Description of the picture : Christ healing the sick in the Temple, painted by Benjamin West ... and now in the British Gallery, Pall Mall / [A.D. M'Quin].

Contributors

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DESCRIPTION

OF

THE PICTURE,

Christ Healing the Sick

IN THE

TEMPLE,

PAINTED

By BENJAMIN WEST, Esq.

PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY.

AND NOW IN THE BRITISH GALLERY, PALL MALL.

FROM THE PHŒNIX

SUNDAY AND MONDAY NEWSPAPER.

THE SECOND EDITION, CONSIDERABLY IMPROVED.

LONDON:

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(BY PERMISSION OF THE DIRECTORS.)

1811.

Price Sixpence.

Christ Healing the Sick.

"And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them.

"And when the Chief Priests and Scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: they were sore displeased."

MATT. Chap. xxi. v. 14, 15.

INTRODUCTION.

THE *Transfiguration*, by the *divine* RAPHAEL, we have attentively studied, and it has filled us with awe and astonishment. Often have we also stood speechless before the Cartoons, lest we should interrupt the miraculous acts performing on the canvas, and have laid down our respectful fingers on the places where the wonder-working hand of the Painter had dwelt, feeling, at the same time, a certain pride at having arrived, seemingly, in contact with the first artist in the world. The *Raising of Lazarus* we have most sincerely admired at the Palais Royal, and are happy to know that it is now in the possession of one of the first patrons of the art, and in London. The celebrated *Communion of St. Jerom* by *Dominichino*, the famous Picture of *D. da Volterra*, the *Crucifixion* by *N. Poussin*, all these constellations of the firmanent of the graphic Muse, as well as the *Miracles of Christ*, with which the forcible pencil of *Jouvenet* has surrounded the altar of St. Martin in the Fields at Paris, are still fresh in our recollection, and yet, when entering the South Room of the British Institution, we cast our eyes upon Mr. West's Picture---suddenly, and as if by magic, all these chef-d'œuvres of the art ebb and crowd back in the tide of our memory, but soon flow and vanish away. This is a bold

assertion, yet we are confident that our particularising the performance will prevent any one evincing us guilty of blind enthusiasm or ill-grounded partiality, and as it will, through the generosity of the Subscribers, stand as the polar star and foundation-stone of a British Gallery, instead of being sent, as intended at first, to adorn and illumine another hemisphere, we trust that our readers will be pleased at our entering minutely into the elements of the Picture; indeed, not an atom of the whole should be left unnoticed.

Before we enter into the particulars, let us observe, generally, that, on an area of about one hundred and seventy-seven square feet, the eye meets between fifty and sixty figures, all finished after living models, and that this picture possesses that uncommon felicity of subject which must be pleasing to all Christians, whatever may be the difference of their worship.---There is not a sect that does not admit that we are all sinners, all liable to bodily infirmities, and feeble creatures; and as here the invention points out so general and so indisputable a truth, every one is called to admire the manner in which it has been substantiated by the fertile and powerful conception of the Artist.

INVENTION.

The design is grand and worthy of the sublimity of the subject. Boldly conceived and appropriate in all its parts, it appears strictly conformable to the invariable rules of Epic composition, which the greatest painters have received from the most celebrated poets. The Son of the Almighty, embodied in a most amiable human shape, stands in his ministerial and typical capacity of healing the sick. On his face the mildness of a man of the tenderest feelings is so exquisitely blended with the majesty of a being above Nature, that it is not easy to say which most prevails, the meek and humble son of Mary, or the imperative Creator

and Master of the Universe. His attitude is easy and dignified, the drapery elegant and noble; ample without incumbrance; folded with simplicity and taste, and according with the old and generally-adopted costume of red and blue. The head, hands, and feet are most beautifully wrought, very gracefully disposed, and the whole figure follows the line of beauty without affectation or constraint.

Christ is surrounded by several groups, composed partly of his Disciples and Apostles; partly of the afflicted and languid, brought to him as the Fountain of Life; and of the Pharisees and priests, who view the Messiah with involuntary wonder and mortal jealousy. These groups are disposed with great judgment, and afford to each other a proper help in the general system of light and shade in the whole piece. They undulate before the eyes, like distant hills in the glow of a summer evening, and the pleasing vapour which circulates around them, produces the most correct aërial perspective.

In the group of the Apostles, which serves as a back ground to the principal figure, and is made up with uncommon discernment, John on the right hand of his master, Peter, Matthew, and several others on the left, are most conspicuous. The beloved disciple is represented here young, amiable, and pensive, as we constantly find him in religious compositions. Peter reminds us, perhaps, too much, of the Cartoon "The Death of Ananias;" but he is the Apostle whom we know, whose features are familiar to us, and who, most probably, was anciently imitated by Italian painters and sculptors, from statues of Jove himself, as if they could not exemplify the potent and *infallible* head of their church, in a better manner than by identifying him with his fabulous type in the Capitolian temple, the "father of gods and men, whose nod was fate." Matthew, who relates the fact, was

called from his toll-desk soon after a circumstance similar to this, and is therefore a fit witness to the miraculous transaction, in which he seems to take a peculiar interest.

On the right of Christ are several persons bringing objects of pity and commiseration to HIM, who was, of all the sons of men, the most compassionate: a most beautiful woman, in a dark garment, holds a sickly infant;---behind her a distressed mother brings forward, with natural eagerness, a ricketty child; and, between her and Jesus, we remark, as a prominent feature in this group, a very handsome young woman, who seems to have lost her sight by a dreadful disorder in her brain. The white band, and the hand of the sympathizing old man, which bind and hold her beautiful head, tell at once her situation, and work impressively on the mind of the spectators, who wish that an object so pleasing, so enchanting to the sight, may not be longer deprived of that blessing. This group is backed by that of the high-priest and Pharisees, whose countenances, by their variety and aptness, are in a most classical style. A figure in the right corner, pointing at our Saviour, and glancing on him a look full of malice, has been mistaken for the traitor Judas; but the painter had too correct a conception of his subject to bring forward such a hideous character. Fear and cowardice are fit companions for conscious guilt, and Mr. West has most appropriately placed Iscariot in the back ground, lurking behind the other Apostles, and darting, slily, through the crowd, a glance full of malignity, perfidy, and treason at the divine prototype of goodness, truth, and mercy. His invidious eye and part of his sallow face are all that can be seen of him.

From the group of Priests, Scribes, and Pharisees, the sight of the spectator is agreeably and gradually led, by the contrast of several elegant women, bearing baskets of doves and flowers, to an inside view of the Temple, where,

in the Sanctuary, the seven-branched Candelabrum burns in awful majesty. A peristyle of well-painted, but plain columns, adorned with lamps, conveys the roving eye to a glance at the gate called *Speciosa,* so well represented in one of the Cartoons: young Levites, boys crying "Hosanna," and other figures of less import in the *demi-jour,* fill up the intervals, without crowding, and direct our attention to a more interesting part of the picture.

On the left side of the canvas, an elderly woman, distorted by complicated disease, is brought to Jesus by several friends and relations, two of whom appear to be Roman soldiers, whose sturdy mien and military dress contrast excellently with, and set off, the pallid face and emaciated limbs of the sufferer, as well as the beautiful and most lovely features of her distressed daughter.

In front of this affecting group a Centurion is in the act of kneeling: his attitude, the anatomical merit of his figure, and the classical correctness of his costume, deserve our unfeigned admiration. He expresses what he feels, and appears to feel the most profound veneration for HIM whom he so earnestly supplicates. Between him and Christ one of the principal groups is placed.

An old man, worn out with a long and death-brooding illness, is carried by two strong porters, one standing at the head and supporting the superior part of the body, the other kneeling, his back towards the spectators, and holding the feet and legs. Such attention has been paid to anatomy and colouring in the working up of these two figures, that both, and especially the standing one, seem rather living beings than the masterly and successful efforts of a judicious pencil. But what shall we say of the sick man intrusted to their care? The impression still remains, and will not be easily removed from our mind.—Surely the expression on the face of the reviving *Lazarus,*

by *Seb. del Piombo*, is admirable; and it has been whispered, that the restoring hand, whose original wonders we are now relating, had somewhat to do there with making up for the rapacity of Time;---here the expression is greater still; we read in the half-sunk eyes, on the projecting brows, and quivering lips of the decaying man, lively hope and heart-soothing confidence pronounced with the most energetic emphasis. His skeleton arms and hands are raised towards the real source of health and comfort, and his feet, which happen naturally to be the nighest part to the healing power, by a gentle glow of returning blood, which distinguishes them from the general tint of the body, seem to have already felt the emanating virtue that flowed spontaneously from HIM who alone could say, in truth, "I am the life."

Contrast is the most powerful engine a Painter can make use of to secure admiration to his works. Mr. West has succeeded wonderfully in this part, and thence arises that secret charm which, even at first sight, wins the approbation of the beholder. The beautiful woman who holds the crutch of her dying father, the healthy complexion of her face and the glow of her extended neck; the figure of the young man above; the lovely boy annexed to the group; the blind old man led by a lad, the two young Apostles who seem engaged in eager conference, all here deserves our unrestricted approval, and makes the centre of the Picture the focus of interest.

COMPOSITION.

Thus far we have given, or, at least, endeavoured to give, a general view of the picture. Now it remains for us to enter into the detail, and we shudder at the idea of anatomizing a piece of workmanship, whose *tout-ensemble* (to be adequately described) would have required a

pen and a mind equal to the pencil and genius that created it.

It has generally been understood that the rule of the threefold unity, so strictly adhered to by Greek, Latin, and French Dramatists, has an equal claim upon the attention of Painters. In fact, an historical picture is, in itself, a silent drama, or, at least, a selected scene, the fleeting and momentary performance of which has, by the commanding hand of the Artist, been fixed on canvas. Yet we have to deplore that many of the great luminaries of the *chromatic* world have often deviated from the unities of action, time, and place. It has been respectfully, but most justly, observed, that the chef-d'œuvre of *Raphael*, mentioned in the beginning of these observations, labours under the incorrectness of a double transaction; a fault which, after this deluding precedent, and upon the god-like authority of so great a master, crept into the works of many of his followers, who, unfortunately, had neither talents nor elevation of mind sufficient to redeem, or atone for, the indisputable error. The unity of time has been also infringed upon by painters of all ages, but most egregiously by those who, treading the dark paths of the reviving art, had yet but a doubtful dawn to guide them through the intricacies of their fantastic way. We often remark, in their performances, episodes which certainly belong to other times, and personages who lived in ages previous or posterior to the principal figure. These anachronisms are most common in religious subjects, and cannot be accounted for, unless by the too-obsequious docility of *the hand that painted* to the imperious directions and commands of *the hand that paid.* The unity of place has not been much more regarded by several others, who, on the same canvas, give you several scenes acted on different spots; placing in the corner of *a Crucifixion,* the *Agony in the Garden,* or in the background of *Vulcan forging the*

armour of Æneas, that very hero admiring the work under a tree. Happily, the patrons of the Art being less bigotted to their own whims, and the Painters, through the liberality of their patrons, less penurious, these incongruities do not often hurt our eyes in modern paintings.

In the valuable performance under our inspection none of these hardly excusable faults are to be found. The last group (which, if we consider its high importance as an integral part of the whole, we have but *slightly* sketched), constitutes, with the person of Christ, the entire subject. All the rest is accessary. No episode, no digression is idly introduced which might detract in the least from the full attention of the beholder; and, although the Son of God appears to feel for all the sufferers who surround him and entreat his benevolent attention to their respective infirmities, yet the entire scene consists in the act of healing the sick man.

DESIGN.

When a Painter has conceived a sublime composition, and his hand has chalked it out on the pannel or canvas, much more still remains to be done. His *design*, as the word is understood in a more specific sense, ought, by its correctness and aptness, to answer the grandeur of the *invention*. Here again, in this second part of a great Painter's duty, we shall have the pleasing task of praising the President of the Royal Academy. The outlines are every where in the classical style of the Roman School, and the "*airs de tête*" elegant, varied, and pure. No repeated similarity, no mannerist's contortions disgust the eye; no forced oppositions of figures and of limbs puzzle the critic's mind.

The extremities, so often neglected by some of the ancient masters, are here admirably articulated and highly

finished, and even that part (which, though *apparently* of little consequence, Lud. Caracci deemed so difficult to draw with agreeable truth, that he himself composed, after the best specimens in nature, a *canon* or rule for it) the *human ear*, wherever it meets the sight, is boldly pronounced, and expressed with indisputable mastership. The feet of Christ are those which Magdalen anointed and kissed, and the sandals are in perfect harmony with them. The feet and hands of the old man are entitled to great praise also, though of a very different appearance. His knotted and ache-worn fingers and bare-phalanxed toes may serve as a study for any artist who desires to become perfect in anatomical accuracy.

The hands of Jesus are very remarkable. The left one is so judiciously, so happily placed, that it appears insulated, as in nature, in the ambient air; and the right, which balances the other in graceful equilibrium, receives, between the index-finger and the thumb, the brightest ray of light to be found in the whole picture; as if, being the organ through which the divine power emanates and manifests itself, it ought to have emitted, above all the rest, an *acmè* of brilliancy and incomparable radiance. Hence, from this single spot, in the general economy of *the keeping*, the light decreases, through the well-understood medium of chiaro oscuro, into still visible shades.

We must not forget to mention here the boldness of the Artist in placing the bright circle of glory, which surrounds the head of Christ, close to the spot which exhibits the seven lights of the mysterious luminary in the *Sanctum Sanctorum* of the Temple. A common artist would have been afraid lest the accidental back-ground might have out-glowed the brightness of the light which emanates from Him who said, " let there be light:" conscious of his power, the Artist places the one nearly upon

the other, and, by this most orthodox contrast, exemplifies the rising dawn of the Messiah's glory upon the slow-retiring twilight of the fulfilled types of the Mosaic Law.

COLOURING.

This essential part of painting acts, sometimes, as a passport for any kind of composition, and its irresitible magic, by the help of what the Italians expressively term *lo strepito*, often lulls the most supercilious mind into blindness at the sight of glaring defects in invention or design. Free from too much bustle and eclat, the choice of local colours in the draperies and in the variety of complexions, arising from the difference of sex and age in the persons here represented, bespeaks great taste and discernment. No blunt transition, no abrupt breaking from one colour to another, no scattered lights force the perplexed eye to rove from place to place, in the motley maze, until it turns away harassed and tired, knowing not where to find a spot for repose. Speaking of the rainbow, to the various *nuances* of which he compares the diversified tints on the loom of Pallas and her rival Arachne, the Poet says :

> In quo diversi niteant cum mille colores,
> Transitus ipsa tamen spectantia lumina fallit :
> Usque adeó quod tangit idem est, tamen ultima distant.
>
> OVID. MET. vi. 65.

This transition, through a variety of colours, is here very happily enacted. The eye is pleased, not dazzled, by the aggregation of so many tints, and dwells with delight, as on a fresh assemblage of blooming flowers tastefully disposed by a judicious hand; indeed, we are not afraid to say that this is the best-coloured picture which the pallet of Mr. West ever produced, and that every good and impartial judge will find in it,

"*il degno colorir di Lombardia.*"

The draperies have in general a great deal of truth, and that flowing and "moëlleux" which so well established the superiority of *Baroccio*, *Andrea del Sarto*, *P. Veronese*, and *Rubens*, in this department of the art.

Titian and *Bassano* are much praised for their boldness of touch, their daring and rapid handling the thunderbolt of the graphic Muse, and *Tintoretto* himself was styled, "*il fulmine di penello*;" the venerable President, whose hand seems to have not yet felt the cold chill of advanced age, gives us astonishing proofs of steadiness, correctness, and strength; and although, at a proper distance, every figure in the picture, every part of the figures, appears highly finished, the whole effect is the result of appropriate touches boldly struck where they ought to be.

The clearness of the pigments, the free and unmuddled manner in which they seem to have been laid on, the cleanness and purity of the glazings, assure us that this chef-d'œuvre, instead of fading, will improve under the hand of slow-working Time, and that, long after we have shut our eyes to the beauties of nature and of art, posterity will think, when gazing in admiration at this great effort of genius, that its author must have united and possessed the best qualities of the greatest artists:

"Il vero natural di Tiziano,
Del Corregio lo stil puro e sov'rano
E di un Rafael la giusta simetria."

Sonnet addressed to Nicolo del Abbate.

CONCLUSION.

A Painter, in the first enthusiasm of composition, when his genius, pregnant with slow-conceived schemes, wandering in the illimited fields of Fancy, finds, or thinks he finds, at last, a safe spot to rest upon, begins to embody his subject, and to give visible shapes to floating and undecided

perceptions; he generally pauses, as if struck with self-created awe at the importance and difficulty of the undertaking ---all the parts that constitute his art rush at once on his imagination, and he weighs in the scales of judgment and taste, how to keep a proper equilibrium between all the bearings of his theme. Whether the economy of the picture before us is the result of such proceedings in the vast and extraordinary mind of the worthy President, or the mere effect of a happy chance concatenating successful combinations, we cannot take upon us to decide;---the fact is, however, that no painting hitherto known to us exhibits a *better* " tout ensemble," and we trust that the encomium we have bestowed upon the Painter and his work (were it in need of other support than truth and a sight of the picture itself) would be sufficiently justified by the impartial verdict of so many gentlemen of taste, real and efficient patrons of the art, who, after consideration, have given for it the sum of 3000 Guineas.

We do not live in an age of blind and foolish prodigality, and the present moment is, perhaps, one of those which, for a certain lapse of time, have been most pressing upon the private purse of every individual; therefore, when, to an *independent* artist, from whom we hope to receive further proofs of his talents, such a price is offered, in order to prevent the wonderful emanations of his genius and the steady exertions of his unimpaired pencil leaving this country, were we even insensible to the charms of painting, we must conclude that the performance is not over-rated. Minerva's advice to Plutus prevails, and England remains proudly possessed of a jewel, which will, at ulterior times, be coveted by men of taste and wealth in all other parts of the world.

Z.

The Directors, anxious to give the utmost publicity to this admirable composition, have resolved to publish by Subscription a print of it, in the line manner by C. HEATH, Esq. of the dimensions of 28½ inches by 18½. The price to Subscribers to be Five Guineas each. No proofs to be taken off, except for the Subscribers to the purchase of the Picture (50 guinea shares) who will be entitled to one proof each, one early impression of the print, also two proofs of the etching, and two of the unfinished impressions. Subscriptions are admitted, and deposits received by Mr. VALENTINE GREEN, the keeper, at the British Gallery only.

No adept in the graphic art ever had, perhaps, a fairer opportunity to gratify the public curiosity, than in the intended execution of this valuable Picture on copper, which has happily fallen to the lot of Mr. Heath.---The public will be naturally led to expect a full display of all the well-known energies of his skill and his hand, to do justice to a subject for which the liberality of the Directors has been so eminently displayed; and, if we may judge from this circumstance, there will be no stimulus of reward wanting to excite the Engraver to do to this Picture* that justice, by which he will at once confer immortality on himself and on his art.

* We understand that the sum of 1800 guineas is intended to be the reward of Mr. Heath for the engraving.

ADDRESS

TO ARTISTS, STUDENTS, AND AMATEURS OF THE FINE ARTS.

The rapid progress of the liberal ARTS, in this country, and the generous patronage which they constantly receive from men whose names are both an honour and an encouragement to any institution they condescend to support, call upon us to pay them greater attention than has hitherto been done in any daily or weekly publication. —We consider the Arts as the friends of man; his glory in the sunshine of prosperity and wealth; his support in the difficulties of want; and we have reason to think that an article, consecrated to

them in the PHŒNIX, will be at once interesting, instructive, and amusing to the Public. There the Artist will find the result of his labours impartially estimated; the Amateur his taste generally confirmed, sometimes improved and enlightened, and our occasional observations, on the Fine Arts, founded upon undisputed principles, will lead the Student in the path he chuses to follow. The field which is open before us is immense, the materials numerous and diversified, and we flatter ourselves that our criticisms will be found original without eccentricity, pleasing without flattery, and impartial without severity or pedantry.

Conscious of the importance of the task we take upon ourselves, and anxious to do it justice, we have called in auxiliary strength, and beg to observe, that the gentleman who has excited so much interest by the preceding remarks on Mr. West's picture, has promised to help us in our enterprise, and we feel confident that his assistance will be acceptable to our enlightened readers. He has studied the Fine Arts with all the rapture of youth, and has since contemplated them in the maturity of age. An ardent lover of them, he combines the nice discernment of an independent Amateur with the practical experience of an Artist, and, in viewing the *chef-d'œuvres* which this country and the continent possess, he has acquired those judicious and comprehensive perceptions which enable a man to appreciate, not only the intrinsic merit of a performance, but also to discover its comparative excellencies.

Our intention, therefore, is to watch every opportunity that may occur of acquainting our Subscribers with what relates to the Fine Arts. The *Royal Academy* and the *British Institution* we have first in view.—The Exhibition of *Drawings in Water-colours*, *Importation of Foreign Paintings*, *Designs*, *Stained Glass*, *Panoramas*, and occasional expositions of master-pieces, such as *Pictures*, *Statues*, *Engravings*, *Sales* of these objects, as well as *Public Monuments* and new *architectural* efforts, will naturally come within our cognizance, and be carefully attended to, as far as they may afford us an opportunity of rendering our labours useful and pleasing to the Public.

We shall, at the same time, be most thankful to any of our Readers, who will favour us with their opinions, which, were they most decidedly in opposition to our own, as long as they tend to promote the advancement and welfare of the Fine Arts, will be gratefully received and immediately inserted.

J. SWAN AND SON.

PHŒNIX OFFICE,
76, *Fleet Street*, *April* 24, 1811.

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