A MAJESTICK SHAPE-1745

By Albert Ten Eyck Gardner

Archivist

“I was in Company the other Day, where a warm dispute arose, whether the Taste and Knowledge of Painting was confined only to Painters and Connoisseurs, as they are termed; or whether a Man of Sense may not be as good a Judge of either. . . . The polite Arts are to be tasted by every Body that has good Sense, and especially Painting, which is nothing but an Imitation of Truth. Believe me, my dear friend, a Man of Sense often feels the Beauties of a fine Picture, much stronger than many of those pretended Connoisseurs, that impose upon you by a Language peculiar to themselves. . . . Shall Men of true Sense ever be the Dupes of these high-flown Talkers? . . . Who has not some Idea of a beautiful Proportion? Does not even the Peasant admire a majestick Shape?"

These sentences, announcing such an encouraging and democratic approach to the mysteries of painting, set the tone, appropriately enough, of the first essay on art published in the first American magazine. They are to be found in the March issue of The American Magazine & Historical Chronicle of the year 1745.

The ideas expressed in this essay can by no means be considered new or original, nor are they, it proves, from the writings of an American author. However, one does not have to search far to find the source from which the essay was taken, and, once found, it is plain to see that the editor who chopped and chose certain sentences knew how to trim his text to suit the tastes of the provincial audience his magazine was aimed at.

The American Magazine & Historical Chronicle was published in the town of Boston, where it appeared monthly from September 1743 until December 1746. It seems to have been financed by some Boston booksellers, and the editor was the rising young lawyer Jeremy Gridley. His contemporaries knew him as a man of “strong literary tastes”; he was broad-minded and cultivated and was held in great esteem in Boston. Today he is still revered in New England as the Father of the Boston Bar. A poetic eulogy addressed to his memory sings his praise:

Of Parts and Learning, Wit and Worth posses’d.
Gridley shone forth conspicuous o’er all the rest;
In native Powers, and smit with Fame,
Genius brighten’d and the spark took Flame. . . .
The maze of Knowledge sedulous he sought.

His magazine was, naturally, closely formed on the current British models, such as The Gentleman’s Magazine and the London Magazine which had been launched so successfully in the early 1730’s. The purpose of all these early magazines was to select and reprint essays from other sources, and at first little original material appeared in them. The contents of the American Magazine were in large part drawn from its British contemporaries. The essay chosen by Gridley for his March 1745 issue was taken (without any credit being given) from an old copy of The Gentleman’s Magazine published ten years before, in May 1735. There it appeared among the “Weekly Essays,” reprinted from still another source, The Prompter (nos. 49 and 52). The Prompter was a one-page sheet issued twice a week in London. It was, as its title indicates, devoted to theatrical gossip and news of the London stage. It was, in fact, a sort of eighteenth-century ancestor of the present-day theatrical newspaper Variety.

The editor of The Prompter, and the author of most of the original material that appeared in it, was Aaron Hill. He was a third-rate poet, a playwright, and entrepreneur chiefly remembered today by literary historians as “a pompous bore of the first water” who had some quarrelsome correspondence with Alexander Pope. He may also be remembered in this country as the anticipator of Oglethorpe in his plan to colonize what is now the state of Georgia.

It might at first seem strange that Hill would put together and publish an article on connoisseurship in his tuppenny paper devoted to plays
Title page of the first American magazine. The view of Boston is by James Turner.
and players, but it appears that the subject of “taste” was then being discussed in theatrical circles because of a play recently given in London called “The Man of Taste.” Hill had written a review of this play in which he criticized its author for cribbing his whole script from Molière. It is also to be remembered that in general at that time the subjects of taste, connoisseurship, and art collecting were all the concern in some degree of almost every English gentleman, as well as every hanger-on like Hill who would be a gentleman.

Aaron Hill was one of those men who are always embarking on ill-starred and chimerical schemes; seeking to improve and advise everyone. It is said that he did not hesitate to take it upon himself to instruct Garrick in the art of acting. And here we have him trying to improve the minds of the stars and underlings of the London stage by teaching them the lingo of what passed for connoisseurship in 1735.

The article “On the Knowledge of Painting” as published by Hill in The Prompter is for the most part composed of “a Dialogue wrote in French . . . by Mr. Coypel,” (probably the French painter Antoine Coypel, or possibly his son Charles Antoine Coypel). The translation into English was probably done by Hill, who was at that time just beginning his translations of Voltaire's plays.

The Dialogue takes place between Alcippeus, a sage old artist and collector of paintings, and his young disciple Damon, an eager though timid art lover. The English version of their discourse (as opposed to the American version edited by Gridley), is quite long, taking up one by one various points which arise in making or talking about pictures. In Gridley's version almost all these extended remarks of a technical nature are cut to a minimum or deleted altogether. The effect of these editorial changes is to shift the emphasis of the whole article from the niceties of connoisseurship and the academic rules of painting that would be of interest to European readers to two main lines of thought that would appeal to and encourage a colonial amateur of art, unsure of himself in the presence of the mysteries of painting.

Preceding this Dialogue is a short passage written in rhythmical prose, very much like a soliloquy which may have been composed by Hill in a poetic mood after reading the Two Discourses of Jonathan Richardson, or a study of that old war horse among art books, Du Fresnoy's De arte graphica, englised by John Dryden in 1695. At any rate, after passing through Gridley's editorial hands, it reads:

“There is a Sort of Magick in the Art of Painting, which charms by the Deception it puts upon us. To have Nature, as it were, forc'd from itself, and transplanted upon a Canvas, under the Representation of some delightful Landscape, enrich'd with the grateful Variety of Sun-shine, Water, Greens, distant Views, and interspersed with Figures, that seem animated, and in Motion: Or else, to have some celebrated Action, expres'd with so much Force, that we see Dignity, or Grief, Terror, or Love, according to the Circumstances of the Story, and are moved as strongly, as if the Persons represented were in Being, and before our Eyes: To see a stabb'd Lucretia, or a dying Cleopatra, an exposed Andromeda, or a forsaken Ariadne: To see an irritated Sea, and a Vessel struggling with the Waves, or splitting on a Rock, while Horror and Despair strike from the ghastly Looks of the drowning Mariners: It is no longer a dumb entertainment to the Eye, but a speaking Image to the Mind, that awakens every Sentiment in it, and hurries the Beholder by an imperceptible Violence, thro' every Passion represented on the now living Canvas.”

Despite the fascinations of tracking down the immediate sources of Hill's poetics or the details of the first publications of Coypel's Dialogue, the important thing is that the ideas expressed in both Introduction and Dialogue all derive ultimately from one common source—the literature of the ancients as interpreted by the literature of the French Academy. Aaron Hill's introductory paragraphs sum up one of the principal laws of the eighteenth-century “science of a connoisseur,” based on the time-wearied dogma of academic painting piously handed down from remote times in ancient Greece—that painting is a charming and deceptive imitation of nature. In the American version of the Dialogue as published by Gridley, the Man
Jeremy Gridley, Boston lawyer and editor of "The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle," by John Smibert (1653-1733). In the Harvard Law School
of Sense (that is you and me and every other reader) is repeatedly encouraged to judge a painting by the easily set and classically approved standard of its closeness to nature, its realism—a standard which anyone with eyes to see could apply by simple comparison without recourse to any abstruse aesthetic theories and without any specialized vocabulary of strange foreign terms. And furthermore the Man of Sense is encouraged to stick by his own judgment.

It has already been pointed out that these ideas are not new and that authority for them is to be found in ancient authors—the final and absolute authority for European aesthetic theories in the eighteenth century. The deference paid by such classic artists as Phidias and Apelles to the opinions of ordinary men must have baffle the aristocrats of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but there it was set down in black and white, recorded by Pliny, an impeccable antique authority. In addition to baffling the connoisseurs, there were occasions, particularly in France, when the artists of the eighteenth century were enraged to the point of battle by the outspoken criticisms leveled at their work by an increasing number of art critics who were neither artists themselves nor, worse still, even men of noble blood.

As John Evelyn reports in the preface to his translation of Fréart de Cambray’s _An Idea of the Perfection of Painting_ (London 1668), “there is hardly that Man living, but has some inclination for Painting, and that does not even pretend sufficient Abilities to controul [i.e. criticize] the Works which it produces; for not only Learned Men, and persons of Condition, who are ever probably the most rational, are emulous of this knowledge; but the very Common People will adventure to spend their Judgements too; so as it seems, this Art is in some sort the Universal Mystery. Neither is this presumption a Vice peculiar to the French alone, or of this Age of ours only; ’tis as old as Painting it selfe, and sprung from her very cradle in Greece.”

One classic source of this idea is Pliny, who records an anecdote of the painter Apelles, given here in the amusing translation by Franciscus Junius (François du Jon) in his book _The Painting of the Ancients_ (London, 1638):

“When Apelles had made any workes, sayth Plinie, he exposeth them in a place, where all that passed by might see them: hiding himselfe in the mean time behinde the picture, to hearken what faults were noted in his worke; preferring the common people, a most diligent Judge, before his owne judgement; and he is reported to have mended his worke upon the censure of a Shoo-maker, who blamed the Artificer for having made fewer lachets in the inside of one of the pantoffles [i.e. slippers] then of the other. The Shoo-maker finding the worke the next day mended according to his advertisement, grew proud and began to find fault with the legge also. Whereupon Apelles could not containe himselfe any longer, but looking forth from behinde the picture, bid the Shoo-maker not to meddle beyond the pantoffle: which saying of his became afterwards a Proverbe.” [i.e. Let the shoemaker stick to his last.]
If Jeremy Gridley is remembered in legal circles as the Father of the Boston Bar, both artist and critic may also remember him as one of the instruments of transmission that brought to the American wilderness the true word of academic dogma according to the ancients. The layman may remember him as the encourager of the doctrine of equality of judgment in matters of art—an idea so favorably suited to the democratic conditions of frontier society.

With the assistance of Gridley and other like-minded men these ideas, when transplanted to the colonies, took firm root, and they have flourished ever since with undiminished vigor. The idea of every man's ability to judge painting on the basis of its realism, which stretches throughout the history of European art, would seem to reflect a natural, almost instinctive, human attitude toward the art of painting. The constant emphasis on the imitation of nature by the academies and schools that codified the ancient and renaissance laws of art have conjoined to form a solid core that has become with the passage of time the center and sacred foundation stone of the folklore of art. It is upon this rock of public opinion that the modern artists, trained in different ways of thinking, come to grief. The academic artist and the general public still cling to this antique standard, unwilling to admit that the correct imitation of surfaces is merely one narrow aspect of the art of painting.

Another point of interest not to be overlooked in the consideration of this article, "On the Knowledge of Painting," is its local significance—the fact that an essay on art was considered of sufficient interest to the readers of The American Magazine in 1745 to warrant publication. There were at that time in Boston a number of active factors which we may conjecture prepared the way, in a sense, for the publication of this early venture into instruction in art criticism.

It is certain that the rich gentlemen merchants of Boston were never very far behind their British counterparts in fashionable matters, such as a love for old books on classical subjects or fashions of taste, manners or dress. As wealth accumulated the dour manners imposed by early Puritan divines gave way, and worldly things began to glitter for the delight of colonial aristocrats. Gilded mirrors, walnut furniture, paintings, engravings, silver bowls and tankards, silk brocades, and books appeared in Boston houses, shops, and auctions in increasing quantity.

Though Jonathan Edwards and other ministers continued to threaten their trembling congregations by "painting the landscape of Hell" in their sulphurous sermons the attention of the ungodly was turning toward the contemplation of painted landscapes of another sort and even to "pagan allegoricals" done in the classic manner of the French painter Poussin.

In 1745, Boston, in addition to its nearby college, its numerous book and print dealers, and its homes of men of education, boasted one other center of cultivation and artistic activity that was one of the major sights of the town. This was the studio and shop of the British painter, John Smibert, to which all curious travelers were taken to meet the artist and to admire among his art treasures a very rare "collection of fine pictures." Here besides painting portraits, and often attempting "something in the Landskip way," the artist carried on a shop where prints, fans, gilder's supplies, colors, brushes, frames, and canvas could be inspected and bought.

One of the portraits Smibert painted, shortly after his auspicious introduction into Boston society by the august Bishop Berkeley, was that of Jeremy Gridley. It remains today as evidence that these two men must have been at least acquaintances, if not friends. Possibly the publication of the essay on painting was the result of some discussion between artist and editor in the studio. Perhaps the article was especially trimmed to drum up trade for the painter and to stir interest in his wares—who can say?

In recent years several theories have been propounded why early American painting began in the eighteenth century to display a marked character of its own so soon after diverging from the parent schools of Europe. Some writers credit the clear atmosphere or just plain good eyesight for this phenomenon. However, there is perhaps a more particular reason
suggested by this essay into the laws of academic painting and their transference to the New World. One book that was certainly available to American artists of the eighteenth century was Dryden's translation of Du Fresnoy's De arte graphica. This book in its time was considered to sum up all that was necessary for an artist to know; it was the standard handbook of the academic painters from its first publication in France (1668) down to the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is almost inconceivable that Smibert should have set out for the howling wilds of the New World without a copy in his luggage. In later days both Benjamin West and Charles Willson Peale studied it diligently and recommended it to everyone who wanted to paint. A passage in this book says: “Our business is to imitate the Beauties of Nature, as the Ancients have done before us ... And for this reason we must be careful in the search of Ancient Medals, Statues, Vases, and Basso Relievo's ... because they furnish us with great Ideas, and make our Productions wholly beautifull. And in truth after having well examin’d them, we shall therein find so many Charms, that we shall pity the Destiny of our present Age without hope of ever arriving at so high a point of Perfection.” Here speaks the academy: the artist must imitate nature as she is interpreted by the remains of ancient sculpture, good, bad, and indifferent. The early American artist, looking about him for such things, was forced by the circumstances of time and place to go directly to nature as he saw it in the clear atmosphere and with his sharp eyesight, without any confining bonds in the form of classical kickshaws to copy. Naturally, when the first art schools were organized in this country (about 1795-1805) one of their first projects was to import plaster casts of ancient sculpture, architectural fragments, and cameos from Napoleon's Louvre, the Naples Museum, the Vatican, in order to amend this disastrous condition.

Though modern artists scoff at the old-fashioned ideas that for so long ruled the world of art they have not cut themselves so far off from tradition not to enjoy the security of having their theories backed by classical authority. And they quote also from venerable texts every bit as respectable as any battle cry of the academicians. They point with pride to that passage in the Philebus of Plato that says: “I will speak of the beauty of shapes, and I do not mean, as most people would think, the shapes of living figures, or their imitations in paintings, but I mean straight lines and curves and the shapes made from them. . . . These are not beautiful for any particular reason or purpose, as other things are, but are always by their very nature beautiful, and give pleasure of their own quite free from the itch of desire; and colors of this kind are beautiful, too, and give a similar pleasure.”

The above quotation has, of course, only in recent years been emphasized, whereas “the imitation of Nature” has been repeated as a precept of the academicians for centuries. Gridley’s essay “Of the Knowledge of Painting” would seem to mark the formal point of transference of the old Academic view of art to this country and from that time to this any deviation from it has raised pained outcries and hot rage among the conservatives. In the words of Junius, “whatsoever is not done after the example of Antiquitie, goeth against their stomackes.”

The reference to the article “Of the Knowledge of Painting” in the American Magazine and Historical Chronicle was found in The Index to Early American Periodical Literature, compiled by WPA cataloguers under the direction of the Library of New York University.