PREFATORY NOTE

The Editor desires to acknowledge his indebtedness to the artists and owners who have kindly lent their drawings for reproduction in this volume

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BRITISH LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN WATER-COLOURS.
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(1) INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON THE IDEA OF DEVELOPMENT AS APPLIED TO ART

THE idea of development has played, for considerably more than half a century, and still plays, a large part in all discussions about art. And it is obvious that it is a very useful and at the same time a very dangerous idea; useful, because with its aid you can prove anything you have a mind to, and dangerous, because it conceals all sorts of latent suggestions, vague presuppositions, and lurking misconceptions, and thus misleads and beguiles the unwary. The most insidious and dangerous of these suggestions is its connexion with the ideas of progress or advance. The dictionaries, indeed, give "progress" as one of the synonyms of "development," and amongst the synonyms of "progress" I find "advance," "attainment," "growth," "improvement," and "proficiency." So that as soon as we begin to connect the idea of development with the history of art we find ourselves committed, before we quite realize what we are doing, to the view that the latest productions of art are necessarily the best. If art develops, it necessarily grows, improves, and advances, and the history of art becomes a record of the steps by which primitive work has passed into the fully developed art of the present; the latest productions being evidently the most valuable, because they sum up in their triumphant complexity all the tentative variations and advances of which time and experience have approved.

Stated thus baldly the idea as applied to art seems perhaps too obviously at variance with our tastes, experience, and instinctive standards of artistic values to be worth a moment's consideration. Yet we are

all too well aware that this is the line of argument by which every freak, every eccentric, insane or immoral manifestation of artistic perversity and incompetence which has appeared in Europe within the last thirty or forty years has been commended and justified. Certainly in England every writer on art who calls himself “advanced” is an evolutionist of this crude and uncritical type. At one time it was Cézanne and Van Gogh who were supposed to have summed up in their triumphant complexity the less developed efforts of Titian, Rembrandt, Watteau, and Turner, and at the present moment Cézanne and Van Gogh are being superseded by Mr. Roger Fry and his young lions of “The New Movement.”

The worst of it is that the idea of development, of evolution, is a perfectly sound and useful one in certain spheres of activity. In science, for instance, the idea works and is helpful. The successive modifications and improvements by which the latest type of steam-engine has been evolved from Stevenson’s “Puffing Billy,” or the latest type of air-ship from the Montgolfier balloon, form a series of steps which are related and connected with each other, and they are so intimately connected that the latest step sums up and supersedes all the others. No one would travel with Stevenson’s engine who could employ a British or American engine of the latest type. There we have a definite system of development—of growth, improvement, and increased proficiency. And we find the same thing if we look at science as a whole, as a body of knowledge of a special kind. Its problems are tied together, subordinated and co-ordinated, unified in one vast system, so that we can represent its history as a single line of progress or retreat.

But art is not like science. Donatello’s sculpture is not a growth from the sculpture of Pheidias or Praxiteles in the same way that the London and North-Western engine is a growth from Stevenson’s model; nor was Raphael’s work developed from Giotto’s in the same way. Works of art are separate and independent things. That is why Donatello has not superseded Pheidias, nor Raphael Giotto; and that is why the world cherishes the earliest works of art quite as much as the later ones.

Yet we are bound to admit that we can find traces of an evolutionary process even in the history of art, if we look diligently for them. I remember to have seen a book by a well-known Italian critic in which the representations of the Madonna are exhibited from this point of view (A. Venturi, “La Madonna,” Milan, 1899). In it the pictures of the Madonna are treated as an organism which gradually develops, attains perfection, gets old, and dies. There is something to be said for this point of view. When you have a number of artists successively treating the same subject you naturally find that alterations and fresh ideas are imported into their work. These additions and modifications can quite fairly be regarded as developments of the subject-matter and its treatment. But such developments are always partial and one-sided, and they are accompanied with losses of another kind. If Raphael’s Madonnas are more correctly drawn and modelled than those of Giotto, these gains are balanced by a corresponding loss in the spiritual qualities of sincerity and earnestness of religious conviction. It depends, therefore, on what narrow and strictly defined point of view we adopt whether we find development or decay in any particular series of artistic productions. From one point of view the history of art from Giotto to Raphael can be regarded as a process of growth and advance, from another, the same series can be taken, as Ruskin actually took it, as an exhibition of the processes of death and decay. The enlightened lover and student of art will look at the matter from both, and other, points of view, but he will realize that the theory of development does not help him in any way to find a standard of value for works of art.

Art must be judged by its own standards, and those standards tell us