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Public Statues in London.

BY FRANCIS TURNER PALGRAVE,

Late Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford.

PART I.

MONUMENTAL statues, common in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Italy, were hardly known during the Gothic or Mediæval period of Western Europe; and they first appear in England in connection with the Lord Arundel who collected antique marbles. He caused the bronze equestrian group of Charles I. at Charing Cross to be modelled in 1633 by Hubert le Sueur, who is called a pupil of the Italian sculptor, John of Bologna. Before it was put up, the monarchy had been abolished; and it is a well-known story, how a brazier, who read the signs of the times better than the politicians of the Commonwealth, concealed the group when its destruction was ordered. But it is probably little remembered by those who now pass it, that the vacant spot was selected for the scaffold of Major-General Harrison and four other patriots who suffered under the Restoration. There is something vindictive and barbarous in the choice of this site for the statue; something that recalls old frightful tales of human sacrifice and superstition. But people gossiped in those days as in ours, and much discussion seems to have accompanied the elevation of the statue to the pedestal, which was then elaborately carved for it, perhaps from the design, if not by the hands, of Grinling Gibbons.

> What can be the mystery, why Charing Cross
> This five months continues still muffled with board?

Thus, about 1672, sang Andrew Marvell—a writer from whose ode on Cromwell, one of the noblest and most stately poems in our language, a more serious strain might have been expected.

Anecdotes about artists have ordinarily little more to do with their art and the merit of it than these; but, in case of the Charles I., it is such historical associations that lend the group its main value. Placed well for effect, but (like other statues to be hereafter noticed) too high for convenient study as a work of art, it appears to be in a tame, at least a timid style, which hardly rises above the common monumental sculpture of that day; and in the age of Vandyck, one would have expected a

more picturesque and effective likeness, especially since, when seen in front, one traces a distinct reference to that great painter's equestrian portraits. The horse is fairly natural, though not free from indications that the artist was thinking of the ill-modelled breed of the ancient Roman sculptors; and the best thing we can say of the group, is that it avoids the bad extravagant style, which had by 1633 corrupted Italian sculpture, and of which, John of Bologna was one of the most brilliant representatives.*

Strange, as it may seem, London contains at least one public statue, the subject of which is hardly less uncertain, than if it had been dug up in Greece or Italy. Probably during the reign of Charles II. when Soho Square was begun, a stone figure was placed there, which has been assigned to the unhappy Duke of Monmouth, to James II., and to Charles himself. The last appears the most probable. It is a standing figure, clothed in English armour, but with a robe twisted behind; a wig surrounds the mutilated features.

Cromwell still waits for his statue; and he, in truth, should be a very powerful and accomplished sculptor, whose hands could safely attempt the difficult task of doing justice to the great man who stands up like some huge rock among the petty figures of the Stuarts. But unless we commemorate a prince or a general (and Cromwell was something more than most princes and generals), English funds are rarely forthcoming. Men even greater than the Protector are equally unrepresented. Yet there are few methods by which a wealthy man might more certainly or more honourably hand his name down to future generations, than by a first-rate public monument to departed genius.

James II., by Gibbons the wood-carver, apparently completed in 1687, stands behind Whitehall, and considering its age and exposed position, is well-preserved. He is in full Roman armour, laurel-crowned, and a robe falling behind him; the attitude, that of a man giving some command, is rather too showy, yet is rendered with ease and a certain dignity, and there is a considerable air of likeness in the harsh but narrow-looking features. The modelling is fair in its conventional way, which reminds one rather of the Roman-antique style than of nature; and it deserves special praise that Gibbons has known how to take advantage of his material, and has given his figure the comparatively disengaged or "open" attitude of which bronze, from

* For some of the facts stated in this paper, the writer is indebted to Mr. C. Knight's "London" (1843), and Mr. P. Cunningham's "Handbook" (1849).

its superior tenacity, admits. The drapery, from the same reason, has been kept light and flat in the folds. These may seem obvious merits; but it will be found that sculptors of much greater pretension and experience than Gibbons, have not felt the difference between working in stone, and working in metal, and have made their bronze figures dark and heavy, by a massive treatment, which only looks well in its own appropriate and light-coloured material. The artist received £500 for this work—a very large sum, the time and the size of the figure considered, and a proof that he must have obtained fashionable recognition as a sculptor.

The great William, fated to learn in England, by a bitter and pathetic experience,

> The unwilling gratitude of base mankind,

has but one statue—that in the centre of St. James's Square. So far as its distance from the eye admits of a judgment, this group (it is equestrian) though rather clever and lively, appears to be in a poor style, imitating the French statues of Louis XIV., and has all the look of a contemporary production. Yet it seems certain that the younger Bacon not only placed this figure here in 1808, but modelled it. He speaks of it as "my equestrian statue," in a letter which has been kindly pointed out to the writer by Mr. G. Scharf; and a print of the Square, dated 1754, shows a basin and fountain where the group now stands. Except upon such evidence (especially when one considers how unlikely it was that anyone should go to the great expense involved at the above date), it might have been conjectured that a contemporary statue had been presented to the Square by one of the great families who have houses about it, and might have been provided with its pedestal and "put in order" by Bacon. Though wanting in dignity and grace, this group has some truth to character in its expression of will and energy. The curious way in which the hair of the tail is detached in little masses in the direction of the horse's progress, was probably intended to increase this effect. But there is always a want of due stability and repose when a figure appears to be rapidly moving off its pedestal. The pause of *arrested* motion, the moment of *suspended* action, by the laws of the material, is almost always the right instant for sculpture to express.

Anne figures thrice: before St. Paul's, and in the two Queen's Squares named after her. Of these statues it will be enough to describe one. That in Queen's Square West (apparently Portland

stone painted) represents her exactly as she might have looked in one of the pictures of the time, in full court-robes, wearing a crown, and rising up or walking forward; whilst the right hand is extended over a cushion resting on a twisted column. The features are pleasing, and though the work is without any trace of proper style, the figure has a ladylike and dignified air. The broken sceptre now lies upon the cushion,—an emblem of her ill-fated family!—The quiet Square, with its solemn but not ungraceful houses around, some still preserving fragments of contemporary carving, the trees and the untrodden grass-plats, is a fit place for the monument of the last reigning Stuart.

A figure of George I., showy but effective, and infinitely better designed for its position than the Duke of York and the Nelson by two once fashionable Academicians, surmounts the picturesque campanile of St. George's, Bloomsbury.

George II. (or George I.,—the point is disputed), in Leicester Square, has been lately mutilated and ordered for removal; equal acts of folly, for though the statue was, perhaps, not of greater merit in art than several of our most recent figures presently to be noticed, yet it had real interest for all who feel that to love their land is to love its history, and are aware how much a past period is vivified and realized by the sight of any actual monument which the men of that day saw and handled.

A second statue of George II., perhaps by the same hand as the one of his father, stands like a Roman warrior in Golden Square. This, again, is a stone figure painted over (with the exquisitely absurd English taste in these matters) to look, no doubt, more like stone! The statue is of the ordinary monumental sort, though very elaborately wrought in the drapery and armour, which, from unskilful arrangement, give it a clumsy air. The warrior character may here be accepted as a not undeserved, if pedantic, compliment to the king's distinguished personal courage and firmness in danger. He and his father, in comparison with their Stuart predecessors, have, in truth, been rather harshly dealt with in our literature, which forgets their good points and cannot forgive their imperfect English.

The Duke of Cumberland, an equestrian bronze, set up in 1777 within Cavendish Square, is the last and perhaps the worst public statue in the primitive style which need be mentioned; for a standing figure of Sir H. Sloane, by Rysbrack, in the Apothecaries' Gardens at Chelsea, though noteworthy as the first extant memorial to a private citizen of distinction, hardly falls within our subject. Awkwardly

huddled together in his robes, and seemingly desirous to ride off and hide himself, the statue of the Duke almost justifies a criticism which it drew from Sir J. Reynolds—that modern dress was radically unsuitable for sculpture. But no powerful sculptors had proved then, as David d'Angers in France, Rietschel in Germany, and Watson and Woolner with us, have since proved, that the reverse of Sir Joshua's verdict is the truth. Indeed, it is obvious to common sense, that if we cannot clothe our contemporaries as they were really clothed, we had better leave monumental sculpture alone.

These figures all date before sculpture was studied as an art in England—nay, before it was thought possible that genuine English hands could produce anything worthy to be called sculpture. It is worth while recalling this state of things, for the encouragement of our race here or across the seas. During the first half of the last century nearly the same scepticism existed also in regard to our capacity for painting. These arts, at least in their highest form, were supposed by some natural law of selection to be confined to Italy—a country which, for more than a hundred years, had not only ceased to produce the great things which have justly made her celebrated, but had fallen into a degeneracy, in which tameness and extravagance, both alike almost entirely forgetful of nature, contended for the mastery. Yet the superstition that Italian taste necessarily meant something superior, from which the French had freed themselves, survived in England, and we find even Reynolds apologizing with his graceful good sense, for placing Gainsborough on a level with the Roman picture-manufacturers of the time, not one of whom, to judge by their works, would have been qualified even to "set his pallette" for our great landscape-painter.

"Sturdy Hogart," as Swift called him, was the first artist of power who spoke out, somewhat rudely no doubt, against this silly superstition, and satirized our art-patronizing classes for wasting their money on the Italian charlatans and sharks who then abounded, in terms which have even now not lost all their applicability. Hogarth's own pictures were, however, his best argument; Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Wilson followed; and the English school of painting, in oil and water-colours, whatever deficiencies it may be justly charged with, has at least proved that we stand on a level with any other civilized race in capacity for these forms of art. If our sculpture has not emerged to similar excellence, it has not been from want of men equal to the best of those hitherto known in Christendom, but from the want of general

public knowledge and taste on the subject, which has prevented ability from obtaining fair play, or impressing itself on the country.*

Some revolution, analogous to that initiated by Hogarth, from the books and reviews which have reached the writer, appears to be required in America. There, as in eighteenth-century England, in spite of a considerable activity and pleasure in art, an unreasoning reliance on European taste seems to prevail; a half-unconscious distrust of native power; a disposition, at least, among artists or their patrons to think that art is only to be learned abroad. This is particularly perceptible in case of sculpture, towards which the American mind shows a marked bias, which should in time produce good work. In the interests of this noblest of the Fine Arts, may an Englishman be allowed to observe that it is an injurious tendency which leads American sculptors, like some English, to settle in Italy? Attractive as the prospect may seem in the pages of a sentimental novelist, ignorant of art, everything is there really against them: ancient models, mostly indifferent when compared with our fragments of genuine Greek art, and rarely useful as guides for modern practice; renaissance models, mostly unsculptural in style, however beautiful or grand in their execution; a native modern school detestable in taste, though seductive by its showy cleverness; above all, coterie worship of the most ruinous kind; idle and dilettante wealth seeking to flatter itself by patronizing art, and blinded in its pursuit by the flattery which it receives, in turn, from the interested artist. This sickly *malaria* was near ruining Michael Angelo himself. It is, hence, little wonder that Rome, to the present day, has bred no great or sound sculptor for centuries: at best a Canova, a Thorwaldsen, or a Gibson, to show how fatal a delusion it is, even for men with some natural vocation for the art, to put their trust in connoisseurship and fashion, museums and mythologies.

It is about a century since the efforts of Nollekens, Banks, and others, began to lift sculpture above the church-figure fashion, or the mere imitation of French and Roman models; and there is henceforward some attempt at sculptural style, although often imperfectly carried out, in the public statues of London. Henceforth we also notice another change which, though promising well, has but partially fulfilled its promise. The royal family has hitherto filled our list of public statues; nor, considering the considerable place which the heads of every state, even if not to their own credit,

* The writer may refer those who are curious for further details on this point to his "Essays on Art," Macmillan and Co., 1866.

must necessarily fill in its history, should we grudge any of their images as superfluous. But the more liberally we concede their claims, the more will a high-spirited nation demand similar recognition of those citizens who have been born "nobles by nature." All kinds of private merit were, from a very early time, honoured among the Greeks by monumental sculpture; their healthy minds and lively intellects soon saw that a musician might be not less of a public benefactor than a ruler or a general; but in England these honours were long confined to the royal lineage, just as Rome reserved a triumph for members of the privileged houses. This feeling broke down with us after the French Revolution, and a more liberal order of things began. So sculpture, like all the arts, images the politics of a nation. But the plan has failed hitherto in several respects, which it is worth while to notice as lessons for the future. In the first place, whether because a man of action has more powerful or more united friends than a man of mind, or through what is now spoken of as the "Philistinism" of the race, intellect and genius have been almost excluded from these national honours, and every foreigner in England has remarked that the statues of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Bacon, Newton, and others of "the blood of the gods," are conspicuous in London by their absence. And a second cause of failure, when anything in this way has been tried, has arisen from the low state, not only of sculpture, but of taste and knowledge of the art among us, already alluded to. Without personal disrespect to men who follow the art as they have received it, and might have made more of natural capacity under a better system, it may be said that the large majority of our professors bear the same relation to sculptors, in the strict sense, that the Holloways and Morrisons bear to a Cullen, a Holland, or a De Mussy. They are unscientific. The large majority of our patrons or committees of selection, again, have no more fitted themselves, by study of the art, to decide on the merits of the respective artists than an average Englishman is qualified to decide between Armstrong or Whitworth ordnance. If they were qualified, their first discovery would necessarily be that there is no art wherein excellence is rarer than sculpture; and in place of falling in with the thoughtless practice of the day, and encouraging monuments and statues to every politician or general of note, they would resolutely determine to have none unless they could have them by first-rate ability. That one or two sculptors of such rank should be found in any country is the most that can be looked for; there have been many periods when no genius in this

difficult art has existed anywhere; but the man of trained taste would make this his first rule—to have excellence in sculpture, or give up the wish for it. There is no pleasure, or life, or honour in a mediocre statue. Genius can only be duly commemorated by genius.

With the development of sculpture as an art in England the individual style of the artist becomes also conspicuous, and must henceforward be carefully considered in any attempt to criticise our public statues. It may, therefore, be convenient to class them under their respective sculptors. The first example in which the art raised itself above the primitive style with which we have been hitherto engaged was given by Bacon, in the bronze group of George III., which stands within the quadrangle of Somerset House; and it still remains one of the best works in London. We are so familiar with the appearance of this king in his later years, that it is a surprise to see him here with the delicate and almost girlish features of his youth, as he might have looked, before his mind clouded into obstinacy, when he made love to Lady Sarah Lennox, or gossiped respectfully with Dr. Johnson in the palace library. The figure is treated in a half-classical style, in a robe which follows and displays the form, hair bound with a fillet, legs and arms bare. The limbs are rather timidly modelled, but the attitude has a fair degree of animation, and the draperies are managed with carefulness and grace. Bacon, though a sound, was not an imaginative artist, like his distinguished contemporary Banks; he is, hence, not happy in the emblems with which he has grouped the King. George holds a classical rudder, and a classical galley lies behind him, balanced on his right side by a lion. In itself this lion is much better modelled than those in Trafalgar Square, to be presently described. The back is particularly good; but through an absurd diminution of natural size, the effect is altogether thrown away. Below the king the Thames, figured in Roman fashion as an aged but vigorous man, reclines, with a vase and an immense "cornucopia," which—reversing the error committed in regard to the lion—is far too large. This figure is ably and powerfully modelled, but misses the repose of ancient art: it reveals something of the extravagant taste of the Roman sculptor Bernini, or of Bacon's own contemporary, Fuseli. Altogether, however, this group (especially when its date in our school is considered) ranks as a very creditable work, and teaches a lesson greatly needed now;—how much care and completeness may do for the art in the absence of those high gifts of genius which are only given once or twice in a century to the sculpture of any country.