

The Slade professorship : address to the Very Rev. the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge / F.M.B.

Contributors

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Royal College of Surgeons of England

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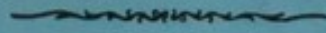
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THE SLADE PROFESSORSHIP.



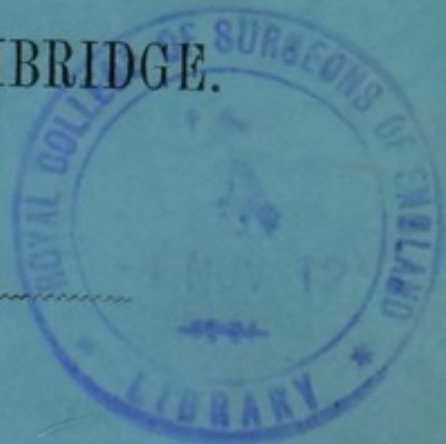
A D D R E S S

TO THE

VERY REV. THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

OF THE

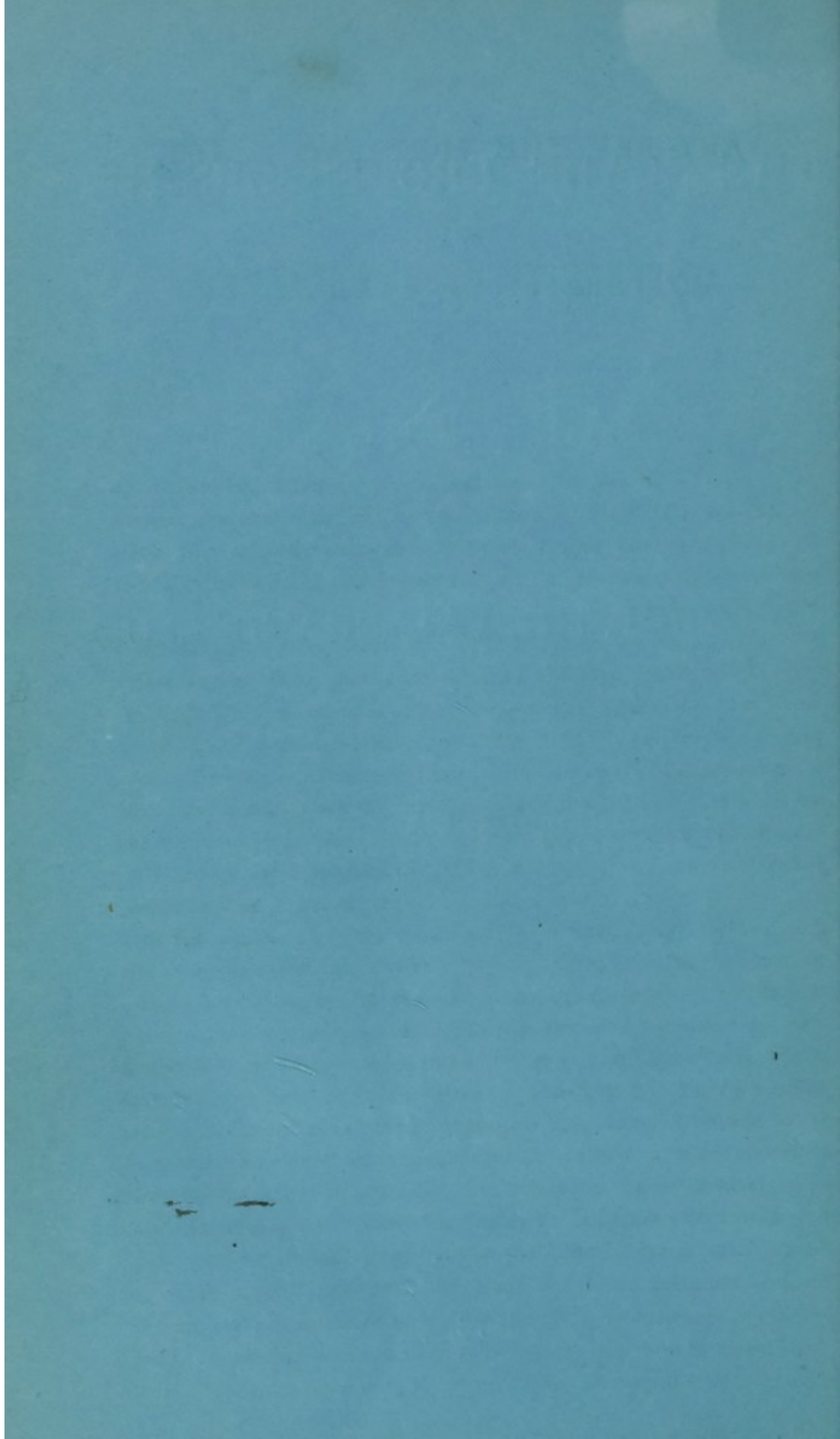
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE.



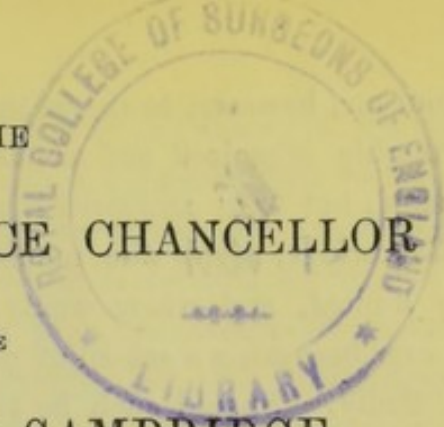
F. M. B.



1873.



TO THE
VERY REV. THE VICE CHANCELLOR
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE.



REVEREND SIR,

Being a Candidate for the honour of occupying the Slade Chair of Fine Art at your University, I think it desirable to state at some length, and with some particularity, my views as to the Professorship itself, the choice of a Professor, and the character of his duties when elected.

1st. As to the nature of the Chair itself, and the right employment of the Slade bequest, I am of opinion that the system in actual existence, consisting of lectures delivered as a branch of general education, is upon the whole the right one, and I have it happily in my power to affirm that more than three years ago, my convictions respecting such course were identical, for having been questioned as to this point at the time the Slade School of Fine Art in London was under consideration, I stated in reply that I believed the Art Studies best fitted for the College, would be such as could form part of a scheme of general education, and not those required by practical artists. My reason for this opinion was two-fold: partly, that it seemed to me desirable, (and more than ever so in these days, when so many of the old established boundaries in education and sociology are either shifting or being swept away)—that some broad line of demarcation should be maintained between education proper, and technical instruction, the one seeming to be the natural inheritance of University bodies, while the other appears to pertain more to special institutions,—a point which I am informed is at present under discussion with the learned and philosophic— But more, that I regarded the classes and mode of training particularly designed for Art-Students as ill adapted to the general scholar, owing to their requiring too much time, and otherwise tending rather to encourage fragmentary technical skill, than those broad ideas and elevated tastes so evidently demanded in the case of connoisseurs. These were my views three years back, and such they have remained: far be

it from me, however, to regret the establishment of a School of Art so thoroughly organized and conducted as that of University College, London; but I am convinced it would be a mistake to attempt the like in Cambridge, where the number of real Art-Students could be but very limited, and where wants of many kinds seem to disqualify it for ever becoming a school of practical art.*

2ndly. Should such be the acknowledged purpose of the Professorship, I believe that it could be best carried out by one himself practically conversant with art, and in particular, a historical painter. Practical, because practical acquaintance with a subject induces vivifying illustrations drawn from its inner nature; whereas theory deals in generalities, skimmed from off its surface, and also from the danger there is that theoretical doctrines, expounded by a theorist, to pupils themselves only theoretic, would lead too much to unimpressive terminology, and gratuitous assertion of rules and principles; historic, because that branch of all the arts is most central, stands highest, and as it were projects its glance over the others. But it is still more owing to *personal ascendancy*,—a quality which, though but the result of extorted admiration and enthusiasm, seems in great leaders akin to the mysterious forces of nature, and which, like a spark, passes from master to pupils, kindling their attention;—that the practical man remains valuable. The master must also be master of his craft:—one to lead soldiers, must have fought battles; to impress a medical class, one must have performed cures; to wield authority in the house, one must be the “author,” the “auctor,” or adder to it of at least one stone during its building; and so likewise, to the art-seeker, the art-master, the creative genius is indispensable.

But, to obtain and keep hold of this personal influence, it suffices not to be a historical painter in name,—a denomination, moreover, of the vaguest, seeing that it no-wise necessitates the carrying out of subjects taken from history,—it requires a man with a living interest attaching to all he does, a man so balanced as to unite executive excellence with imagination and elevation of aims, combining general knowledge with acuteness of reasoning sufficient for the evolution of fresh laws where the progress of art demands them, or the erasement of rules become obsolete,—in short an artist equally capable of clothing his ideas in words or in works. Such a man commands attention by force of judgment; his memory is stored, but with typical instances—

* There could be no reason why the Professor should not give technical advice after the general class, to such pupils as may have especial aims, or show exceptional aptitude.

heavy in grain, not with the husk and chaff of dry facts ; if his utterance be not of the most spontaneous sort, if his periods be not always perfectly rounded, on the other hand he never leads his pupils astray, for as each fresh topic arises, his reasoning is a match for it, and by degrees, as his subject warms beneath him, unconscious eloquence is expressed,—for he is original. His thoughts run not on catalogues, nor his opinions on other men's writings. These, when he remembers, he identifies with the ideas of the times which engendered them, and with his own mind brought to the subject, he accepts them,—however oft quoted,—for what they are worth ; and of the dried leaves of common-place is made nourishment for the living seed of thought, as it takes wing, and roots itself in the brains and hearts of others, and there, in the place of the sickly plant, diletantism, expands to a powerful tree of knowledge and love of art.

3rdly. As to the subjects of such a Professor's teaching, and his mode of dividing and classifying them, I am of opinion that they should include the history, critical analyses, and to a certain extent, technical examination of all the Fine Arts, of every nation and epoch, from historic painting and sculpture down to mere decoration, and from the present day back to the remotest past.

If such a programme should appear too vast and comprehensive for the scope of any course of lectures, it should be remembered that the highest conditions of art,—those alone in which human emotion mixes, only prevailed in one quarter of the globe, Europe, during two periods of one thousand years each : about the first of these, Greek Art, though so much has to be admired, very little can be told, and that whereas architectural and decorative art occupy every other time and place, if of the first-named, much would have to be said under several headings, of the latter one could only treat as a whole, probably in one discourse.

As to the amount of information to be reviewed and condensed in such a synthesis, though on the narrative plan it might not only be beyond the limits of any class, or indeed of an ordinary literary career, yet by modern method and critical science, a way, in rapid succession, to the more salient features is shown : even as in the geographical examination of some continent, it may be as impossible as it would be unprofitable to name every town and village, hill and rivulet, yet it becomes practicable to give the physical aspects of the whole,—with its articulated ranges and its water-sheds, its table land and its swampy regions,—in a way that is far more impressive. Nothing indeed can be more wearying to a healthy intellect, or more flattering to such as are possessed of minute memories and sluggish tastes than the first described plan, by which every small group of workers, nay, each individual work

has to engross some minute share of the wearying whole, till adjectives of praise fail to secure a sufficient prominence to the really important characteristics, but when these only are insisted on, either for admiration or dispraise, when no subject is criticised from its own separate stand-point, but in place of this, the bearing and linking of individuals and groups are explained, then prejudice is forced to yield, and obstinacy that will refuse its assent to dogmatism, has to accept the general law. By such inductive reasoning, may perhaps be shown, how all art, from its earliest years,—as separable from individual genius, which is *im*-progressive and unimprovable,—proceeds by unceasing, though not undeviating, advances, to its culminating point; how, even during its most disastrous checks, steps towards the goal are made, and that still, after its final plunge downwards, as in the case of Greek art, it lies not dead like rotten wood, but rather is as the living roots of a hewn-down tree that still put forth shoots in their abasement.

Then at some point when the attention of the class is fully awakened, it may become desirable to entertain the question of abstract principles in art, why Beauty has hitherto eluded the grasp of definition, and whether it be only relative, and occupying some varying mean place between our organisms, our associations and our knowledge; or again, whether as some insist, the type which is mathematically ascertainable, be Beauty itself. In like guise, the different opinions and schools of criticism which have accompanied the march of art, may be subjected to analytical examination, from the earliest crude fragments bearing on the perplexed question, down to the dawn and bright morning of critical literature in Italy, with Aretino, down through the enthusiastic commencement of philosophic criticism in Germany with Lessing and Winckelman, past Didérot, past Stendhal, and the disquisitive acuteness of the French thinkers, through the unprofitable wrangles about objectivity and subjectivity, classicism and romanticism, past the tender, if somewhat sentimental, worship of “the Early Masters,” and so called “Christian Art,” past “English Individuality,” and the belief in “Originality,” up to the very latest expression of the critical mind, as exemplified in Grimm and Schnaase, and a return to facts and a doctrine founded synthetically on evidence collated from all the sister arts, including music; a doctrine akin to eclecticism, and yet free of it; by which is shown how each school or individual who inaugurated it, has its feet planted in the past,—its predecessors, and its arms to the future its own, and which proves that the Present, would it be remembered, must also add something of its own to the general stock.

But here I would fain abandon generalities, for the consideration of how facts and theories could best be dealt with in a series of Lectures

such as the ordinary student could be supposed to find time for. A synopsis in chronological order of all that is known of the subject from earliest times, might be the simplest, but it is by no means clear that it would be the most effective plan. I should rather incline to one which would place the beginning near the middle ; or rather a sort of *perspective* middle, such as gives preponderance to a very small space in the foreground, over miles of back-ground fading away into distance.* I should wish the course to begin 150 years ago, with the revival of painting by William Hogarth, reinforced by Reynolds and Gainsborough ; and however startling such proposition, ~~as~~ unusual such phraseology may appear, it would be easy, by means of a table of dates, and the comparison of a few facts, to justify them. o/c

With the art of all Europe reduced to the flattest of school respectability,—with no one rival in all Spain, Holland, France or Italy, to be (with the exception of Greuze)—put in the scale with him, Hogarth, without a predecessor in England, and with scarce a cotemporary on the continent, stands forth in proud and solitary pre-eminence, the father of modern art, and not so much so from the mere fact of there being no other great genius in Painting extant, as from the new phase into which art from that time forth entered. For with his inexhaustible ideas,—painter's ideas, which are in their nature entirely apart from literary inventions,—his boundless range of dramatic ex-

* Synopsis of a course of Eighteen Lectures for the Slade Professorship.

1. The Revival of Painting in the 18th century, by Hogarth. Also about Reynolds, Gainsborough, &c.
2. The Revival of Painting in Flanders and Spain in the 17th century. Italian realistic Art. French Art.
3. English Modern Art.
4. French and Belgian Modern Art,
5. German and Scandinavian Modern Art.
6. Mediæval, Early German, French, Italian, and English Art ; how sprung from Byzantine Art.
7. Italian Art, to the beginning of the 16th century.
8. Greek Art.
9. Giorgione, Titian, Leonardo, Raphaele, Correggio, Michael Angelo, &c.
10. Egyptian, Asiatic, Greek, Byzantine, and Gothic Architecture.
11. Renaissance, pseudo Greek, and English 19th century Gothic.
12. Ornamental Art.
13. Technical ; Anatomy, Perspective, &c.
14. Technical ; Colour, Form, Composition, Draperies, &c.
15. Sculpture.
16. Masters and Master Pieces.
17. The Future of Art.
18. Review of the whole Course of Lectures.

pression, his never surpassed facility of execution, he seemed the founder of new kingdoms for his heirs to reign over, and a new vista of pictorial possibilities was displayed in front of him, and when later the two great English face-painters came to his support, the three formed a tripod on which England's and a new generation's art rested. Beauty and Fancy returned to their no longer neglected sister art, and the world sunned itself in their smiles. The seventeenth century schools of Holland and Spain being again extinct, and Greuze, the charming pourtrayer of the one sweet face, leaving no school behind him, (if even his faint tawdriness and conventionalities could be forgiven him) France and Europe lapsed again into obscurity and grossness, for a stern and martial "reveillé" to overtake them, in David. But the key-note of modern painting had already been struck in the far distance of the seventeenth century, with the realistic styles of Veronese, Rubens, Velasquez, and Rembrandt; silenced for a time, it was caught up by the English school,—a genius-haunted band, with Flaxman, and Stothard, and Constable, and Blake and Crome,—hurrying on, oft stumbling and catching in their art-trappings, and clashing for a while with the usurping Davidians, it half mingles with them, half jostles them, founds, through Constable, a school of landscape in France, and exists in and with modern art,—all but in Germany; too far off to have caught up the tone, she has founded a school of her own, hovering between poetry and pedantry,—strongly defined and outlined poets' ideas clothed in schoolmens' gowns, transparent with age and colourless. English art has already snatched from the Teutons all she requires and more,* but her sister sleeps incredulous,—or from Antwerp or Paris seeks tardy assistance. Great otherwise, in idea-range, and first both for contour and design, and earliest (ourselves not excepted) to do honour to Hogarth and with at least one beauty-moved votary, the sculptor Rauch! But Paris, London, and Antwerp form a triumvirate that brooks no other claims to the empire of art. Such might be the incomplete skeleton of what might be given on the subject of Modern Art, occupying the five first lectures.

The ear of the class once gained, the moment would be favourable for stating the claims of Mediæval Schools, where they sit, canopied with gold, and raimented as with angels' wings,—perfect in tint and hue, and purest, yet intensest in expression. Giotto and Arcagnas,—spirits as of grown men striving with swathing bands, and bursting them

Then the theme might necessitate a recoil of almost 2,000 years,

* Dyce and Maclise.

upon Greek Art, with its strength as of Demi-Gods,—needing not exaggeration or tumultuous upheavings of energy; with health for beauty, and a regulated skill never before or since attained to, fitting preparation of the mind for the contemplation of the trio of laurel-bearers of the Renaissance, Leonardo, Raphael, and Buonarotti. Condemners of the simple faith of their fathers, these again set “Strength” and “Physical Beauty” on the throne of art, and welcomed the Pagan Gods. The first, many-hued in mind as the chameleon of the fable, and great in all his phantasies,—painter, poet, sculptor, musician, courtier, and pioneer of science, by turns,—seldom painting, never idling, too beautiful to be long spared from a court’s festivities. The second, not a courtier among princes, but a prince among courtiers,—supreme,—in all things successful,—worshiped; ever toiling, filling the world with his works and his fame, living out a long life in a short space,—Hushed to sleep by his guardian genius! The third, from youth to age a giant among common men, walking apart, working apart, taciturn,—brooding great thoughts, not small successes, drawing divinity out of stones, or stamping it on the damned! Indefatigable, and great in age as in all things, and with hands too enfeebled to hold the pencil, rearing huge temples! out-living whole generations of his pupils, and leaving behind him a cloak too heavy and vast for the perplexed executors of his genius.

The historic side of human-impressed Art done with, Architecture and the arts uninformed of human passions, would escort us on a panoramic journey past the silent lessons of the Sphinxes and the problems of Egyptian masonry, away to the magic East, and the tile-walled pagodas, and the temples rock-scooped and granite-carved, gilded prisons of queens, citadels of cruelty, disguised with subtlest craft of ornament,—secret,—inscrutable, dateless,—thence back past the ruins of temples built for free-men,—moderate, severe, but enriched with beauty and gems of art, more imperishable than gold,—and the ruins of palaces built by the same freemens’ sons for tyrants; and the Byzantine Basilica, and the Norman fort, and the Cathedrals of the middle ages, and Renaissance dug to light in fragments from antiquity, and Pseudo-Greek art, and home to England and English early art,—not revived,—rather re-appearing as the gold hills dip down under the sea to re-emerge thousands of miles off; the world’s admiration! nor should be forgotten, as too often forgotten now, ornamental art, shuddering in bondage to mechanical neatness, and the question why while it flourishes amid those lowest in the ethnological scale, it fails and pales before the ethics of civilization.

At this stage of the lectures, the Technicals of Art might be intro-

duced,—the different modes of study, the rules of composition in painting, sculpture and architecture, the characteristics of architectonic art, the value of anatomy, perspective, and the study of costume in painting, the examination of form as beauty in men and animals, the eulogium of Colour and other topics, would bring us to the close of the fourteenth discourse.

The remaining four lectures,—supposing the set to consist of 18, to be given twice in three years,—might be reserved for subjects of the highest interest: sculpture, master-pieces in art, philosophic considerations, and lastly, counterbalancing the want of an introductory discourse, a review of the whole matter given.

I have now, as briefly as the nature of the subject admits, explained my views as to the Professorship itself, and the arts it has been founded to advocate. I have faintly indicated how a systematic analysis of the whole may be attempted, I have glanced at the relations of different Schools, and pointed to their fluctuations; nor have I left unnoticed the connection between the several branches of art, their mutual assistance, and at times the interchange of functions that takes place between the Imaginative Painter and the Historical Portrait Painter, the Sculptor and the Architect. I have suggested problems that might be entertained, and views that might be discussed. Should I have exceeded in length the ordinary address of a candidate, it has not been without purpose, though at the risk of being wearisome; for the writer can be known by his writings, and the artist by his works; but how is the fitness of either to be tested when they offer to exchange parts?

Bearing this double question in mind, I beg to submit these few pages in answer to one section of it, at the same time that, for the other, I trust my works themselves, or the notices that have at different times appeared on them, may serve as a reply.

I have the honour to be,

REVEREND SIR,

Your's obediently,

FORD MADOX BROWN.

37 Fitzroy Square, W.

Dec. 20, 1872.