

Thomas Davis on “National Art”

No one doubts that if he sees a place or an action he knows more of it than if it had been described to him by a witness. The dullest man, who "put on his best attire" to welcome Caesar, had a better notion of life in Rome than our ablest artist or antiquary.

Were painting, then, but a coloured chronicle, telling us facts by the eye instead of the ear, it would demand the Statesman's care and the People's love. It would preserve for us faces we worshipped, and the forms of men who led and instructed us. It would remind us, and teach our children, not only how these men looked, but, to some extent, what they were, for nature is consistent, and she has indexed her labours. It would carry down a pictorial history of our houses, arts, costume, and manners to other times, and show the dweller in a remote isle the appearance of countries and races of his cotemporaries.

As a register of *facts*—as a portrayer of men, singly or assembled—and as a depicter of actual scenery, art is biography, history, and topography taught through the eye.

So far as it can express facts, it is superior to writing; and nothing but the scarcity of *faithful* artists, or the stupidity of the public, prevents us from having our pictorial libraries of men and places. There are some classes of scenes—as where continuous action is to be expressed—in which sculpture quite fails, and painting is but a shadowy narrator.

But this, after all, though the most obvious and easy use of Painting and Sculpture, is far indeed from being their highest end.

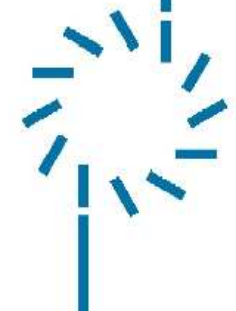
Art is a regenerator as well as a copyist. As the historian, who composes a history out of various materials, differs from a newspaper reporter, who sets down what he sees—as Plutarch differs from Mr. Grant, and the Abbé Barthélémy from the last traveller in India—so do the Historical Painter, the Landscape composer (such as Claude or Poussin) differ from the most faithful Portrait, Landscape, or Scene Drawer.

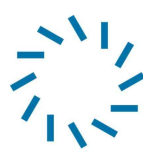
The Painter who is a master of composition makes his pencil cotemporary with all times and ubiquitous. Keeping strictly

to nature and fact, Romulus sits for him and Paul preaches. He makes Attila charge, and Mohammed exhort, and Ephesus blaze when he likes. He tries not rashly, but by years of study of men's character, and dress, and deeds, to make them and their acts come as in a vision before him. Having thus got a design, he attempts to realise the vision on his canvas. He pays the most minute attention to truth in his drawing, shading, and colouring, and by imitating the force of nature in his composition, all the clouds that ever floated by him, "the lights of other days," and the forms of the dead, or the stranger, hover over him.

But Art in its highest stage is more than this. It is a creator. Great as Herodotus and Thierry are, Homer and Beranger are greater. The ideal has resources beyond the actual. It is infinite, and Art is indefinitely powerful. The Apollo is more than noble, and the Hercules mightier than man. The Moses of Michael Angelo is no likeness of the inspired law-giver, nor of any other that ever lived, and Raphael's Madonnas are not the faces of women. As Reynolds says, "the effect of the capital works of Michael Angelo is that the observer feels his whole frame enlarged." It is creation, it is representing beings and things different from our nature, but true to their own. In this self-consistency is the only nature requisite in works purely imaginative. Lear is true to his nature, and so are Mephistopheles, and Prometheus, and Achilles; but they are not true to human nature; they are beings created by the poets' minds, and true to *their* laws of being. There is no commoner blunder in men, who are themselves mere critics, never creators, than to require consistency to the nature of us and our world in the works of poet or painter.

To create a mass of great pictures, statues, and buildings is of the same sort of ennoblement to a people as to create great poems or histories, or make great codes, or win great battles. The next best, though far inferior, blessing and power is to inherit such works and achievements. The lowest stage of all is neither to possess nor to create them.





Source: Thomas Davis, *Prose Writings: Essays on Ireland*, London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1889, 146-152

Ireland has had some great Painters—Barry and Forde, for example, and many of inferior but great excellence; and now she boasts high names—Maclise, Hogan, and Mulready. But their works were seldom done for Ireland, and are rarely known in it. Our portrait and landscape Painters paint foreign men and scenes; and, at all events, the Irish people do not see, possess, nor receive knowledge from their works. Irish history has supplied no subjects for our greatest Artists ; and though, as we repeat, Ireland possessed a Forde and Barry, creative Painters of the highest order, the pictures of the latter are mostly abroad ; those of the former unseen and unknown. Alas! that they are so few.

To collect into, and make known, and publish in Ireland the best works of our living and dead Artists is one of the steps towards procuring for Ireland a recognised National Art. And this is essential to our civilisation and renown. The other is by giving education to students and rewards to Artists, to make many of this generation true representers, some of them great illustrators and composers, and, perchance, to facilitate the creation of some great spirit.

Something has been done—more remains. There are schools in Dublin and Cork. But why are those so neglected and imperfect? and why are not similar or better institutions in Belfast, Derry, Galvway, Waterford, and Kilkenny ? Why is there not a decent collection of casts anywhere but in Cork, and why are they in a garret there? And why have we no gallery of Irishmen's, or any other men's, pictures in Ireland?

The Art Union has done a great deal. It has helped to support in Ireland artists who should otherwise have starved or emigrated; it has dispersed one (when, oh when, will it disperse another?) fine print of a fine Irish picture through the country, and to some extent interested as well as instructed thousands. Yet it could, and we believe will, do much more, It ought to have Corresponding Committees in the principal towns to preserve and rub up old schools of art and foster new ones, and it might by art and historical libraries, and b) other ways, help the cause. We

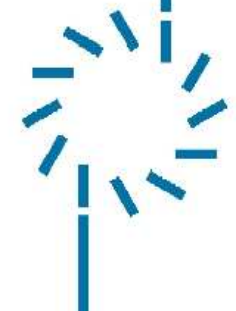
speak as friends, and suggest not as critics, for it has done good service.

The Repeal Association, too, in offering prizes for picture: and sculptures of Irish historical subjects, has taken its proper place as the patron of nationality in art; and its reward for Building Designs may promote the comfort and taste o the people, and the reputation of the country. If artists will examine the rules by which the pictures, statues, and plate remain their property, they will find the prizes not so small as they might at first appear. Nor should they, from interest or just pride, be indifferent to the popularity and fame (success on national subjects, and with a People's Prizes t be contended for. If those who are not Repealers will treat the Association's design kindly and candidly, and if the Repealers will act in art upon principles of justice an conciliation, we shall not only advance national art, but gai another field of common exertion.

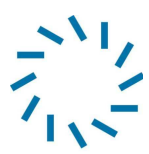
The Cork School of Art owes its existence to many causes.

The intense, genial, and Irish character of the people, the southern warmth and variety of clime, with its effects on animal and vegetable beings, are the natural causes. The accident of Barry's birth there, and his great fair excited the ambition of the young artists. An Irishman and a Corkman had gone out from them, and amazed men by t grandeur and originality of his works of art. He had thrown the whole of the English painters into insignificance, for who would compare the luscious commonplace of the Stuart painters or the melodramatic reality of Hogarth, or the imitative beat of Reynolds, or the clumsy strength of West, with the overbearing grandeur of his works.

But the *present* glories of Cork, Maclise and Hogan, the greater, but buried might of Forde, and the rich promise which we know is springing there now, are mainly owing to another cause; and that is, that Cork possesses a gallery of the finest casts in the world.



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These casts are not very many—117 only; but they are perfect, they are the first from Canova's moulds, and embrace the greatest works of Greek art. They are ill placed in a dim and dirty room—more shame to the rich men of Cork for leaving them so—but there they are, and there studied Forde, and Maelise, and the rest, until they learned to draw better than any moderns, except Cornelius and his living brethren.

In the countries where art is permanent there are great collections—Tuscany and Rome, for example. But, as we have said before, the highest service done by success in art is not in the possession but in the creation of great works, the spirit, labour, sagacity, and instruction needed by the artists to succeed, and flung out by them on their country like rain from sunny clouds. Indeed there is some danger of a traditionary mediocrity following after a great epoch in art. Superstition of style, technical rules in composition, and all the pedantry of art, too often fill up the ranks vacated by veteran genius, and of this there are examples enough in Flanders, Spain, and even Italy. The schools may, and often do, make men scholastic and ungenial, and art remains an instructor and refiner, but creates no more.

Ireland, fortunately or unfortunately, has everything to do yet. We have had great artists—we have not their works—we own the nativity of great living artists—they live on the Tiber and the Thames. Our capital has no school of art—no facilities for acquiring it.

To be sure there are rooms open in the Dublin Society, and they have not been useless, that is all. But a student here cannot learn anatomy, save at the same expense as a surgical student. He has no great works of art before him, no Pantheon, no Valhalla, not even a good museum or gallery.

We think it may be laid down as unalterably true that a student should never draw from a flat surface. He learns nothing by drawing from the lines of another man—he only mimics. Better for him to draw chairs and tables, bottles and glasses, rubbish, potatoes, cabins, or kitchen utensils, than draw from the lines laid down by other men.

Of those forms of nature which the student can originally consult—the sea, the sky, the earth—we would counsel him to draw from them in the first learning ; for though he ought afterwards to analyse and mature his style by the study of works of art, from the first sketches to the finished picture, yet, by beginning with nature and his own suggestions, he will acquire a genuine and original style, superior to the finest imitation ; and it is hard to acquire a master's skill without his manner.

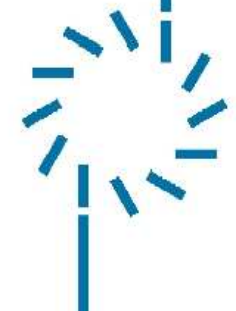
Were all men cast in a divine mould of strength and straightness and gallant bearing, and all women proportioned, graceful, and fair, the artist would need no gallery, at least to begin his studies with. He would have to persuade or snatch his models in daily life. Even then, as art creates greater and simpler combinations than ever exist in fact, he should finally study before the superhuman works of his predecessors.

But he has about him here an indifferently-made, ordinary, not very clean, nor picturesquely-clad people; though, doubtless, if they had the feeding, the dress, and the education (for mind beautifies the body) of the Greeks, they would not be inferior, for the Irish structure is of the noblest order.

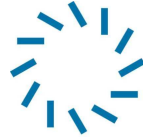
To give him a multitude of fine natural models, to say nothing of ideal works, it is necessary to make a gallery of statues or casts. The statues will come in good time, and we hope, and are sure, that Ireland, a nation, will have a national gallery, combining the greatest works of the Celtic and Teutonic races. But at present the most that can be done is to form a gallery.

Our readers will be glad to hear that this great boon is about to be given to Irish Art. A society for the formation of a gallery of casts in Dublin has been founded.

It embraces men of every rank, class, creed, politics, and calling, thus forming another of those sanctuaries, now multiplying in Ireland, where one is safe from the polemic and the partisan.



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Its purpose is to purchase casts of all the greatest works of Greece, Egypt, Etruria, ancient Rome, and Europe in the middle ages. This will embrace a sufficient variety of types both natural and ideal to prevent imitation, and will avoid the debateable ground of modern art. Wherever they can afford it the society will buy moulds, in order to assist provincial galleries, and therefore the provinces are immediately interested in its support.

When a few of these casts are got together, and a proper gallery procured, the public will be admitted to see, and artists to study, them without any charge. The annual subscription is but ten shillings, the object being to interest as many as possible in its support.

It has been suggested to us by an artist that Trinity College ought to establish a gallery and museum containing casts of all the ancient statues, models of their buildings, civil and military, and a collection of their implements of art, trade, and domestic life. A nobler institution, a more vivid and productive commentary on the classics, could not be. But if the Board will not do this of themselves, we trust they will see the propriety of assisting this public gallery, and procuring, therefore, special privileges for the students in using it.

But no matter what persons in authority may do or neglect, we trust the public—for the sake of their own pleasure, their children's profit, and Ireland's honour—will give it their instant and full support.



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