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Velasquez and Titian

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Velasquez and Titian.



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MR. FREDERICK WEDMORE'S NOTES

ON

Velasquez and Titian

IN THE ETCHINGS OF

R. W. MACBETH,

A.R.A.



ROBERT DUNTHORNE : AT THE SIGN OF THE REMBRANDT
HEAD, IN VIGO STREET, LONDON, W.

MDCCLXXXVIII.

BIBLIOTECA DE LA ALHAMBRA

Donativo del Sr. Conde de
Ribera a la Biblioteca
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Plano de la Alhambra y Generalife
DE CULTURA

Velasquez and Titian

IN THE ETCHINGS OF

R. W. MACBETH, A.R.A.

By the execution of the five important Etchings, for which it is at this time hardly necessary to invite careful attention, Mr. Robert Macbeth has done his part to bridge or overcome the distance which, to those of us to whom forty hours of railway are not exactly an unmixed boon, has divided London from Madrid. Even now no great picture gallery is so little known to Englishmen as the Royal Museum in the Spanish capital. Yet—though we write in full remembrance of the Velasquez in Florence and London—of the Velasquez, more especially, in the house of the Duke of Wellington—we may yet say, without fear of denial, that in Madrid

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only can Velasquez be quite fully valued, though we meet him there not in isolated glory, but in company of the greatest Fleming—Rubens—in company of Titian, in company, last of all, of a Spanish master of portraiture who is to be seen with fairness nowhere else—El Moro.

A careful selection of subjects from Titian and Velasquez—a selection such as Mr. Macbeth's—seems, I say, to bring the Madrid gallery nearer to our doors. These things have hitherto been engraved very little. Pure line engraving cannot adequately render their opulence of colour nor their richness and decisiveness of brush-work. A woodcut here, a lithograph there—not of the best, or not of the best known—or, it may be, recently, an etching somewhat cold and precise in character—it is to these, or to the murderous photograph, that we have had to turn, heretofore, for souvenirs of these wonderful things. There is much in them that Mezzotint

alone might have rendered, but there is much in them, too, that must have eluded Mezzotint. And, for the rest, the etchings of Mr. Macbeth—as the student may easily satisfy himself—are not executed within narrow lines, within fixed and theoretic limitations. Something very much akin to the practice of Mezzotint steals at need into Mr. Macbeth's practice of Etching.

"I am the creature of the thing that is before me." He is not concerned with the question of whether this or that means may be permitted him, or whether it may be denied.

THE ST. MARGARET. The picture known as "St. Margaret" is, I take it, both in etching and canvas, the least important of the chosen five. The picture itself has suffered very much since the days when Titian despatched it to the young King, Philip the Second. For years it hung in the Escorial; and *pin-*

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tura deshonesta it was foolishly reckoned, in the days of monkish supremacy. The Saint's leg was duly painted over with a drapery. The drapery has since been removed, leaving the flesh abraded. Whether the work represents St. Margaret at all—St. Margaret, patron saint of women in childbirth—or represents rather St. Martha, "patroness, especially," says Mrs. Jameson, "of female discretion, and of good housekeeping," is indeed open to question. Señor Pedro de Madrazo—the historian, so to put it, of the Royal Museum at Madrid, and the brother of the Keeper—has gone so far as to write that it is only out of respect for the tradition of this picture that they retain for it the name of "St. Margaret." With the legends of both these holy women a dragon is associated—its presence, or the woman's beauty, is the motive for Titian's design—but while St. Margaret's dragon was employed in the interests of

one Olybrius, Governor of Antioch, who was inflamed by the sight of St. Margaret's charms, the dragon whom St. Martha overcame was the especial pest and terror of the country of the Rhone. In the width and vastness of the Rhone waters he lay concealed during the day, and, as evening closed, issued forth upon his mission of destruction. The scene of this legend, says Mrs. Jameson, is now the city of Tarascon. An attribute of St. Margaret—not of St. Martha—is a crucifix or palm. An attribute of St. Martha is a pot of holy water. The cross is seen in Titian's picture. "St. Margaret, then," we may be inclined to believe. But the background has, perhaps, a greater significance—a stirred lagoon or a wide river. Was it Titian imagining the Rhone, with a reminiscence of Venice?

THE GARDEN OF LOVE. The gladsome allegory with which we are next confronted—wrought in a spirit of pure and

happy Paganism—was treated by the master when he was himself in possession of the youth whose joys it celebrates, and Messrs. Crowe and Cavalcaselle, in some of the most interesting pages of their *Titian's Life*, are heedful to point out, not only the picture's force and harmony, which may be taken for granted, but the "earlier and smoother finish, the careful modelling and clean outline." The "Garden of Love"—or "Venus Worship," to give it another name—was the first of several pictures, mythological or religious, painted for Alfonso of Ferrara. Those who have enquired the most closely into the order of Titian's labours believe it to have been executed "before 1518." The "Bacchanal," at Madrid, and the "Bacchus" in our National Gallery, have less of youthful care and more of riper freedom. "The Garden of Love"—albeit painted for an Italian Duke—did not long remain on Italian

soil. It was transported to Spain in days so long ago that the tears started—so the story says—to Domenichino's eyes when he heard of its departure. "Poussin, too,"—conjectures Mr. Crowe—"and Vandyke would miss it, as well as Rubens, who copied it; and Albano might regret the original of so many of his adaptations."

The joyousness of the picture accords with or expresses singularly well the temperament of the artist who wrought it, of whom Vasari wrote, "Titian has enjoyed health and happiness unequalled, and has never received from Heaven anything but favour and felicity." Perhaps one's first impression of the picture—before one has had time to understand a tithe of its crowded and delicate detail—is of that harmony and serenity of colour which counts always for so much in the charm of a Venetian canvas. Rosy and golden flesh-tints crowd the foreground, and behind the company of Cupids there is

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the green and gold of an autumnal landscape, and a blue sky, barred with silver cloud. To the left, are massive trees; to the right, the statue of Venus, at whose feet two girls, who seek her good offices, place, with the impulsiveness of Youth and Desire, a votive tablet, and a mirror to reflect her beauty. Every adventure of Love—the pain as well as the joy of it—is typified by one or other of the crowding, bustling little figures, one of whom directs an arrow, while another hurls an apple from a distance with unerring aim. Love noble and heroic—as Señor Madrazo tells us—is set forth by one Cupid who, without defending himself, receives a wound from a dart shot by a companion. Selfish and idle Love may be traced likewise, and the pleasant caprice of a day, and cunning and deceit, are symbolised by the embrace which one Cupid bestows artfully upon an unprepared and unwilling brother. Over

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and above the ingenuity with which there is carried out by the artist an allegory hardly new three hundred years ago—yet hardly old to-day—there is to be noticed, through his work, an understanding of the life and forms, the playfulness, the woes, and the inconsequence of childhood, with which some of us have been inclined to credit too exclusively the earlier masters of Italian design, and the great Englishman of the Eighteenth century, who owed to Venice, after all, so much of his inspiration.

THE SURRENDER OF BREDA. The immensely complicated canvas on which Velasquez has depicted the formal submission of the vanquished outside Breda—when the clash of arms has hardly ceased, and the scene is filled with gorgeousness and glitter, with the pomp and circumstance of war—is known popularly among the Spanish as “Las Lanzas”—“The Lances”—and the title records

one's first impression correctly, in suggesting the essential feature of the composition. The historical incident here set forth, were it in itself unimportant and in any danger of passing from men's minds, would gain a fresh vitality, and assume an importance not hereafter to be lessened, through the fashion in which Velasquez has endowed it with the abiding charm and dignity of Art. But, indeed, that ten months' siege of Breda, which ended on the 2nd of June, 1626—when the people of the place, like the Parisians of '71, had eaten their last bread—is not the least glorious of the whole company of patriotic actions, or patriotic endurances, in which the time was rich; and when, three days after the signing of the capitulation, Justin of Nassau, the Governor of the town, waited upon Spinola, the Spanish commander, that submission, which his attitude in the picture typifies, was received with the consideration and the "stately

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Spanish grace" vouchsafed likewise, Lord Tennyson tells us, to the vanquished fighters on board our little "Revenge," when the bad day came on which Sir Richard Grenville's ship was

"manned by an alien crew."

Behind and at the side of the principal figures, the soldiery and Spanish generals whose names are known in connection with this war—and Spinola's prancing horse, with haunches towards us—occupy and crowd the scene. In middle distance a company of spearsmen ride along the land—Velasquez having the audacity to paint them, in a full sunshine, right behind the heads and shoulders of his two chief personages. Beyond these riders, a country of field and stream and village, a peopled and endless plain—a blue-green distance at once real and pictorial—stretches to the horizon. Its treatment by Velasquez—a treatment of which Mr.

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Macbeth's etching has carefully preserved the slightness and rapidity—has a breadth which characterized, at a later time, the whole of the painter's work. Velasquez, whose sense of style in landscape is sufficiently evidenced by the way in which he renders the classic grace of the gardens of the Villa Medici—the picture is at Madrid—had never seen the land depicted in the background of the "Surrender of Breda." But he studied bird's-eye views, topographical records, of which a whole series were prepared by a painter of the country, and reconciled the claims of Fact with the claims of Art.

As regards the portrait of him who must have been for Velasquez—as he is certainly for the public—the chief personage of the scene, Spinola, unjustly disgraced not long after the incident which is here recorded, died before the painting of the picture. But Velasquez had studied him well. In 1629 he had

travelled with him to Italy, by sea, from Barcelona, and the long hours of the voyage are likely to have been beguiled by the narrative which a master of action could afford to an artist who was something more than a painter of spectacle.

THE ALONSO CANO. The two pictures which remain to be spoken of belong to the last period of Velasquez's practice: a time in which his hand had learnt to be wholly economic in labour—in which the fulness of perception and of knowledge was expressed in the tersest phrase. Thus, while the modelling of the head in the "Alonso Cano" is most completely indicative, the clay bust upon which the sculptor is working is suggested in chief by canvas dexterously bare. But what a grave directness in the occupied face, what a watchful quiet eye, what a delicate handling by the sculptor's fingers of the modeller's tool, what a study in the simple severity of collar and cloak! Nor can

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anything excel the sober harmony of colour and tone: so much of the canvas being painted in that peculiar *noir d'os* of which Velasquez possessed the secret.

The "Alonso Cano" was wrought, presumably, about 1656, and there is ground for something more than suspicion that it does not represent Alonso Cano at all. Other likenesses—which may be depended upon, it seems, for mere accuracy—exist of this sculptor, and these the noble Velasquez portrait does not resemble. There are further reasons—reasons of age and of costume—for doubting the correctness of the popular attribution; and it is Señor Madrazo's belief—and that of other recent students, amongst them Mr. Macbeth himself—that the artist here recorded, in the earlier stages of his struggle with the massed clay, is none other than Martini Montanez, who made a bust from Velasquez's equestrian portrait of Philip IV.

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—a study afterwards employed in the production of the bronze equestrian statue now in front of the Palace at Madrid.

THE TAPESTRY WEAVERS. Sir William Stirling Maxwell reminds us that the painter Mengs remarked of "The Tapestry Weavers" that it seemed as if the hand had had no part in it: it had been the work of pure thought. To me the phrase—like many a painter's utterance—is, if impressive, a trifle enigmatic. The "Tapestry Weavers," in fact, displays hardly more continuity of thought than fulness of sentiment: it displays a most unerring observation, a cunning of the hand that knows no possibility of defeat, and a perfect appreciation on Velasquez's part of what were the materials for a picture and of what the conditions under which they must be combined. The loveliest of the figures—the girl whose "profile" we may almost

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contentedly suffer to be "lost," so long as she reveals to us the fineness and the strength of the outstretched arm—is at once modern and a reminiscence of the type of Titian. The arrangement of colour, the disposition of light and shade, the large suggestion of texture, the placing of each object with a view to balance and effect—these are hardly things which demand to be enquired into or laboriously pointed out: they are as evident as is that sense of *la vie vécue*—the life that is led, not dreamed of—which is present, I suppose, in every canvas that came from Velasquez's hand. But, lest the virtue of composition should be wont to be somewhat under-rated in the case of an art so fully charged as Velasquez's with the virtue of reality, it is well to look a little at this matter of balance, the building up of a subject even more pictorial than anecdotic. The claims of composition, more than the

claims of reality, have given us—for instance—the bending figure of the young woman who draws the curtain, and the ladder which in the arrangement of line fulfils a purpose akin to that which it fulfils in the most artfully composed of all the etchings of Ostade—who was a master of Composition—the etching of *La Famille*.

A room in the deserted Convent of St. Isabel is the scene of this picture. On a daïs in an alcove, brilliantly lighted from the side, a woman seems to show to two visitors a finished tapestry. But, on the lower level of the darker, nearer, and larger portion of the place, there proceeds the work which gave the canvas its Spanish name—"Les Hilanderas." Here, slightly dressed, with naked feet and bared arms and shoulders—as one may see the girls to-day in the tobacco factories of Barcelona or Seville—are the spinners and winders of the wool. The

truth of action is complete, and the wheel of the elder woman moves not more certainly than the arm of the winding girl, robust of contour, delicate of hand.

The etchings which Mr. Macbeth has wrought after the five pictures, some of whose characteristics I have tried to note in the preceding lines, form, in all probability, the most important series that his needle can execute. "I shall do no more," said the etcher, a few weeks ago, in the printing room—looking up from the last scratches which he had seen to be necessary before a long studied work was committed to the public. But there was a twinkle in his eye, and I saw that the conclusion was not perfectly definite. The saying owed its momentary decisiveness to the artist's sense of all the labour that the task had involved. We will not take it too literally; yet it is scarcely likely that the occasion can re-

peat itself, and that pictures of such high prestige and such intrinsic importance can again be interpreted by an artist so singularly competent to render their essential qualities through his own possession of a talent which, whatever may be its deficiencies, is, at least, ever masculine and energetic. The etcher of Frederick Walker's "Harbour of Refuge," and of George Mason's "Harvest Moon"—the etcher of his own most manly and serene and spacious canvases, the "Ferry" and "A Fen Lode"—was not wronging himself, was in no sense untrue to his vocation, in devoting so much time and such deep and affectionate study to these Madrid pictures, which are, be it remembered, no unripe fruit from the garden of the Primitives, but the large and noble harvest of a matured Art. Fourteen years ago Mr. Macbeth began to etch, and half a hundred plates, small and big, original and translations, have

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come, during this period, from his hand. His method has been his own. With time, it has gained in variety as well as force, and never, probably, has it been so flexible and so unfettered as in the plates which are now submitted to the connoisseur. In the execution of the head of the "Alonso Cano"—in its union of firmness with subtlety of modelling—Mr. Macbeth has reached the highwater mark of an interpreter's talent.

Señor Madrazo, of the Madrid Gallery, did everything in his power to facilitate the accomplishment of the etcher's task. But when an English printer—Mr. Goulding, of course—arrived in Madrid, and sought a place at the printing press of the Calcografía, that, in concert with the artist, he might take an early trial impression from the coppers, it was felt that vested interests were but slightly considered, or that some slight might be intended to the Spanish printers. But



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Mr. Goulding is an artist too; and when the quality of the impressions he succeeded in obtaining was perceived by the frequenters of the place, objections, I am told, vanished, and there was wont, thenceforth, to be a little gathering of the interested and the admiring to watch the English printer's treatment of the copper, and to await the impression, as, rich and velvety and delicate—and expressive fully of the intention of the artist—it issued from the press.

FREDERICK WEDMORE. *Alhambra y Generalife*

November, 1888.

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