I. NATURE.

To the Greek climate we owe the production of TASTE, and from thence it spread at length over all the politer world. Every invention, communicated by foreigners to that nation, was but the seed of what it became afterwards, changing both its nature and size in a country, chosen, as Plato\(^a\) says, by Minerva, to be inhabited by the Greeks, as productive of every kind of genius.

But this TASTE was not only original among the Greeks, but seemed also quite peculiar to their country: it seldom went abroad without loss; and was long ere it imparted its kind influences to more distant climes. It was, doubtless, a stranger to the northern zones, when Painting and Sculpture, those offsprings of Greece, were despised there to such a degree, that the most valuable pieces of Corregio served only for blinds to the windows of the royal stables at Stockholm.

There is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled; I mean, by imitating the ancients. And what we are told of Homer, that whoever understands him well, admires him, we find no less true in matters concerning the ancient, especially the Greek arts. But then we must be as familiar with them as with a friend, to find Laocoon as inimitable as Homer. By such intimacy our judgment will be that of Nicomachus: Take these eyes, replied he to some paltry critic, censuring the Helen of Zeuxis, Take my eyes, and she will appear a goddess.

With such eyes Michael Angelo, Raphael, and Poussin, considered the performances of the ancients. They imbibed taste at its source; and Raphael particularly in its native country. We know, that he sent young artists to Greece, to copy there, for his use, the remains of antiquity.

An ancient Roman statue, compared to a Greek one, will generally appear like Virgil’s Diana amidst her Oreads, in comparison of the Nausicaa of Homer, whom he imitated.

Laocoon was the standard of the Roman artists, as well as ours; and the rules of Polycletus became the rules of art. […]

The Gymnasies, where, sheltered by public modesty, the youths exercised themselves naked, were the schools of art. These the philosopher frequented, as well as the artist. Socrates for the instruction of a Charmides, Autolycus, Lysis; Phidias for the improvement of his art by their beauty. Here he studied the elasticity of the muscles, the ever varying motions of the frame, the outlines of fair forms, or the Contour left by the young wrestler on the sand. Here beautiful nakedness appeared with such a liveliness of expression, such truth and variety of situations, such a noble air of the body, as it would be ridiculous to look for in any hired model of our academies.

Truth springs from the feelings of the heart. What shadow of it therefore can the modern artist hope for, by relying upon a vile model, whose soul is either too base to feel, or too stupid to express the passions, the sentiment his object claims? Unhappy he! if experience and fancy fail him.

The beginning of many of Plato's dialogues, supposed to have been held in the Gymnasies, cannot raise our admiration of the generous souls of the Athenian youth, without giving us, at the fame time, a strong presumption of a suitable nobleness in their outward carriage and bodily exercises.

The fairest youths danced undressed on the theatre; and Sophocles, the great Sophocles, when young, was the first who dared to entertain his fellow-citizens in this manner. Phryne went to bathe at the Eleusinian games, exposed to the eyes of all Greece, and rising from the water became the model of Venus Anadyomene. During certain solemnities the young Spartan maidens danced naked before the young men: strange this may seem, but will appear more probable, when we confider that the Christians of the primitive church, both men and women, were dipped together in the same font.

Then every solemnity, every festival, afforded the artist opportunity to familiarize himself with all the beauties of Nature. [...] 

These frequent occasions of observing Nature, taught the Greeks to go on still farther. They began to form certain general ideas of beauty, with regard to the proportions of the inferiour parts, as well as of the whole frame: these they raised above the reach of mortality, according to the superiour model of some ideal nature.

Thus Raphael formed his Galatea, as we learn by his letter to Count Baltazar Castiglione⁵, where he says, "Beauty being so seldom found among the fair, I avail myself of a certain ideal image."

According to those ideas, exalted above the pitch of material models, the Greeks formed their gods and heroes: the profile of the brow and nose of gods and goddesses is almost a straight line. The fame they gave on their coins to queens, &c. but without indulging their fancy too much. Perhaps this profile was as peculiar to the ancient Greeks, as flat noses and little eyes to the Calmucks and Chinese; a supposition which receives some strength from the large eyes of all the heads on Greek coins and gems.

From the same ideas the Romans formed their Empresses on their coins. Livia and Agrippina have the profile of Artemisia and Cleopatra.

We observe, nevertheless, that the Greek artists in, general, submitted to the law prescribed by the Thebans: "To do, under a penalty, their best in imitating Nature." For, where they could not possibly apply their easy profile, without endangering the

⁵ Vide Bellori Descriz delle Imagini dipinte da Raffaello d'Urbino, &c. Roma. 1695 fol.
resemblance, they followed Nature, as we see instanced in the beauteous head of Julia, the daughter of Titus, done by Euodus.\(^c\)

But to form a "just resemblance, and, at the fame time, a handsomer one," being always the chief rule they observed, and which Polygnotus constantly went by, they must, of necessity, be supposed to have had in view a more beauteous and more perfect Nature. And when we are told, that some artists imitated Praxiteles, who took his concubine Cratina for the model of his Cnidian Venus; or that others formed the graces from Lais; it is to be understood that they did so, without neglecting these great laws of the art. Sensual beauty furnished the painter with all that nature could give; ideal beauty with the awful and sublime; from that he took the Humane, from this the Divine.

Let any one, sagacious enough to pierce into the depths of art, compare the whole system of the Greek figures with that of the moderns, by which, as they say, nature alone is imitated; good heaven! what a number of neglected beauties will he not discover! [...]  

The imitation of beauty is either reduced to a single object, and is individual, or, gathering observations from single ones, composes of these one whole. The former we call copying, drawing a portrait; 'tis the straight way to Dutch forms and figures; whereas the other leads to general beauty, and its ideal images, and is the way the Greeks took. But there is still this difference between them and us: they enjoying daily occasions of seeing beauty, (suppose even not superior to ours,) acquired those ideal riches with less toil than we, confined as we are to a few and often fruitless opportunities, ever can hope for. It would be no easy matter, I fancy, for our nature, to produce a frame equal in beauty to that of Antinous; and surely no idea can soar above the more than human proportions of a deity, in the Apollo of the Vatican, which is a compound of the united force of Nature, Genius, and Art.

Their imitation discovering in the one every beauty diffused through Nature, shewing in the other the pitch to which the most perfect Nature can elevate herself, when soaring above the senses, will quicken the genius of the artist, and shorten his discipleship: he will learn to think and draw with confidence, feeing here the fixed limits of human and divine beauty.

Building on this ground, his hand and senses directed by the Greek rule of beauty, the modern artist goes on the surest way to the imitation of Nature. The ideas of unity and perfection, which he acquired in meditating on antiquity, will help him to combine, and to enoble the more scattered and weaker beauties of our Nature. Thus he will improve every beauty he discovers in it, and by comparing the beauties of nature with the ideal, form rules for himself. [...]  

Nothing would more decisively prove the advantages to be got by imitating the ancients, preferably to Nature, than an essay made with two youths of equal talents, by devoting the one to antiquity, the other to Nature: this would draw Nature as he finds her; if Italian, perhaps he might paint like Caravaggio; if Flemish, and lucky, like Jac. Jordans; if French, like Stella; the other would draw her as she directs, and paint like Raphael. [...]  

\(^c\) Vide Stosch Pierres grave pl. XXXIII.