

THE FIELD OF ART

BY ROYAL CORTISSOZ

WHERE shall the student go when he wishes to come in contact with really representative examples of the eighteenth-century British painters? "To England" would seem to be the obvious reply, and it would hold, no doubt, if the student were to have the run of certain private collections. But how otherwise he would fare may be judged from certain passages in Sir Walter Armstrong's little book in the *Ars Una* series:

Reynolds is not well represented in our public galleries.

It is impossible to reach a complete idea of Gainsborough's powers from our public collections.

Romney has been still less fortunate than Reynolds and Gainsborough in his fight for publicity. Scarcely any picture showing him quite at his best has won its way into a national collection.

Hoppner has been even more unlucky than Ramsay in failing to make his proper entry into the nation's collections. No idea of his powers can be formed from the National or the Portrait Gallery, and he is almost entirely absent from the provincial museums.

With regard to the national collections, the same unhappy story has to be told about Lawrence as about so many other English masters. He is quite inadequately represented in our public museums.

Of course these drastic statements have to be received with certain reservations,

for the national collections in England are not utterly devoid of examples of the historic leaders just cited. But that these examples are not of what I might call the canonical order remains emphatically true, so as I revert to the

question asked at the outset I offer another reply. It is that instead of going to London the student should travel in exactly the opposite direction, and examine the collection formed by the late Henry E. Huntington at Pasadena, in California. There he will find in unique fulness a true representation of the British tradition. There are only about forty canvases in the group, but

they are uniformly of astonishing quality.

DOCTOR HALE'S article in the July number of this magazine gave a full account of the Huntington foundation, with special reference to the library, but his allusions to the art gallery were brief, so I may therefore go in some detail into its character. It is unique, as I have already remarked, and in more senses than one. For one thing the collection was



Master William Blair.

From the painting by Sir Henry Raeburn.

brought together in comparatively few years. At the foot of each description in the catalogue runs the legend, Acquired from Sir Joseph Duveen, and that redoubtable individual would appear to

nation's artistic patrimony. Now they dwell on the Pacific coast! These two renowned masterpieces, surrounded by others of the same school, establish within our borders, in something like splen-

dor, perhaps the world's most imposing memorial to the painter of an epoch. Unique? It is, to my mind, one of the most piquant episodes in the history of connoisseurship. Mr. Huntington was in love with the eighteenth-century British painters, and having resolved to assemble them under his roof, he adopted the highest standard and steadfastly adhered to it. It must have amused him as he meditated amongst his treasures to realize that no historian of the subject could forego the long journey to California. There in very truth he had recreated one of the seats of artistic tradition.

What is tradition? I have ventured to define it before in these pages as simply the tribute which the genuine artist pays to the wisdom of the finer spirits in the art of all ages. There is nothing of academic formula about it, there is nothing in it to obstruct the artist's free expression of himself. It is in this sense that the eighteenth-century British masters embody tradition. The Royal Academy was there but it imposed no routine upon the particular practitioners we have now to consider, and even though you



Diana, Viscountess Crosbie.

From the painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

have achieved something like a tour-de-force in his service to Mr. Huntington. Ransacking the private collections of Great Britain, he literally stopped at nothing. From the Duke of Westminster, for example, in 1921, he bought Gainsborough's Blue Boy and Sir Joshua's Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse. They had seemed immovable monuments in a

may trace some nominally conventional strains in them, the genius pervading them is in no wise academic, but in each case remains essentially personal. They bear the stamp of a period. They mirror a fashion. They use more or less a common denominator of design. But they enforce the everlasting truth that an artist is known by the individual ability

and quality he puts into his work. A point of view is not necessarily a formula. From it an artist, though he may stand on a ground common to others, may use his own vision, and his craftsmanship, too, will reveal only the pressure of his own inviolable hand.



LET us touch first upon this matter of the point of view. For a long time in the history of British portrait-painting it is closely allied with the carriage and demeanor of the royal court. The raciest earthiness of the Georgian epoch could not dislocate the gait of the aristocracy when it was on parade before the painters. And the latter, in the epoch of Mr. Huntington's masters, were not only vividly conscious of that gait but had in the back of their minds a peculiar sensitiveness to what Van Dyck had done in his registration of it. In the sixth of his Discourses Reynolds alludes to "the place which Van Dyck, all things considered, so justly holds as the first of portrait-painters." Tacit repetitions of this judgment recur again and again in the master's pages. His view permeated all the studios. There was danger in it, to be sure, one phase of which Reynolds himself thus touches upon:

The great variety of excellent portraits with which Van Dyck has enriched this nation, we are not content to admire for their real excellence, but extend our approbation even to the dress which happened to be the fashion of that age. We all very well remember how common it was a few years ago for portraits to be drawn in this fan-

tastic dress; and this custom is not yet entirely laid aside. By this means it must be acknowledged very ordinary pictures acquired something of the air and effect of the works of Van Dyck, and appeared, therefore, at first sight to be better pictures than they really were.



Mrs. Henry Beaufoy.

From the painting by Thomas Gainsborough.

The fragment points to the peril of superficial emulation, but I cite this chiefly to underline the fact that the eighteenth-century British masters escaped it. Costume counted with them, counted enormously, but it was the costume of their age and it happened to be intrinsically effective. What they received from Van Dyck was not a pat-

tern of dress but a fillip to mood and taste. In carrying on his tradition they carried on just his elegance and stateliness, and they adjusted the key to their own time. Incidentally each painter

whole history clearly shows, and his Italian travels, with an instinctively studious habit of mind, only confirmed in him a predestined impulse. Mr. Huntington's leading specimen, the Mrs. Siddons as

the Tragic Muse, was never painted by an academician with a formula but by an observer of nature. She was wont to say that she had fixed the attitude herself, and this is borne out by the easy felicity of the composition. What Sir Joshua did was by the sinewy force of his touch to lift the whole thing to a higher power. Mrs. Siddons adopted the pose in response to his request to "graciously bestow upon me some idea of the Tragic Muse." But we may be sure that it was his genius that pulled the whole fabric together. It has been said that the portrait is reminiscent of the Isaiah in the Sistine Chapel, and that Reynolds would never have painted it just as it is if Michael-Angelo hadn't painted before him. Perhaps. But I go back to my conception of tradition. It is with no sacrifice of originality that Sir Joshua pays tribute to Michael-Angelo. It was from his own inner sense of things that he drew the majestic grace, the unity of design, which are his salient contributions to an era. It is this personal distinction of his that shines forth from



Jane, Countess of Harrington.

From the painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

tinctured a portrait with his own idiosyncrasy.



THIS is notably so in the case of Reynolds. The powers of *ordonnance* in him which smack so much of the academy were really an inborn part of him. The grand style was in his blood, as the man's

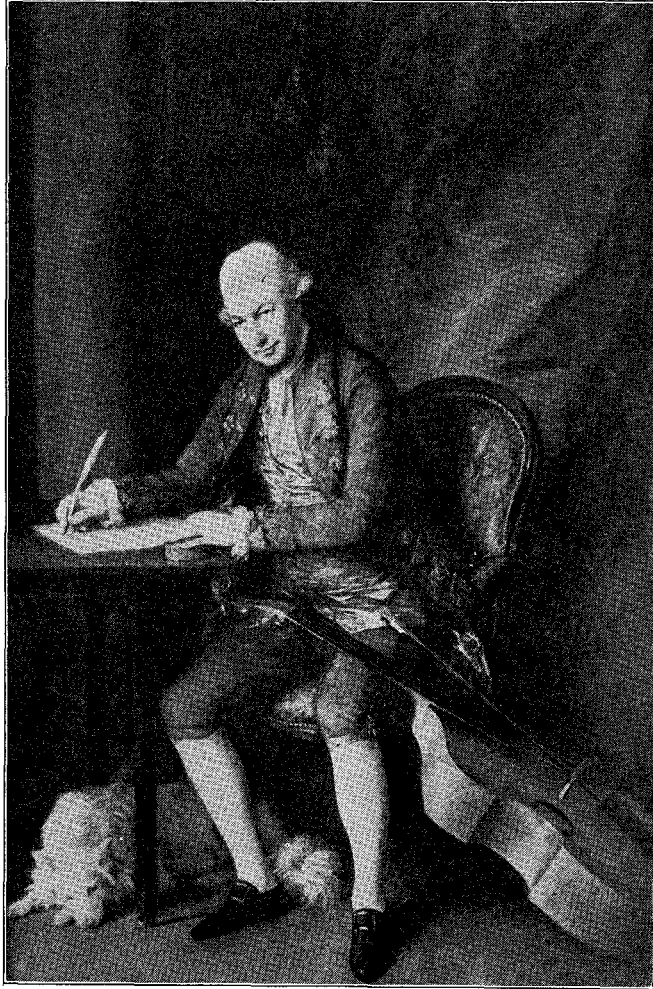
all the ten paintings from his brush in the Huntington Collection. It is hard to say which is the more striking in the Diana, Viscountess Crosbie, the gracious movement of the figure or the serene balance of the design. The artist sees his subject steadily and sees it whole, as a bit of nature and as a work of art. So it is again in the almost dramatically imposing Jane,

Countess of Harrington, in the classical Mrs. Edwin Lascelles, and in that incomparable Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, which is classical, too, and at the same time romantically intimate. There are Sir Joshuas in the collection, like the exquisite profile of the little girl, The Honorable Theresa Parker, which are intensely modern in their fresh spontaneity. But the master was most himself when he was painting in the formal vein of his period, not dashing off a study but building up a court portrait. He is the great constructive type of his school, and in that rôle in Pasadena he is superb.



GAINSBOROUGH, I imagine, could have bent Reynolds's bow in the matter of pondered composition if he had chosen, but he hadn't the same weighty temperament. It was his gift to be lyrical and light in hand, to respond to nature as whole-heartedly as Sir Joshua, but to give her even greater freedom. There is a pair of full-lengths by him in the Huntington Collection which holds the secret of his art as in a parable. In one member of the pair, Edward, Second Viscount Ligonier, is portrayed standing beside his horse. He is "posed" and so is the animal, but a certain subtle naturalism pervades the group, and when you turn to the full-length of his wife you find that in spite of the pedestal and statue beside which she stands, and the billowing drapery in the background, it is with a fairly

unstudied, artless stroke that Gainsborough evokes her lovely presence. Beside the august quality of Reynolds he seems the pure *improvisatore*. He can make a composition with the best of



Charles Frederick Abel.

From the painting by Thomas Gainsborough.

them, as witness the brilliant portrait of the Court Musician, Charles Frederick Abel, but its sound structure is somehow lightened by the careless animation of life itself. Gainsborough is the happy virtuoso in this gallery, as he was indeed in the London of his time. In temperament he is a very different man from the robust moralizing Hogarth, but he is akin



The Hon. Theresa Parker.
From the painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

to that master in what I may call the gusto of technique. Like Hogarth in *The Shrimp Girl*, he uses the brush as though it were a magic wand. What, after all, is *The Blue Boy* if not, technically, a prodigious tour-de-force? The story that he painted the picture in defiance of Sir Joshua's dictum on the subject of blue was long ago exploded, but this portrait, nevertheless, owes much to nothing more or less than a conjurer's skill in showing what he could audaciously do with the tools of his trade. There are nine Gainsboroughs in the Huntington Collection to balance Sir Joshua's ten portraits, and in this instance also the examples are superlative. Besides the Ligonier pair and *The Blue Boy* the group contains some of the most ravishing portraits of women that Gainsborough ever painted, the Juliana, Lady Petre, the tenderly blithe Mrs. Mears, and that wonderful Mrs. Henry Beaufoy which with its romantic background touches the imagination like some sylvan idyll. Gainsborough was the virtuoso, yes, when he painted Mrs. Beaufoy, but he was a poet, too, as

sensitive in feeling as he was in brushwork. There was a kind of gracious emotion in him. When he painted *The Cottage Door*, the sole landscape of his in the collection, he gave us not only a transcript of the truth but a thing of enchanting beauty. Reynolds at Pasadena has more grandeur, but Gainsborough beats him in sheer flashing beguilement.



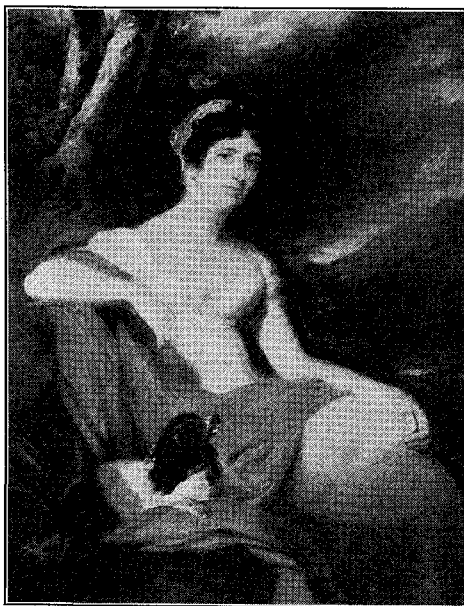
ROMNEY, who is numerically a shade stronger than either of them, in his turn makes as personal an appeal. When he is stately, as in the full-lengths of Mr. and Mrs. Jeremiah Milles, he is somewhat colder than Sir Joshua. He savors a little more obviously of artifice. He is not so powerful a type. Neither has he Gainsborough's dexterity, his glancing, gleaming touch. He has, on the other hand, great linear ability, and while he does not make drapery as noble as Reynolds makes it or as shimmeringly delightful as it is in the hands of Gainsborough, he treats it with remarkable adroitness. His special note as it



Mrs. Francis Burton.
From the painting by George Romney.

comes out in the Huntington canvases is the note of sentiment, of charm. If there is a weakness anywhere in the eighteenth-century English school, a weakness half suggesting that academic dryness from which I have maintained that the masters are in essence free, it discloses itself in respect to the physiognomies. The typical face in a portrait of that period is not very rich in character. But if there is not pronounced character, there is always a certain witchery in a head by Romney. When I think of his Mrs. Ralph Willett in the Huntington Collection, or the Mrs. Penelope Lee Acton, or The Beckford Children, or the two different studies of Lady Hamilton, or the Mrs. Francis Burton, I think of so many images of delicate beauty, made that much more delicate and alluring by their envelopment in Romney's spirit.

There are two captivating Hoppners in the gallery, one a great full-length of Mrs. Bedford and her Son, the other a bust portrait of Lady Beauchamp, in which the very fragrance of his art seems to reside. There are three thoroughly



The Hon. Mrs. Cunliffe Offley.
From the painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence.



Lady Beauchamp, afterward Marchioness of Hertford.
From the painting by John Hoppner.

representative Lawrences, including that glittering Pinkie which in technical bravura is rivalled only by the same painter's Miss Farren in the Morgan Collection. A good Raeburn is present, and there are two fine pictures by Turner and Constable. On the Constable, A View on the Stour, near Dedham, I am tempted to pause. It is a glorious landscape, one of his masterpieces. But it is not for landscape art that our hypothetical student will turn to the Huntington Collection. He will turn to that collection for the tradition of eighteenth-century British portraiture in its purest estate. In the contemplation of it he will drink deep draughts of pleasure, and if he happens to be a portrait-painter himself he will derive also substantial profit from the encounter. A noble tradition never dies. It is a living, continuing force. There are elements in the portraits at which I have glanced which must always be inspiring, elements of dignity in design, honesty in the construction of

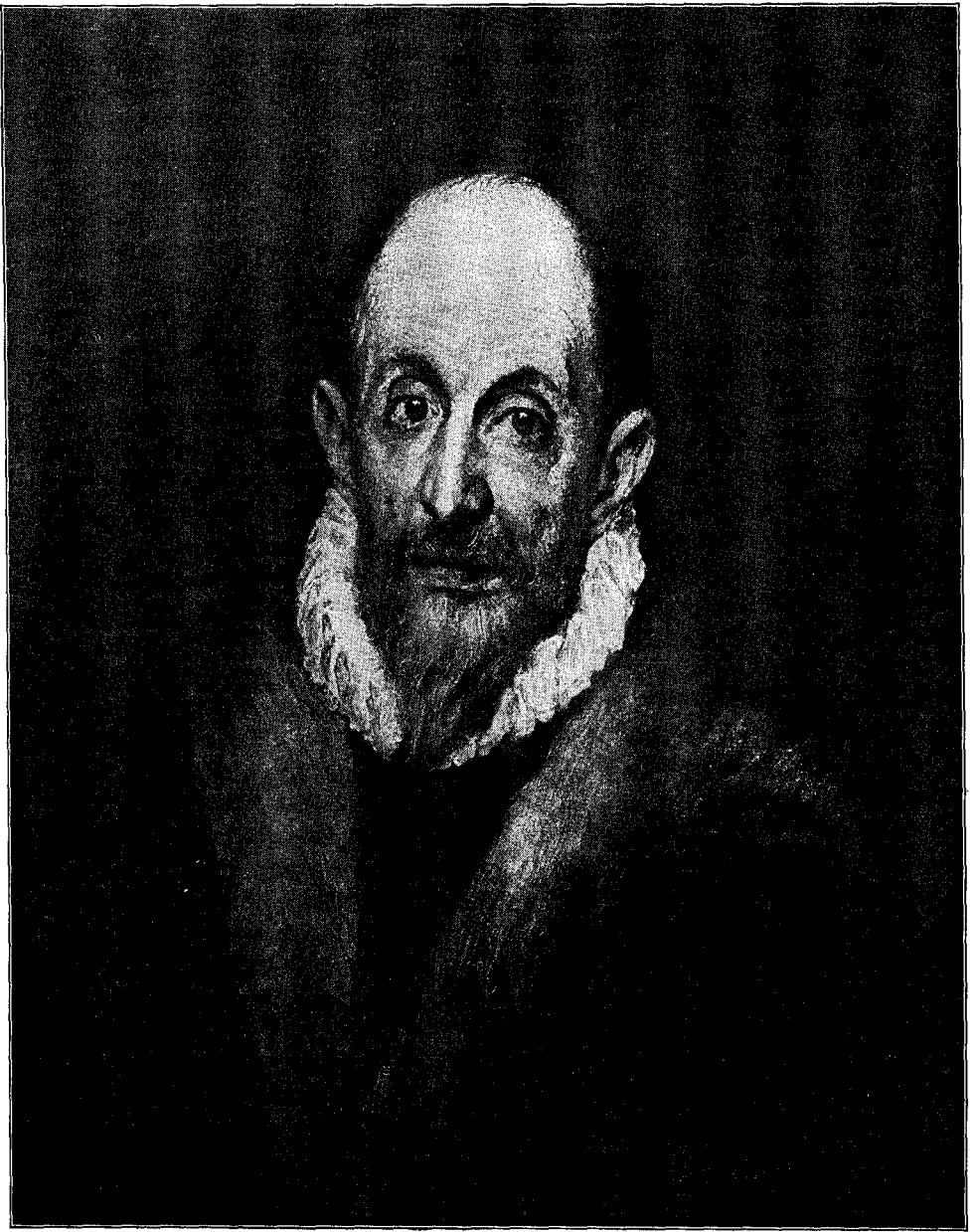
form, purity and distinction in line, art of painting. That is why, for my taste in color and serenity in spirit. The own part, I doubly value the generosity of the Huntington Collection recalls us, in short, the man who formed it and left it to the public to some of the stanchest virtues in the



The Cottage Door.

From the painting by Thomas Gainsborough.

A calendar of current art exhibitions will be found in the Fifth Avenue Section.



EL GRECO.

From the portrait by himself.

—See "The Field of Art," page 376.