in a boasting Latin inscription affixed to the building he had robbed so shamefully. Thus the pope and the sculptor carried all before them in their time, and sent out a baleful influence which corrupted public taste upwards of one hundred years afterwards.

Rusconi, Mocho, Bolgio, Quesnoy (commonly called Fiamingo), and the inferior sculptors of the time, adopted the popular taste, which their scholars continued, and its last puny and insipid effects are to be seen in the statues at the Fountain of Trevi, and monument of Benedict the Fourteenth, executed by Bracci and Sybilla, in St. Peter's church, about fifty years since.

Nearly the same taste in the arts of design which prevailed in Italy prevailed also in France, as the latter country was supplied with art, or artists, from the former: thus, when Lewis the Fourteenth invited Bernini to come into France, Bernini answered, "that he had no need of *him*, whilst he had such a sculptor as Puget." Puget's works were somewhat more dry and detailed than Bernini's; Girardon's (his cotemporary) were more heavy; but they were all of the same school. The opinion of Bernini confirmed the monarch, and the same bad taste was cultivated in France with as much zeal as it was fostered in Italy; as we see by the works of Bouchardon, Boucher, &c., who continued it to the same time which extinguished its last feeble efforts in both countries.

Spain, Germany, and the other nations of Europe, receiving their supplies of fine art from the two countries above mentioned, were consequently influenced by the same motives and trammelled in the same taste, which was at this period become so degraded as to be at the point of utter dissolution, had not some controlling circumstances arisen, which assisted in its revival.

The king of Naples had, in part, cleared the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompeii, which exposed to view streets, dwelling-houses, temples, theatres, baths, and public places, nearly in the same state as when they were inhabited 1700 years before: these discoveries brought back to the light of day, as it were by miracle, 700 antient paintings, and a prodigious

prodigious number of bronze statues and busts of the finest Greek sculpture.

The success of these discoveries, and the interest they excited, stimulated the popes, Roman nobility, and antiquarians, to make excavations wherever there was a probability their labours would be rewarded. These researches fortunately recovered from oblivion innumerable pieces of exquisite sculpture; many of the most precious formed the Clementine museum; many enriched the Borghese, Albani, and other collections; several passed into Germany, Holland, Sweden, Russia, France, and Spain: England was not insensible to the opportunity, and several intelligent and spirited individuals profited by this profusion of antient treasure. Such acquisitions roused attention from all quarters; they were eagerly visited, greedily examined, dissertations and memoirs were written concerning them, and systematic inquiries into their principles published. During all this research and analysis, frequent comparisons were made with the modern works, the remains of the bad taste above mentioned, and which were found so deficient in every excellence that they were universally abandoned to contempt. The interested antiquarian, with sordid cruelty, and to raise the price of his own commodity, whispered that modern talents were unequal to the meanest of these productions, and sometimes he found a senseless purchaser, whose only measure of intelligence was the abundance of his wealth; who would pay dearly enough for any thing that was called antient, to be received into the number of the cognoscenti, and join in the outcry against modern ability.

All this, however, brought in a new and severer mode of study among the artists, with a more diligent attention to nature and the antique, and has enabled some of them to exhibit performances much more on a level with the merit of those works than the insensible can feel, or the interested choose to own.

Having marked these phænomena in the hemisphere of art, we should now turn our thoughts more particularly to England, and see in what manner our own country was affected by their influence. Previous to the Reformation,
although

although Italian artists were employed in ornamenting our churches and tombs, yet in the old histories, records, and contracts of public buildings, there are abundant names of English painters and sculptors, who appear to have been considered able masters in their time, perhaps not inferior to their Italian fellow-workmen. But after Henry the Eighth's separation from the church of Rome, Elizabeth, proceeding in the reformation, destroyed the pictures and images in the churches; strictly forbidding any thing of the kind to be admitted in future, under the severest penalties, as being catholic and idolatrous. This entirely prevented the exercise of historical painting, or sculpture, in this country; at the very time that Raffaele and Michel Angelo had brought those arts into the highest estimation on the continent.—The rebellion, in 1648, completed what the reformation had begun; the fanatics defaced whatever they could, that the former inquisition had spared; they broke painted windows and tombs, carried away the monumental brass, and church-plate, crying, "Cursed he be, that doth the work of the Lord deceitfully!"—Thus the artist, terrified by the threats of the sovereign, the denunciation of death or perpetual imprisonment from the laws, and scared by fanatical anathemas, found that his only hope of safety rested upon quitting for ever a profession, which enclosed him on all sides with the prospect of misery and destruction. From this time, and from these causes, we scarcely hear of any attempt at historical art by an Englishman, until it was again called forth by the benign influence of the present reign.

When the liberal spirit of Charles the First desired to adorn the architecture of Whitehall with the graces of painting, he was obliged to seek the artist in a foreign land; he had no subject equal to the task: Rubens and Vandyck were employed: and when the king's bust was to be done, Vandyck painted three views of his face, a front, a side, and a three-quarter, which were sent to Bernini in Rome, by whom it was executed in marble. If our kings and nobility had continued to inhabit castles, as in the feudal times, painting and sculpture would have been but little wanted; for, if the
walls

walls of the building were sufficiently strong to resist battery, or shot, and contained retreats to secure the inhabitants from the enemy, the end of that kind of dwelling was answered: but in the times succeeding Charles the First, the improved state of society and knowledge had induced the great to build commodious villas and palaces, in which the architectural distribution made the sister-arts absolutely necessary to uniformity and completion. Still ingenious foreigners were employed for this purpose, whilst the native was treated with contempt, both at home and abroad, for his inability in those arts which law and religion had forbidden him to practise.

As this suppression of ability was extremely impolitic and dishonourable to the country, let us inquire for a moment on what scriptural authority the prohibition which occasioned it was supported. Painting and sculpture were banished from the churches, that they might not be idolatrously worshipped: and this is just; the divine law orders they shall not be worshipped, but utters no prohibition against the arts themselves: on the contrary, divine precept directed images of cherubim to be made, whose wings should extend over the ark of the covenant, and cherubim to be embroidered on the curtains which surrounded it. This decision in favour of the arts being employed for proper purposes in sacred buildings, is so clear and strong, that it could only be overlooked, or opposed, by infatuated bigotry.

A succession of foreign artists, as has been observed, were employed in almost every work of importance, from the time of Charles the First, until within forty years of the present day. The painters, Vandyck, Lely, Verrio, Kneller and Casali, succeeded to each other; as did also the sculptors, Cibber, Gibbons, Scheemakers, Rysbrack, Bertocini, and Roubiliac. This variety of artists (sculptors are more particularly meant) from different countries, French, Flemings, and Italians, sometimes brought the taste of John Goujon or Puget, sometimes a debased imitation of John of Bologna and the Florentine school, and sometimes the taste of Bernini; but never a pure style and sound principles. After the Reformation, the chief employment of sculpture

was

was in sepulchral monuments, which, during the reigns of James the First and his son Charles, were chiefly executed by Frenchmen or Flemings, scholars of John Goujon, still regulated by the principles their master had acquired from Primaticcio, the pupil of Raffaele. Some of these works have great merit, particularly the tombs of sir John Norris, and sir Francis Vere, in the same chapel with Roubiliac's monument of lady E. Nightingale in Westminster abbey.

The rebuilding of London, in the reign of Charles the Second, gave some employment to sculpture. Cibber's works are the most conspicuous of that period: his mad figures on the Bethlehem gates have a natural sentiment, but are ill drawn; his bas-relief on the pedestal of London monument is not ill conceived, but stiff and clumsy in the execution; his clothed figures in the Royal Exchange strut like dancing-masters, and have the importance of coxcombs. But with all his faults, what he left is far preferable to the succeeding works. The figures in St. Paul's church, and the conversion of the saint in the pediment, partake strongly of Bernini's affectation; and from that time to the establishment of the Royal Academy we must expect to see every piece of sculpture more or less tinted with the same bad taste, especially the sepulchral monuments, to which, after the statues and basso-relievos last noticed, we must chiefly look for the progress of sculpture amongst us.

It will be proper here to remark that all the Grecian sculpture was arranged in three classes: the group of figures; the single statue; and alto or basso relievo. The first two classes were suited to all insulated situations, and the latter to fill pannels in walls. These classes not only serve all architectural purposes, but adorn, harmonise, and finish its forms: every attempt to make other combinations between sculpture and architecture will be found unreasonable, and degrading to one as well as the other; but Bernini, whose character and works we have already noticed, seems to have thought that he had the privilege of equally subverting art and nature in his works. I shall mention the following instances although I am afraid their extreme absurdities will prevent such of those from believing the descriptions as have
not

not seen the things themselves. In the area before the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva he raised a bronze elephant on a pedestal, and on the elephant's back placed an Egyptian obelisk : the architecture of the east window in St. Peter's church he has loaded with many tons weight of stucco clouds, out of which issue huge rays, intended for light or glory, of the same materials, but long and thick enough for the beams of a house. Extravagances of this kind, and many others that he has committed, have fortunately had little effect upon us, because some have been necessarily connected with catholic churches, and others introduced in fountains, which are only frequent in hot countries : we were, however, the dupes of his school, until native genius gained sufficient judgment and strength to correct its errors, and supply a better style of art. Before the time of Bernini, two kinds of sepulchral monuments prevailed ; one from the highest antiquity, which was a sarcophagus, either plain, or covered with basso-relievos, with or without the statue of the deceased on its top. The other kind was introduced by Michel Angelo, in the mausoleum of Julius the Second ; and those of the Medici family, in the chapel of St. Lorenzo, at Florence. In these the sarcophagus, as in the former kind, was suited to the niche or architecture against which it was placed, and surmounted or surrounded by statues of the deceased and his moral attributes. Both these practices were rational and proper ; the one for plainer, the other for more magnificent tombs. This branch of sculpture was of too much importance to be neglected by Bernini ; he stripped it of its antient simple grandeur, leaving it neither group, statue, basso-relievo, sarcophagus, or trophy, but an absurd mixture of all, placed against a dark-coloured marble pyramid, and thus sacrificing all that is valuable in sculpture to what he conceived a picturesque effect. The pyramid is, from its immense size, solid base, diminishing upwards, a building intended to last thousands of years : how ridiculous, then, to raise a little pyramid of slab marble, an inch thick, on a neat pedestal, to be the back ground of sculpture, belonging to none of the antient classes, foisted into architecture, with
which

which it has neither connection or harmony, and in which it appears equally disgusting and deformed! The first monuments he raised of this kind were two in the Chigi chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, in Rome: this novelty soon found its way into every country in Europe; our Westminster abbey is an unfortunate instance of its prevalence. Rysbrack and Roubiliac spread the popularity of this taste in England; but as the first of these sculptors was a mere workman, too insipid to give pleasure, and too dull to offend greatly, we shall dismiss him without further notice. The other deserves more attention. Roubiliac was an enthusiast in his art, possessed of considerable talents: he copied vulgar nature with zeal, and some of his figures seem alive; but their characters are mean, their expressions grimace, and their forms frequently bad; his draperies are worked with great diligence and labour, from the most disagreeable examples in nature, the folds being either heavy or meagre, frequently without a determined general form, and hung on his figures with little meaning. He grouped two figures together (for he never attempted more) better than most of his contemporaries; but his thoughts are conceits, and his compositions epigrams. This artist went to Italy, in company with Mr. Pond, an English painter: he was absent from home three months, going and returning, stayed three days in Rome, and laughed at the sublime remains of antient sculpture! The other sculptors of this time were ordinary men; their faults were common, and their works have no beauty to rescue them from oblivion.

Thus we have seen the nobler efforts of painting and sculpture driven out of the country by reforming violence and puritanical fury; sculpture reduced to the narrow limits of monument-making, and by these means degraded to a sort of trade; and this department supplied from the corrupt source of Bernini's school, and not unfrequently through the worst mediums. In this state the art continued until the establishment of the Royal Academy settled a course of study, both at home and abroad, which developed the powers of English genius, till then unknown to the natives, and denied by foreigners.