

## OIL PAINTING.

I. In one notable way English art differs from that of all other European schools. They have their root more or less in mediæval times; ours, in modern. They are influenced in style or subject by native earlier masters; we, by foreigners only. Our eighteenth century painters had to create the belief that England was able to produce Art: Italy, France, Germany and the Netherlands could point to former triumphs with pride, or study them with emulation. The key to the first period of the English school is given by this peculiar position of circumstances.

II. It is not intended, in this and the following summaries, to give a catalogue of names, or attempt to characterize every painter represented in the Exhibition; but to sketch the spirit of each School in its main phases, with the causes that guided its development. This will be done best by following the course of the greater artists; for these, like the greatest men or greatest books of any period, not only embrace the aims of inferior minds, presenting them in a fairer and clearer form, but add to what they could do, all that lies within the prerogative of genius. Four such men—a large number for one century—occur in the eighteenth:—Hogarth (1697—1764); Wilson (1713—1782); Reynolds (1723—1792); Gainsborough (1727—1788). Thus the life of Gainsborough, the latest born, covers thirty-seven years of the life of Hogarth, the earliest. How then did previous Art affect these great contemporaries? By what elements of their own did they found an English school in a country which had hitherto known little but the naturalized art of Holbein and Zuccaro,—of Rubens, Vandyke, Lely, or Kneller? How far did they carry native painting? A reply to these enquiries will at once contain the essential story of the British art of the last century, and prepare us, in some degree, to understand that of the present.

III. In his life not less than in his works, Hogarth presents a sturdy protest against all previous styles. No man more distinctively and decidedly original and creative—not even Phidias of Athens, or Giotto of Florence,—ever banded art: no one, for good or for evil, was ever less affected by pre-existing influences, or by contemporary criticism. The modern art of Europe began as completely with him as its modern poetry with Dante; and as Dante's fellow-countrymen were at first unable to believe that a great poem could be written in their mother tongue, so Hogarth's were incredulous that England could produce a painter. He first, with a serious and widely-extended scheme, put into painting what Fielding put into novel-writing; he brought the canvass down from mythology and pageantry, and made it tell the real story of common life,—its pathos, its meanness, its fashions, humours, tears, laughter, triumphs, and depths of degradation. Clowns, boys, lords, rebels, politicians, gamblers, labourers, soldiers, brides, mistresses, spend-thrifts, poets, musicians, madmen—nay, the very wigs and queues and walking-sticks of the age,—all move and live on the stage of his marvellous theatre. In a sense true of no other artist, Hogarth held up his mirror to nature, and gave back the form and pressure of the time with a strength only equalled by his subtlety. Shakespeare (always exceptional) excepted, no artist, not even Crabbe, has drawn so many characters for us, has given us so much healthy laughter—so much of 'the sorrowing by which the heart is made better.' Yet, in this prodigality of power, one thing is wanting—not perhaps to his mind, but to his pictures,—the charm of beauty is not conspicuous here. Occasional touches of grace or repose occur, the severity is not without sweetness; yet the higher sphere of loveliness is hardly reached; there is no clear sense of the poetry of nature. Through his stern, honest-hearted rejection of Italian art, abused and ill-estimated as he saw it by the men of taste about him, he missed this gift in marked intensity.

IV. Not so with Hogarth's immediate successors. The sense of beauty, the love of innocence,—no artists have enjoyed these more deeply than Reynolds and Gainsborough; nor in management of color, in light and shade, in gracefulness of line, and delineation of character, have they been often equalled. Their art, in technical