A STUDY OF THE ESTHETIC PRINCIPLES IN SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS' DISCOURSES

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A STUDY OF THE ESTHETIC PRINCIPLES IN SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS' DISCOURSES

INTRODUCTION

Criticism is born when art becomes self-conscious. Whether from the artist himself or by the critic, criticism is essential to the development of art. The best criticism is that which the artist exercises over his own work, but this admission does not invalidate all other criticism. The artist must learn to accept criticism by judging it with discrimination. His problem is to investigate the esthetic principles of his critics, weigh them against his own, and evaluate the critics' advice in the light of this comparison.

Art becomes self-conscious in 1648 with the formulation of the French Academy. Prior to this time the course of art was determined by the masters. After the publication of Henry Testelin's *Sentimens des Plus Habilles Peintres sur la Pratique de la Peinture et Sculpture* in 1680, the views of the critics were established in tabular form and exerted a strong influence on painting for the next two hundred years. Reynolds' *Discourses* offer no unique contribution to the French academic standard and share the confusions which are evident in the earlier work. The *Discourses* may be considered as the second attempt to realize the aims of art.

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1 Reynolds' *Discourses* were first published complete in 1794. The first seven *Discourses* were published in 1778, before the others had been written.

through a rational approach.

The purpose of a critical study of Reynolds' writings is not alone to show the strength and weakness of his ideas, but also to formulate with greater clarity the present object of criticism. The first chapter of this thesis is devoted to the statement of a philosophy of art which accepts the countless developments which art has experienced since the passing of the "academic approach." In itself such a statement is very illusive, and needs example after example to illustrate it. But if applied to Reynolds' Discourses it may become more apparent. Therefore the reader is asked not to accept Chapter I, "Axioms of Art Criticism," as a conclusive statement, but to allow its meaning to expand as the criticism of the Discourses is pursued.

Sir Joshua Reynolds was born at Plympton, Devonshire in 1723. He was the son of the village school master, and received an adequate education in the arts and sciences. While in his teens he determined upon his career and was sent to London as apprentice to the painter Hudson. After two years Reynolds left his teacher. The next influence on his work was his trip to Italy where he may be said to have collected the ideas which form the body of the Discourses. In Italy he formed his admiration for the "Grand Style." His sudden growth of understanding, which the Italian masterpieces fostered, may be responsible for his doctrine that art can be taught through principles; that "nothing is denied to well directed labour;" that genius may be acquired through mental labor. From this same experience may be traced Reynolds' unwillingness to trust
a student's own genius. On the contrary, he would force him into a study of only the accepted masters. These are important themes in the Discourses, and all have their basis in contemporary rationalism.

Reynolds' life in London, as a fashionable portrait painter, was uneventful. His circle was that brilliant group led by Johnson, Garrick, Mrs. Siddons, Goldsmith, Walpole, Burke, the witty literary figures of an England which was enjoying the aftermath of expansion and colonization. Reynolds had a genial manner which made him ever a welcome member of their gatherings, though he was never a leader or an active participant in their enthusiasms.

In 1768 Reynolds was both knighted and made first president of the Royal Academy. In later years his political beliefs stood between him and royal patronage, and his position continued to be that of a fashionable portrait painter. He always held his own in this field, even when opposition was offered by Gainsborough and Romney, who were more facile and flattering than Reynolds.

William Blake is a contemporary of Reynolds. His marginal notes on the Discourses are essential for any discussion of Reynolds' thought, although Blake had no direct influence on Reynolds. The mystical Blake is the complete antithesis of the rational Reynolds, and Blake's notes, written in the margins of his copy of the Discourses, offer a severe commentary on most of Reynolds' ideas. Blake has both the advantage and limitation of the mystic's approach

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1 William Blake, 1757-1827. The Marginal Notes to Sir Joshua Reynolds' Discourses are reprinted in E. J. Ellis' The Real Blake, Ch. XXXII.
to life. He is more profound than Reynolds, yet he is equally dogmatic. On this account his criticisms may be accepted only after careful consideration.

Reynolds died in 1792. He worked very little in his later years, as he was deprived of the constant use of his eyes. It must have been a source of consolation to him that he was re-elected president of the Royal Academy after his resignation, which had been brought about by jealousies and dissatisfaction. His last Discourse was delivered upon the occasion of his re-election to the presidency. It shows at once his desire for the good of the Academy and his pleasure at the recognition shown him. It is not an anticlimax to his former Discourses but is rather the strongest statement of them all. It contains many of his aptest sayings and shows Reynolds' refusal to be satisfied with a narrow, confining philosophy.
"The act of the painter is not to do something to things but to do something to persons." — Eric Gill, *Art*, Bodley Head, 1935, p. 7

Before a scientist performs an experiment he takes account of every happening and every possible development. He establishes as many determinants as he can, and qualifies his results by the factors of his experiment which are not determinable. The scientist's experiment is assured of some tangible result, since he is able to gauge his answers by a needle on a dial or the colour of a solution. In other words the criteria for the proof of his experiment are understood through simple physical responses.

The art critic should perform experiments in much the same way that the scientist does. Unhappily he is assured of no equally definite result, because the phenomena of art cannot be experienced through simple responses. The very position which art must maintain relative to human life, forbids it to narrow its interests and become completely accessible to conscious awareness. Art must remain finally in a realm of abstraction, where only man's intuition can sense it. At least this is true for the critic. For the individual, art may be a very conscious experience, but one which can never be communicated to another individual. There will always be disagreement over the merits of art works, as long as

1 "... this is an occupation known as painting, which calls for imagination and skill of hand in order to discover things not seen, hiding themselves under the shadow of natural objects and to give them shape with the hand, presenting to plain sight what does not actually exist." Cennino Cennini, *Il Libro dell'Arte*, Yale Press, 1935, p. 1
there are two people alive. Unfortunately much of the dispute is
only shallow, never resting upon the critic's intuition, but is
dictated only by his reason. Principles generally accepted in one
period are later rejected because the premises on which they are
based are not fundamental. Critics are often like Euclidian geom-
eters who refuse to believe the axioms so necessary to that system.
Art, too, has its axioms, and they cannot be neglected. There is
Truth and Reality within the field of art, as there is in any field.
These are not universal absolutes, but exist only within the field
of art. Their properties may change, particularly for the critic,
whose business is to understand these properties verbally, and also
even for the artist, who may subconsciously shift his emphasis from
one characteristic of art to another. Nevertheless, there are ele-
ments of criticism which can be fixed, indisputably, as determinant;
in the same way that the scientific experimenter determines the
functioning of his instruments.

There are six points upon which critics must agree if they
are to speak of an art which is more than intellectual; one which
includes a spiritual appreciation.

1. The real existence of art depends upon its structure. This
is its unity. A work of art is a unique quality born of common-

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1 William Blake's Marginal Notes to the Discourses contain these
words at the head of an account of Reynolds' life: "In-
vention depends altogether upon Execution or Organisation;
as that is right or wrong, so is the Invention perfect or
imperfect. Whoever is set to undermine the Execution of
Art is set to destroy art. Michael Angelo's Art depends on
Michael Angelo's Execution altogether." (Reprinted in E.J.
Ellis, The Real Blake, Chatto and Windus, p. 372). Roger
Fry writes: "It (art) seems to be as remote from actual life
place parts; the painter's colours have no life on his palette, but when they are combined on the canvas a new quality is created. This would indicate that the quality is due to the combination, not to the colors, hence the significance of structure in art.

2. **Beauty in art** is the realization of **structure** or unity. This differentiates it from beauty of nature which is often conditioned by the biological response to our perceptions.¹ When nature is seen esthetically, it is seen as the painter sees it. Then only are the beauties of nature and art the same.

3. The **fundamental of structure is continuity of parts.** This is "relationship" in art. When one thing is seen relative to another, a continuity of experience is automatically established between the two objects; whether things in nature or painted shapes.

4. The **parts of an art work** are not related to experience generally, but only to **experience in the art medium.** Tones in music, masses in sculpture, coloured shapes in painting are the parts of these arts. Subject is not a part of art.

5. **Subject in art** is synonymous with **structure.** This is only

![Image](image-url)


Roger Fry expresses the necessary distinction between beauty of nature and esthetic beauty in his essay on Archaic Greek Art.
true when the subject is thoroughly assimilated by the work. That is to say the figure of a girl by Renoir is no longer a girl but an organization in paint. There is a great pleasure in seeing a subject completely achieved by a painting — and it is a legitimate esthetic pleasure — but when it is achieved it is no longer a subject, it is the painting. Thus even the "purist" in art may be charmed by the girl in Renoir's picture. He will not be untrue to his insistence upon purity because Renoir has seen and recorded esthetically. This is an axiom of art which cannot be given too much importance at the present time. Lack of proper understanding of the relation of subject and technique or structure has been the cause of so much sterility in art. Too many artists have confined themselves to a narrow purity, which denied subject any place in art, or have gone to the other extreme and become only subject painters. The painters of "Non-objective Art" are in the first of these groups and the Surrealists are in the second.

6. Finally it must be born in the critic's mind that he is writing of art and so necessarily limiting himself to certain aspects of it. He must be continually aware that when art is at its richest development it can call forth every kind of human response, both conscious and subconscious. A critic's comments will only be valid as they show an awareness of this broad appeal and are based on the fullest conceivable experiences.

If the critic bears these axioms in mind he will come to realize art as an independent entity, with a life of its own and a character very similar to life; it will no longer be a narrow rule-
bound system or an illusion of life. Professor Oskar Hagen closes his book, "Art Epochs and Their Leaders," in this way: "Sustained only by those means that are peculiar to her own essence, art brings humanity into communion with life."

By understanding art the critic is able to comprehend life and in turn appreciate art more deeply. Both are fields of Change and Truth. This is the paradox in life and in art. It is the basis for criticism. It is both its weakness and its strength. Truth is essential for change to take place, and significant change must broaden truth. The truths of the past may no longer be true. Change has expanded them into new truths. Nevertheless they were truths which stimulated men to act, and they are not entirely to be cast aside.

Change has been at work in criticism since Sir Joshua Reynolds wrote his Discourses. It is a change which has not altered art, because art proceeds through intuition, but it has led to new Truths in criticism.

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1 Oskar Hagen, "Art Epochs and Their Leaders," Scribners, p. 318
2 Blake's marginal Notes on Discourses, Discourse VI: "Reason — or a ratio of all we have known — is not the same it shall be when we know more." (E.J. Ellis, The Real Blake, Chatto and Windus, p. 393).
Art criticism is a rational science. The critic is essentially a man who thinks in terms of verbal phrases since words are his medium of expression. This is unfortunate, but if it were possible to make the critic express himself in pure sensation, he would no longer be a critic but an artist, so the critic must accept his confinement in the literary field, making the best possible approach which the means permit.

That he is thus limited is unfortunate because he falls heir to that logic of words which is the writer’s meat and the artist’s poison. He can establish an apparently consistent aesthetic theory which loses all basis in experience and is more the result of contemporary thought in science and philosophy than development of art comprehension. If philosophy and science were broad enough to cope with the nature of man, the art critic would be quite safe in applying philosophical or scientific precepts to a discussion of art. But such a condition is only slowly evolving in the present day. It is felt only by a few artists and philosophers, and by even fewer critics.

The change in scientific thought is easily recognized. Today the scientist is no longer in search of final truth. His concern is to make more harmonious the relation of man to his environment. Psychology may claim this as its specific end, but it has become the object of all science, both in theory and practice, and the philosopher is falling in line by becoming a pragmatist. Religion is no longer to overshadow and dictate men’s lives. If
it is to exist it must be useful to man. The pragmatist finds God good only if He is useful and comforting to man. He can no longer be austere and remote, but must be available to every man. The twentieth century aim must be to unify all man's purposes, perhaps to place man once again at the center of the universe. But what he has seen since he last stood there has made him a different creature.

During the eighteenth century man enjoyed another unifying of all purposes. In the *Enlightenment* theory had precedent over experience. In this respect it was a different form of unification from ours today. The eighteenth century philosopher and theoretical scientist established their thought in a generalized mold. They were content to cast experience in it.

Sir Isaac Newton formulated all the processes of nature into mathematical formulae and man could at last glimpse the spirit of God through His creation in much the same way that a layman with only a knowledge of dynamic symmetry understands Michael Angelo when he is confronted with the Sistene Chapel. All that Newton could comprehend was mathematics and never nature, but his view was received and accepted by all men. His theory of gravitation was "regarded for over two hundred years as 'the most perfect, and perfectly established, of scientific laws.'"¹

Newton has been superseded by Einstein whose premise is broader, leaving room for richer development in science, but for the eighteenth century Newton was all important. He made it

¹ J.W.N. Sullivan, *Limitations of Science*, Ch. III, 2
possible for men to look at nature in a new light. An object was no longer simply an object, but a part in a mathematical system which comprehended the entire universe. Since man was flattered by his suddenly acquired insight into the Divine mind he was very loath to acknowledge that his understanding was limited and not until the twentieth century did he abandon Newton's idea of a machine-like universe. When he surrendered Newton's system it was only to flatter himself further with a slightly more profound concept.

In 1905 Einstein published his first thesis on relativity and three years later Minkowski delivered the death blow to Newtonian science by his realization of space-time:

"Henceforth space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality." ¹

Subjected to this new found reality our ideas have undergone a revision which is constantly spreading to every field of life. Art is one of the first things to be influenced since it is more directly connected with man's experience than any other field.

The immediate results of Newton's system were an increased activity in science and, what is more significant for this study, a form of nature worship, a love and respect for everything which was "natural."

The specific scientific achievements which owe their birth to Newton's theories need not be examined here. They are

¹ J.W.N. Sullivan, Limitations of Science, Ch. III, 4 (p. 72, Pelican Series), quoted from Minkowski
the offspring of that science which was selected as the ideal of
the Enlightenment:

"The whole educated world in the eighteenth cen-
tury was convinced, as never before or since, that the
most beneficent and the most divine forces in human life,
man's supreme achievement and his brightest jewel, is
science."¹

The love for nature had its origin in both Newton's
science and in the belief of philosophy which was known as "The
Great Chain of Being." Newton had shown that everything in
nature was related to mathematical laws. He had shown great or-
der to exist where formerly only chaos had appeared. It was a
natural step for men to prefer the things which approached this
order most closely. Primitive man became a symbol for the happy
man, since he was more akin to nature. Nature in any form was the
purest manifestation of order. Voltaire makes nature say to the
scientist: "My poor son, shall I tell you the truth? I have been
given a name that does not suit me at all. I am called nature,
and am really art."²

The importance of this idea to art is made very apparent
by this quotation. It is the same idea which had an application
to all fields of human life through the agency of the Great Chain
of Beings:

"Next to the word 'nature,' 'the Great Chain of
Being' was the sacred phrase of the eighteenth century,
playing a part somewhat analogous to that blessed word
'evolution' in the late nineteenth."³

¹ J.H. Randal, Jr., The Making of the Modern Mind, Houghton
Mifflin Co., p. 279
² Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique, art, "Nature"
In essence the Great Chain of Being was the whole scale of creation, graduated from infinity to nothing; from God, through the angels, through man and the animals and through inanimate nature. This scale was governed by three principles — plenitude, continuity and gradation. Plenitude stipulated that all possible forms of life and matter had been created, no new form was even conceivable. Continuity placed these forms in a consecutive arrangement; God representing absolute goodness at the top of the scale, man in a middle position, since he combined both spirit and matter:

"Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise and rudely great;
With too much knowledge for the sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the stoic's pride
He hanges between; in doubt to act or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast." \(^1\)

Between God and man the spirits were arranged in gradation depending upon the absence and presence of evil in their natures. Beneath man was the same gradation of lesser nature with an increasing content of evil as the scale descended. This entire system was an effort to account for evil in God's creation. It was argued that God being all good could only create things which were less good, and thus evil was an essential part of creation. The evil in anything was considered an inherent property of that thing. It was a part of the thing's position in the Great Scale of Being and as such could not be altered. Evil was no longer a thing to be condemned, and abolished. In fact any attempt to improve the state of man or beast was contrary to the ways of God and really

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\(^1\) Pope, *Essay on Man*, Epistle II, ver. 3 - 9
futile. The world as it existed was at once as good and as bad as it ever could be. In other worlds, which undoubtedly existed, there might be a higher standard of beings but the earth would no longer fill its place in the universe if it were in any way improved. Pope advises man:

"Submit — in this or any other sphere,
Secure to be as blest as thou canst bear;
Safe in the hand of one disposing power,
Or in the natal, or the mortal hour.
All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good;
And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
The truth is clear, whatever is, is right."¹

The Great Chain of Being was fortunately not very influential in practical fields. It denied the possibility of betterment and might have been disastrous if applied to government or society. It did influence society in-so-far as it justified class distinctions, but it cannot be said to have caused them. Its significance to art was to strengthen the belief that nature was "God's Art." Man was willing to believe the order he had found in nature to be a direct manifestation of God and consequently he paid tremendous respect to his discovery and was willing to worship nature in every guise. Into art he read the same form of order that he saw in the world about him. In painting he necessarily laid great emphasis on subject matter. Apparently the artist's aim should be to recreate the order of nature on his canvases. Sir Joshua Reynolds agrees that subject is of great importance:

¹ Pope, Essay on Man, Epistle I, vers. 285 - 294
"It is certainly a thing to be wishes, that all excellence were applied to illustrate subjects that are interesting and worthy of being commemorated."\(^1\)

The Great Chain of Being is the origin of our present day struggle to unite our purposes into a satisfactory form of life. The rigid thought pattern of the Great Chain — and it was really never more than that — paved the way for the Romantic movement. It seems strange that so opposite a trend should develop from the eighteenth century thought, but there was the seed of the new trend already recognizable in a consistent examination of the Great Chain of Being. In the eighteenth century the preoccupation of thought with the whole grand scheme of the universe prohibited any thought of the specific parts. The parts were acknowledged to have a perfection and sufficiency of their own, but minds were devoted to the consideration of the Chain rather than its links; Reality was in generic terms. In the following century interest shifted to the parts of the whole and the Romantic movement was under way. For the Romantic, Reality was found in the parts of the universe and the total conception was soon lost. In the field of art this thought change can be readily seen in the works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Millais' painting of Ophelia is an amazing example of the reality of parts which are unrelated to the whole painting. Each leaf and flower in the picture is a world unto itself and pays no heed to its neighbors. The French school of Impressionism is another example of the development of a single aspect of painting — quite forgetful of

\(^1\) Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourses, Oxford University Press, The Works Classics CXLIX, Discourse XI, p. 170
everything but the play of light in nature. The tendency since Cesanne has been to find truth and reality of art in an effort to combine the interest in specific detail and the consideration of the total situation. It is no longer necessary to suppress details — as Reynolds advises in his Discourses — but to notice their relationship with a larger view of nature and experience. The example of painting is the most pronounced instance of this change from a romantic approach to art to a consideration of pure art expression. The Romantic's love of detail and of story content in painting is being strengthened by a sort of "classical" interest in sound structure. This combination is readily seen in the paintings of Renoir, Van Gogh and Gauguin who are the acknowledged leaders of nineteenth century art.

The modern aim of esthetics is to express our many sensations in a unified form. The eighteenth century artist under the handicap of the intellectualism of the Enlightenment only succeeded in unifying a few of these forms. Too, he was usually unwise in choosing the sensations which were fundamental to his medium. All of Hogarth's famous subjects have primarily a literary significance, and the "histories" which Reynolds was so insistent to advocate were inappropriate for expressing visual experience.

Reynolds was insistent upon the use of rules: "Everything which is wrought with certainty is wrought upon some principle."

1 In expressing this conviction Reynolds was completely in tune with the eighteenth century philosophy which held that every-

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1 Reynolds, Discourse III, p. 28
thing could be grasped by reason. Today the artist admits his incapacity to cope with life through a strictly reasoning approach. He is content to face experience under the guidance of instinct.

In Discourse III Reynolds refutes Bacon's statement: "The painter must do it by a kind of felicity..... and not by rule." Today the painter would side with Bacon. The Enlightenment insisted upon the intellectualization of all fields of art. Today we are still in revolt against this — but not in a Romantic revolt.

The change in attitude may be epitomized by this phrase: in the eighteenth century man studied the art of nature, now he is concerned with the nature of art.

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1 Op. cit., p. 28
Introduction

Sir Joshua Reynolds' Discourses were delivered to the students of the Royal Academy at the annual awarding of prizes. They were not delivered with regularity. The fifteen Discourses were spread over the year 1769-1790. The nature of the material which Reynolds emphasized was dictated by his wish not to fall into the poor practice of repetition. He wanted to say something of greater value to the students than simple congratulations to the prize winners, and yet he did not wish to impinge upon the province of the art teachers. Consequently the Discourses are made up of very general statements of what Reynolds thought to be the wisest theories of art. He necessarily discusses the fields of esthetics, making clear statements of his beliefs, and he mentions also the best approaches to art for the student.

It is interesting to notice the broadening outlook Reynolds displays in the successive Discourses. The last four are by far the best. The ideas contained in these have lasting significance in the field of art. His preoccupation with the Grand Style is less in evidence, and the thoughts often express the same sensitive nature he displayed in his "Notes on Venetian Painting," which had been written from experience rather than argued out at his writing desk.

There are several ideas which recur throughout the fifteen Discourses. They are like the themes in a symphony and offer a convenient key to studying the whole work.
In the first few Discourses the touchstone of excellence seems to be the Grand Style. This is thoroughly defined and discussed in Discourse III. In later Discourses the idea of General Nature becomes almost synonymous with the Grand Style, and in Discourse XIV Reynolds' chief concern is with what he calls the "whole." This change of premise is evidence of the broadening of Reynolds' attitude.

Reynolds' ideas of Imitation and Invention form another theme in the Discourses. His definitions of Genius and Taste Standard are also important factors in his theory of esthetics, and his approach to pure Esthetics combines these three themes together with some rationalized theories. The rest of the Discourses may be considered as Art Study.
"I had seen much, and had thought much upon what I had seen; I had something of a habit of investigation, and a disposition to reduce all that I had observed and felt in my own mind, to method and system...."¹

These words from the last of Reynolds' Discourses characterize the critical approach he made to his subject. They state that the source of his material is his original observation and show his proverbial tendency to generalize. Reynolds was as completely a man of the Enlightenment as was Leonardo da Vinci a representative of the Renaissance. In the eighteenth century the field of science generalized the universe in the form of Newton's World Machine; philosophy built all creation into the Great Chain of Being, and art, with Reynolds as its leader, was unifying its trends under a revived classical interest. Reynolds justifies the following of the classical style by his idea of reality as "general nature:"

"There are excellencies in the art of painting beyond what is commonly called the imitation of nature."²

"All the arts receive their perfection from an ideal beauty, superior to what is to be found in individual nature."³

Reynolds' approach to reality was not unlike that of Plato. Reynolds substituted the word "beauty" for the philosopher's term "reality," but since they are synonymous in painting, Reynolds'  

¹ Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourses, Oxford University Press, The World's Classics CXLIX, Discourse XV, p. 230  
² Discourse III, p. 25  
³ Ibid., p. 24
truth in art was similar to Plato's ideas of perfection. In Discourse III Reynolds writes:

"This idea of the perfect state of nature which the artist calls the ideal beauty is the great leading principle by which works of genius are conducted."¹

This assertion is evidence of Reynolds' preoccupation with achieving a mental image of nature in generic terms, and his belief that the ability to express this image constitutes genius in the field of art.

Both these ideas are themes in the Discourses. Genius will be discussed later.

"General nature" was the chief constituent of taste in Reynolds' mind. Taste is "comprised in the knowledge of what is really nature."²

"It plainly appears that as a work is conducted under the influence of general ideas, or partial, it is principally to be considered as the effect of a good or a bad taste."³

Reynolds insists that nature has its reality only in generalised, unattainable ideas. He writes that one of the mistakes which are most prevalent and injurious to the artist is that of "taking particular living objects for nature." In Discourse IX the idea of "general" beauty or nature is reiterated with great clarity:

".... the beauty of which we are in quest is general and intellectual; it is an idea that subsists only in the mind; the sight never beheld it, nor has the hand expressed it."⁴

¹ Discourse III, p. 27
² Discourse VII, p. 99
³ Ibid., p. 99
⁴ Discourse IX, p. 144
The acknowledgment of anything so intangible as this "general beauty" would seem to be, is at variance with most of Sir Joshua's thought, but it must be remembered that this vague generality was something very positive in Reynolds' mind and probably did not seem in the least metaphysical to him.

The character of "general nature" becomes more apparent when it is united with the "mental picture." The artist's first visualization of his subject, his grasp of it in its broadest terms, is closely allied with "general beauty." The details of the actual situation must be held in subordination to this fundamental conception so that they are "not injurious to grandeur."

When Reynolds criticizes a work of Rembrandt by saying: "Though it is not in good taste, yet it is nature," one is justified in believing Reynolds has confused his terms, but such a statement only bears out the strength of the conviction that general, not particular nature, as exemplified by Rembrandt, is an essential aspect of taste and the Grand Style.

Closely associated with the idea of general nature, and as a means of achieving it, is the subordination of details:

"The whole beauty and grandeur of the art consists, in my opinion, in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind."2

"All the objects which are exhibited to our view by nature, upon close examination will be found to have their blemishes and defects...... But it is not every eye that perceives these blemishes; it must be an eye long used to the contemplation and comparison of these forms......

1 Discourse VII, p. 99
2 Discourse III, p. 28
This long laborious comparison should be the first study of the painter who aims at the greatest style. 1

These two passages, the first dealing with paintings, the second with observation of nature, further define "general nature" by showing how it manifests itself in the artist's approach to his work. By constant observation of objects the artist can arrive at their essential character. In Reynolds' mind this essence is always of the thing itself and not in terms of the artist's medium. It is this limitation that imposes upon the eighteenth century artist his high regard for subject matter. His ideal was in terms of nature, not of painting.

Another essential aspect of the Grand Style is its origin in Greek statuary. The Academy student was advised that the best method of achieving the "perfect state of nature" was to study ancient sculpture. In the Apollo Belvedere, the Gladiator, and in the Farnese Hercules, Reynolds finds the same generalized types which he had so admired in Raphael's work. Dr. Johnson, one of Reynolds' intimates, pointed out the same lack of specific characterization in Shakespeare's plays. That these facts coincided with the philosophy of the eighteenth century, which found its truth in the wholeness of the universe, and never in its particulars, gave certainty to Reynolds' belief in the importance in art of characterless generality, and, finding the greatest precedent for the quality in the highly esteemed Greek work, he assumed the classical style as a prototype of his Grand Style. The in-

1 Ibid., p. 26
fluence of his Italian trip was strong in determining his classical inclination. The schools of painting are divided according to those which are in the Grand Style: Roman, Florentine, Bolognese; and the "inferior" schools: Venetian, Flemish, Dutch. The qualities which determine this division seem to be based, not on any grandness of treatment in painting, but on their relationship with Greek sculpture.

The character of "dignity," so evident a part of Reynolds' own character, seems to be an essential part of the Grand Style. It is achieved by the use of large simple color areas, kept free from too many details. Important, too, in establishing dignity in a painting is the disregard for historical truth, sacrificing likeness for "a poetical manner."

"In all the pictures in which the painter (Raphael) has represented the apostles, he has drawn them with great nobleness; he has given them as much dignity as the human figure is capable of receiving; yet we are told in Scripture they had no such respectable appearance....."

In the Grand Style the use of expression, posture and facial expression, must partake of the same broad nature which characterises the style. If emotion is represented it must be generalized sentiment, expressive of the broadest human emotions. For this reason momentary peculiarities of faces, etc., are to be avoided, just as peculiar details must be eliminated or subordinated to the main pictorial theme. Draperies, which are so important a part of Reynolds own work in portraiture are never to be rendered in a fashion which shows the texture: "To make it (drapery) merely

1 Discourse IV, p. 39
natural is a mechanical operation, to which neither taste or

genius are required. \( ^1 \) Raphael's treatment of drapery is par-

ticularly noticed in Reynolds' Roman Notebook:

"Raphael, in many books on Painting, is praised
to the skies for being natural, and because silks and
velvets are so naturally painted that they would deceive
any man. This is so far from being true that they are
further from it than the draperies of any other painter;
nor ought they to be so natural as to deceive one, ex-
cept in portraits. \( ^2 \)"

Besides this simplicity of colour, expression and tex-
ture, the Grand Style demanded an unobtrusive technique:

"Tintoret, Paul Veronese, and others of the
Venetian school, seem to have painted with no other pur-
pose than to be admired for their skill and expertness
in the mechanism of painting, and to make a parade of
that art which, as I before observed, the higher style
requires its followers to conceal. \( ^3 \)"

A parallel for this argument is cited in the field of
oratory: "It is poor eloquence which only shows that the orator
can talk. \( ^4 \)"

Reynolds attaches great importance to the kind of subject
which a painting depicts. It is significant that speaking of sub-
jects he again uses generalised types on which to form his opinions
of good and bad. History-painting is the highest form of the
painters art. Painters of all other forms of art -- as caricature,
portraiture, genre, etc. -- are inferior.

"All these painters have, in general, the same
right in different degrees, to the name of a painter,
which a satirist, an epigrammatist, a sonneteer, a writer

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\( ^1 \) Discourse IV, p. 42

\( ^2 \) Leslie and Taylor, Sir Joshua Reynolds, John Murray, London,
Vol. I, p. 41

\( ^3 \) Discourse IV, p. 43

\( ^4 \) Ibid., p. 44
of pastorals, or descriptive poetry, has to that of a poet."

The cautiously modified opening phrases of this quotation show the complete submission of the eighteenth century painter to ideal subject matter. The subject was the purpose of painting and entitled the public to extend the same approval or disapproval to the painting that they would extend to the real objects. They were not unaware of the pure values of painting but they gave them only second place in viewing a picture. Reynolds was typical of his age in placing the accent on subject rather than technique. Today the situation has been reversed to such a degree that subject is generally ignored.

Reynolds says further of subjects that they must have a universal appeal "without being degraded by the vulgarism of ordinary life in any country." This is an application of his idea of general nature. He suggests Greek and Roman History or the Scriptures as subject matter of good universal significance.

Reynolds' Grand Style may be said to be the realization of general beauty. This includes a leaning towards classical prototypes, a suppression of details, a demand for dignified subjects and these only in the form of "Histories." Painting was never to display technique but rather to hide it that the appeal to the imagination might be more direct.

"The art of seeing Nature or, in other words, the art of using models, is in reality the great object, the point to which all our studies are directed."  

1 Discourse III, p. 34  
2 Discourse XII, p. 192
Every painter evolves a way of looking at his subjects. They become paintings in his mind long before he even starts to paint. When Cézanne advised a strict adherence to nature it is obvious that he was aware of qualities which were not evident to Ingres who was another close follower of nature. There are as many ways of seeing nature as there are individuals, yet within this wide divergence there is a recognizable similarity. Recognition of this similarity is very significant for the critic. Even the layman can see the obvious differences between artists, but to recognize the common qualities of different painters necessitates a profound understanding of paint as a medium of expression. From such a knowledge the differences among artists also becomes very significant. When the critic can see that Cézanne and Rembrandt saw nature in a closely related manner he can see, too, the importance of the difference between the two men. So when the critic is keenly aware of the possibilities of paint as any artist uses it, he will be aware, too, of how the artist sees nature.

Sir Joshua Reynolds elected to see nature in terms of "general beauty," which became the core of his esthetic doctrines. He had an "eye long used to the contemplation and comparison" of the forms in nature and he simplified specific character out of existence. In this he followed his idol, Raphael. He makes his meaning quite clear when in comparing Raphael and Titian, he claims the latter's deficiency lay in not "correcting the form of his model by any general idea of beauty."  

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1 Discourse XI, p. 164
The falsity of painting nature through eyes attuned to see it only in its most beautiful forms is that the painter has taken no consideration of his medium and its limitations. The most beautiful combinations of paint are something quite different from the beauties of nature. Paint can be used to show all the beautiful diversities of nature, but it is never handsome when so used. The pleasure of its combinations should control the artist's vision. Reynolds allowed his delight in the forms of nature to control his combining of paints, so the basic premise of his Grand Style is false to art.

Why should Reynolds' rationalisation of his painting experience have brought him to this conclusion? When Reynolds painted he was often on very safe ground, but when he turned critic, he fell heir to the intellectualism of the Enlightenment. His circle of friends were literary figures -- Johnson, Goldsmith, Boswell, the actor Garrick, the politician Burke. As a boy he had great reverence for Pope who summarized the eighteenth century philosophy of Bolingbroke in his "Moral Essays." These men were imbued with a love of nature, a complete admiration for its orderliness, and it was this same love they expected to have for art. It is worth noticing that we today still admire order in art, but it is no longer a mathematical order based on Newton's theories of a machine-like universe. It is an admiration for an instinctive organization of pure sensations.

It may be readily understood that the several aspects of the Grand Style also have no real validity as aesthetic standards.
Reynolds' desire to subordinate details to the larger motifs of his canvases is very commendable as bringing dignity and simplicity to his work. But it is both dignity and simplicity of nature forced on art rather than any innate quality of the art. It is essential for a critic to recognise that simplicity is a by-product of art rather than a part of it. It is a quality of the finished art work, not a constituent to be used in forming it. Simplicity exists in art when the artist has finished his work; Reynolds would have us believe that it must be kept in mind while the artist is working. To amplify his meaning; Reynolds believes the artist must be intellectually aware of what he is about even while he is working. This leads to a sterile performance on the part of the artist, because intellect is a poor substitute for intuition when one is coping with the problems of art. The multitude of relationships within a painting cannot conceivably be encompassed by conscious understanding. His whole being dictates to the artist while painting, and it is impossible to be fully aware of all the influences of past experience, present state, and future expectations, and in addition to create a work of art. It is small wonder that William Blake wrote "Darned Fool" in the margin of his copy of the Discourses, opposite that passage which declares the success of a work of art to depend upon rules and not genius.

The importance attached to subject matter by Reynolds is to be discredited as it is to be discredited in the works of all

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1 Sir Walter Armstrong, "Sir Joshua Reynolds," Scribners, of., p. 214

2 Discourse VI, p. 75, "..... as that art shall advance, its powers will be still more and more fixed by rules."
critics who do not realize that "subject" and "painting" are synonymous. Reynolds does not greatly concern himself with specific choices of preferable subject matter, but his preference for "Histories" and subjects of general or universal appeal, is analogous to that of Mr. Sam A. Lewisohn who devotes a chapter to "Subject Matter in Art" in his book Painters and Personality. Mr. Lewisohn says:

"For my conviction is that we have the greatest art where not only the form and design are interesting, but also where the theme has a universal significance."¹

He compares "Shoes" by Van Gogh with Francesca's "Resurrection" and claims the latter is of greater importance. This is really the confusion of nature and painting. The subject of a painting is the painting. The subject in nature receives its "universal significance" by being painted. The evaluation of subjects as they are in life is no longer valid because truth in art is a form of reality which is distinct from the truths in the several fields of life.

To make this more clear consider the subject matter of Leonardo's "Last Supper" and that of "Hope" by Watts. These are subjects of conventional universal appeal, but in the latter the subject is not achieved by the organization of the paint as it is so well in Leonardo's masterpieces, and hence "Hope" has no universal meaning as a painting. There is much more in common between the "Last Supper" and Rembrandt's "Hope" than between these two lofty subjects. This is true because we are speaking of art.

¹ S.A. Lewisohn, Painters and Personality, Harper and Brothers, p. 167
Reynolds abused the Venetians because they displayed their technique and seemed to paint with this alone as the object of their efforts. This is the same criticism which is aimed today at such painters as Brague and Picasso: "The modern painter is a free citizen — free to come and go at will — but he has nowhere to go."1

Although the critic is afraid to dispute the modern artist's technical ability he laments that the artist has no direction. Against this narrow understanding of art it is interesting to place a quotation from Oskar Hagen:

"In the tendencies of Post-Impressionism just now emphasized, a universal desire is unmistakably revealed, a desire to combine by a new synthesis the visual forms of reality, dismembered by the subtlest analysis, and to exalt into a style that which had hitherto been more or less only the collection of materials; indispensable preparation for a style, but not the style itself."2

Hagen is not so pessimistic about the mission of art as are less understanding critics.

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1 H.W. Van Loon, How to Look at Pictures, Modern Age Book, Inc., p. 69
2 Oskar Hagen, "Art Epochs and Their Leaders," Scribners, p. 302
IMITATION AND INVENTION

The ideas of imitation and invention are very closely related in the Discourses. There is considerable controversy over their importance in art and over their dependence upon one another. They are important aspects of the artist's problem and should quickly be placed in correct perspective by the artist before he commences any project. Reynolds has realised this and has emphasised his conviction of the relationship between imitation and invention in three of the Discourses. Reynolds' attitude towards imitation is brought out in his first Discourse:

"..... he who begins by presuming on his own sense has ended his studies as soon as he has begun them."2

"Thus I have ventured to give my opinion of what appears to me the true and only method by which an artist makes himself master of his profession, which I hold ought to be one continued course of imitation that is not to cease but with his life."3

These lines show the importance attached to imitation both of nature and of other painters. Reynolds owed the formation of his own style almost entirely to his imitation of other masters. Of such a practice he writes:

"He who borrows an idea..... and so accommodates it to his own work, that it makes a part of it with no seem or joining appearing, can hardly be charged with plagiarism."4

Reynolds' own work accomplished just such a fusion of

1 Discourses II, IV, VI
2 Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourses, Oxford Univ. Press, Worlds Classics CXLIX, Discourse I, p. 4
3 Discourse VI, p. 87
4 Ibid., p. 84
influences as he here suggests. A superficial understanding of Rembrandts chiaroscuro, a Venetian influence in his backgrounds, and a Roman choice of color are worked together in many of his best pictures. "Nellie O'Brien" or "Mrs. Siddons" are notable examples of his most mature style.

"I am persuaded..... that by imitation only, variety and even originality of invention is produced. I will go further; even genius, at least what is generally so called, is the child of imitation." Reynolds goes on to explain his opinion regarding genius, which was at variance with the common notion of genius as the result of inspiration. This will be discussed later. The significance of imitation in art was faced squarely by Reynolds and he gave it a very considerable place in the artist's development. It is important that he did not mean precise imitation of nature:

"By imitation, I do not mean imitation in its largest sense, but simply the following of other masters, and the advantage to be drawn from the study of their works." To imitate nature directly was very far from Reynolds' intention. His attitude towards nature copying was to achieve a mental picture of "general nature" and to "correct" nature through this concept. But imitation in some form seemed essential to artistic activity in Reynolds' mind. "Nothing can come of nothing." justified his viewpoint.

One had to choose the "right mode of imitation." For the

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1 "Tragic Muse," Wallace Collection
2 Discourse VI, p. 72
3 Ibid., p. 70
4 Ibid., p. 76
art student who just arrives in Italy, Reynolds can foresee some
difficulty in determining what masters are worth imitation and
study. He answers this difficulty in very conservative terms:

"The works of those who have stood the test of
ages have a claim to that respect and veneration to
which no modern can pretend. The duration and stabil-
ity of their fame is sufficient to evince that it has
not been suspended upon the slender thread of fashion
and caprice, but bound to the human heart by every tie
of sympathetic approbation."1

The simple copying of such masterpieces is not enough
to give understanding to the student, so theory must be used to
lead to a comprehension of "the real dignity of the art."2

In this way Reynolds avoids advising students simply to
copy pictures. This is a practice against which he speaks — and
very wisely:

"How incapable those are of producing anything of
their own, who have spent much of their time in making
finished copies, is well known to all who are conver-
sant with our art."3

Unfortunately, however, he supports his disapproval of
scrupulous imitation by the following statement: "Of every large
composition, even of those most admired, a great part may be truly
said to be commonplace."4

No statement could be further from the truth or more be-
side the point. It shows perfectly Reynolds' preoccupation with
only certain aspects of the paintings he had seen, and his lack of
understanding of the relationship of all the parts in a picture to

1 Discourse II, p. 14
2 Ibid., p. 13
3 Ibid., p. 14
4 Ibid., p. 14
the total conception of the whole painting. One might as well say that some of the cog-wheels in a clock were unessential to its proper functioning.

Later in the same Discourse Reynolds shows again a piece of excellent advice on copying:

"If it's (a painting's) excellence consists in its general effect, it would be proper to make slight sketches of the machinery and general management of the picture..... instead of copying the touches of those great masters, copy only their conceptions, instead of treading in their footsteps endeavour only to keep the same road. Labour to invent on their general principles and way of thinking. Possess yourself with their spirit." 1

The necessity for imitation was so strong with Reynolds that he made invention almost synonymous with it.

Imitation made it possible for the painter to be inventive because invention had to grow out of a knowledge of all that had been invented. For Reynolds this kind of imitation was conditioned very much by what he considered worthy of art; and this is a point upon which he is very far from explicit. Several people reading his passage on how to copy paintings 2 would probably have several different impressions of what he meant by "general principles" and the masters' "conceptions." Our only real clue to his meaning is found in his paintings. In these one can see the character of his imitation and invention; there is no very new conception of composition displayed. Original composition, as seen in works by Masaccio, El Greco, Gaugin, and Picasso, is the outgrowth of deep personal experience with the art medium. Reynolds, unfortunately,

1 Op. cit., p. 16
2 Ibid., p. 9
conceived his pictures in pre-established styles: Venetian, Roman, or Dutch, and his invention was inhibited by his preconceptions. He planned many portraits in Rembrandt's chiaroscuro and the fear of violating this style led to many dull passages in his paintings. This respect for styles accounts for his having considered invention as being little more than imitation.

"The more extensive, therefore, your acquaintance is with the works of those who have excelled, the more extensive will be your powers of invention." 1

Another aspect of Reynolds' conception of invention is its over-emphasis of subject arrangements rather than of paint arrangement; his sense of composing a picture was dictated by the objects he chose to paint. Reynolds' composition consisted in distributing the subjects of his paintings in an interesting way rather than simply drawing them, as did Rembrandt, to make the composition an outgrowth of the draughtsmanship.

"Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory." 2

If Reynolds had defined the term "images" his meaning would be clear. It is a safe speculation that his images were subjects, and not pure visual perceptions. The Discourses give continual evidence of this, as do his paintings. A passage from Discourse IV will show this to be the case:

"We know well enough, when we analyze a piece, the difficulty and the subtlety with which an artist adjusts the background drapery, and masses of light; we know that a considerable part of the grace and effect of his picture

1 Op. cit., p. 15
2 Ibid., p. 15
depends upon them; but this art is so much concealed, even to a judicious eye, that no remains of any of these subordinate parts occur to the memory when the picture is not present."¹

Reynolds was primarily impressed with subject arrangement when viewing a painting and the organizing of the background drapery, etc., makes no deep impression. Nor does he refute his objective reaction to both painting and nature, when he says: "Invention in painting does not imply the invention of the subject, for that is commonly supplied by the poet or historian."² Invention was still in very concrete images in Reynolds' mind.

While Reynolds is discussing the "mental picture" he makes broader his definition of invention: "The power of representing this mental picture on canvas is what we call invention in a painter."³

This statement in no way conflicts with his former definition, but it places invention within the painting rather than in the artist's mind. Invention is no longer "a new combination... in the memory" but "the power of representing this mental picture on canvas." This is an important distinction for Reynolds to have made, because it links invention with genius. According to his definition genius was the ability to express good taste, not simply to have it. The ability for expression has been included in his second definition of invention and may give this quality more importance in Sir Joshua's eyes than it had when he defined it as a

¹ Discourse IV, p. 39
² Ibid., p. 36
³ Ibid., p. 37
form of mental re-combining of images. It is noticeable, however, that the idea of imitation as the source of invention, has not been destroyed by the new character given to invention. For Reynolds, invention was a special form of imitation; a selective imitation, and its connection with genius is not stressed by him.

Reynolds' ideas on imitation and invention are as sound as his theories of the Grand Style were untenable. They are sound, but they limit imitation and especially invention, to a degree which prohibits their full functioning in art.

Reynolds' greatest fault is to limit the processes of art to his own understanding, and to claim that no more is possible than can be conceived. To his statement: "In the midst of the highest flights of fancy and imagination, reason ought to preside.....", William Blake replies: "If this is true it is a devilish foolish thing to be an artist."1 This matter of rational vs. spiritual guidance in art is the core of the dispute between Reynolds and Blake. Both men were extremists. Blake was a disciple of the spirit: "Man is born like a Garden ready Planted and Sown. This World is too poor to produce one Seed."2 Reynolds counters with this: "(The mind) will produce no crop or only one, unless continually fertilized with foreign matter," and is answered by Blake's "Nonsense."3

The controversy suggested in Blake's Marginal Notes on the Discourses is very stimulating, but as the contestants are both

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1 Blake's Marginal Notes, Discourse VII, p. 394
2 Discourse IV, p. 390
3 Discourse VI, p. 390
prejudiced towards views which prevent acceptance of any common
ground no real conclusions are reached, and no middle path is even
suggested. If there is a solution it may be found in an accept-
ance of the beliefs of both artists. Reynolds wrote for people
with far less profound minds than Blake's, and even Reynolds him-
self was no match for Blake. Reynolds: "Nothing can come of
nothing." Blake: "Is the Mind nothing?"¹

They could hardly speak the same language, so different
were their personalities. When Reynolds does speak in less pedan-
tic words Blake commends his writing, yet Blake's taste is
narrower than Reynolds'.

Although Reynolds limits imitation by his definition,
what he says of it is true. Imitation is absolutely necessary
for the painter, but not an imitation of either nature or the
masters but of the artist's sensations when confronted by his sub-
ject. It is of great importance how other individuals have re-
sponded to a similar subject, and by a study of their response the
universal quality of the reaction will become apparent. It may
then be interpreted by the artist in his own manner. Reynolds has
this in mind when he insists that theory must accompany sensible
copying. Blake earns censure when he writes: "To learn the lan-
guage of art, copy forever is my rule."²

The position of imitation in art, however, is not so
prominent as Reynolds would have us believe. Successful imitation
of other works is only possible after complete assimilation, and

¹ Ibid., p. 390
² Ibid., p. 371
then it is no longer imitation. Reynolds says this himself,¹ but it seems not to have changed the importance of imitation in his eyes. The kind of imitation Reynolds advocates is not fundamental to art. It is significant in forming the style in which a work is executed, but the artist must employ a different faculty, if his work is to have esthetic value. He must be able to combine the parts of his art into a firm unity, and this is not achieved by imitation. Reynolds hints at this when he suggests that the spirit of the masters should be copied instead of their exact strokes, but he is reticent about the nature of this spirit, and hence falls short of elucidating the full meaning of imitation.

If he had defined the masters' "spirit" he would never have held imitation responsible for invention. Facility is the offspring of imitation. Invention is the ability to conceive unity. It ties the individual to the universal through the expression of art. Roger Fry means this when he writes on "significant form:"

"One can only say that those who experienced it feel to have a peculiar quality of "reality" which makes it a matter of infinite importance in their lives."²

Man becomes aware of the tempo of life through his grasp of unity in art.

Reynolds' definition of invention was not wrong, but it was not fundamental enough to cover the facts even as Reynolds himself saw them. Sensing this, he re-defined invention as the "power to represent" and thereby almost called it an expression of

¹ Ibid., p. 34
² Roger Fry, Vision and Design, Pelican Books, p. 244
unity, but the implication is too faint to be intentional. He may be said to have stopped short with the invention of a mental picture of his subjects, never a mental image of his painting. The distinction was often so slight that a fine canvas was evolved, but Reynolds' attitude was always to "invent nature" and never paintings. Invention in art must deal with the construction of the art form, not with single aspects of it, as Reynolds implies. The invention of a group, or the conception of a drapery, isolates these from the whole composition, leaving the rest dull and devoid of desired character. Reynolds betrays himself by saying: "Of every large composition..... a great part may be truly said to be commonplace."\(^1\)

In a unity no part can be commonplace. Although all parts need not have equal importance, each must have vitality. If Reynolds' observation had not been narrow he would have realised this. Narrowness is the critic's demon, his shortcomings are always due to it.

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\(^1\) Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourse II, p. 14
GENIUS AND THE TASTE STANDARD

"A standard of taste is derived from the uniformity of sentiments among mankind, from whence proceeds the knowledge of what are the general habits of nature; the result of which is an idea of perfect beauty."1

The idea of a standard of taste, in fact a standard of any value in art, is very unusual for a critic to postulate. Reynolds was more a painter than a critic, and it is quite logical, even necessary, for a painter to have his standards. These may develop and grow as the painter works, but he must have standards in order that he may decide what is good and bad in his own painting. However, Reynolds endeavoured to establish one fixed standard; and in this he was more critic than painter.

The Taste Standard, as Reynolds suggests it, rests on a rather flimsy assumption: "We have no reason to suspect there is a greater difference between our minds than our forms...."2 We have no reason, likewise, to believe there does not exist a tremendous divergence in minds. A clinical psychologist could assure one of this. Reynolds obviously made his conclusion prior to his hypothesis. In his desire to find a uniformity of taste, he made a perfectly groundless assumption. He is on much safer ground when he states simply,

"What has pleased and continues to please is likely to please again; hence are derived the rules of art; and on this immovable foundation they must ever stand."3

1 Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourses, The World's Classics CXLIX, Oxford Univ. Press, Discourse VII, p. 117
2 Discourse VII, p. 107
3 Ibid., p. 108
Such a statement is ultra-conservative and Reynolds probably did not mean it to be taken too literally. Of more importance is his insistence that taste depends upon rules and reason. This emphasis is typical of Reynolds' intellectualism.

"We will take it for granted that reason is something invariable and fixed in the nature of things; and without endeavoring to go back to an account of first principles which forever will elude our search, we will conclude that whatever goes under the name of taste, which we can fairly bring under the dominion of reason, must be considered as equally exempt from change. If, therefore, in the course of this inquiry, we can show that there are rules for the conduct of the artist which are fixed and invariable, it follows of course that the art of the connoisseur or, in other words, taste, has likewise invariable principles."\(^2\)

This is again a fallacious argument. Reason is not fixed; far less so in art than in many other fields. However, Reynolds makes another attempt to establish his unalterable standard of taste by associating taste with truth:

"It is the very same taste which relishes a demonstration in geometry, that is pleased with the resemblance of a picture to an original and touched with the harmony of music."\(^3\)

Reynolds reassures us that all these have unalterable foundations in nature, which is his criterion for truth. He reflects the philosophy of the Enlightenment by comparing the truth of mathematics with the truth of nature, and is content to rest his case for the "reality of a standard of taste" with this conclusion.

\(^1\) To this William Blake observes in his Marginal Notes: "Reason -- or a ratio of all we have known -- is not the same it shall be when we know more. He therefore takes a falsehood for granted to set our with." B.J. Ellis, The Real Blake, Chatto and Windus, 1907, p. 393

\(^2\) Discourse VII, p. 98

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 96
He proceeds then to find a "second sort of truth" in art, based upon popular prejudices. Those of the widest application may be considered as really true." If they are only local or temporary in their application they may be ignored:

"..... it became necessary to distinguish the greater truth, as it may be called, from the lesser truth; the larger and more liberal idea of nature from the more narrow and confined."\(^1\)

Such a theory led Reynolds back to the Grand Style and "general nature." It probably seemed very convincing, completing the circle of reasoning as it did. Indeed general nature is the only rule of art which Reynolds offers as essential to taste:

"..... a power to distinguish right from wrong, which power, applied to art, is denominated TASTE."\(^2\)

"We apply the term taste to that act of the mind by which we like or dislike, whatever be the subject."\(^3\)

"Taste is comprised in the knowledge of what is really nature."\(^4\)

Out of these three definitions of taste, only the idea of correspondence to general nature reveals Reynolds' conception of it. It is very possible that Reynolds thought the Grand Style inclusive of everything which was in good taste. Unfortunately it renders his views on taste and a taste standard as pointless as his remarks on the Grand Style. Also, in developing these views he has used such shallow arguments that they immediately destroy his points, rather than reinforce them. Unfortunately, too, they

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1 Discourse XV, p. 231
2 Discourse VII, p. 93
3 Ibid., p. 96
4 Ibid., p. 99
finally render his observations on genius invalid, since he associates taste with genius. Reynolds makes this distinction between taste and genius:

"Genius and taste, in their common acceptation, appear to be very nearly related; the difference lies only in this, that genius has superadded to it a habit or power of execution; or we may say that taste when this power is added, changes its name and is called genius."¹

Reynolds says many things about genius which show sound insight into art. He is eager first of all to discredit inspiration or divine gifts as the source of genius:

"The untaught mind finds a vast gulf between its own powers and those of complicated art, which it is utterly unable to fathom; and it supposes that such a void can be passed only by supernatural powers."²

Reynolds insists that inspiration is a foolish idea, because art is based chiefly on imitation. "Genius..... is the child of imitation."³ He felt this theory at such variance with the usual conception of genius, that he had to substantiate it by arguing that all painting was a slow process of improvement. As the painting advanced, so the rules of imitation became formulated, always keeping an even pace with the accomplishments of genius. It seems like putting the cart before the horse to continue as Reynolds does when he states:

"What we now call genius, begins, not where rules, abstractly taken, end; but where known vulgar and trite rules have no longer any place."⁴

¹ Ibid., p. 95
² Discourse VI, p. 70
³ Ibid., p. 72
⁴ Ibid., p. 74
Here he is implying, as indeed he says later, that
works of genius follow, rather than formulate, the rules of art.
Be this as it may, the significant factor in Reynolds' view of
genius, is its association with rules rather than with inspira-
tion. These rules are often only to be felt by the artist and
are incapable of verbal description. Such a gesture favoring
the spiritual view of art is rare in the Discourses and would
have pleased even William Blake.

The inconsistency of Reynolds' thought, the lack of a
decision whether rules precede or succeed a work of genius, demon-
strates his need for methodical procedure. This question, which
lies at the root of his views on genius, he does not even con-
sider. Rather he contrives the idea of rules which are so subtle
that they defy analysis, and function only in the artist's sub-
conscious awareness. This is very neat, but it does not satis-
factorily determine Reynolds' attitude. Surely a rule, by de-
finition, is something to be followed quite consciously. Had he
abandoned the necessity of rules for the success of genius, he
would have discounted his own eclectic training which was the
backbone of the Discourses. Reynolds is not to be appealed to,
in order to settle any disputes on genius. As does every man, he
based his opinions upon his own experiences. He was only a man
blessed with usual common sense; he was not a genius. For this
very reason his views were confused on the quality.

William Blake who is an acknowledged genius, though a
very exotic one, represents the contemporary view of genius which
Reynolds opposed. In Discourse VII Reynolds ridicules the idea of actual divine direction in affairs of genius. Literal interpretation of poetic metaphors dealing with the appearance of revealing spirits, Reynolds says is as absurd as believing the writer really to have seen a "little winged boy or genius" informing him what to write. Blake answers this after his firm convictions:

"The Ancients did not mean to impose when they affirmed their belief in Vision and Revelation. Plato was in earnest, Milton was in earnest. They believed that God did visit Man really and truly, and not as Reynolds pretends. How very Anxious Reynolds is to Disprove and Condemn Spiritual Perceptions!" 1

Reynolds nearly admits his shortcoming when he evolves his idea of rules which defy definition. But these precepts are always "rules" in Reynolds' mind, while in Blake's mind they have a very different connotation.

If Reynolds had adequately understood his original purpose in Discourse VII, he would never have been led into the position of having to contrive his typically rationalized theory of undefinable rules. His original purpose was to show that the art student must preface his work with a knowledge of the rules of art. He never really wanted to speak of the process by which the mature genius produces a work, only how the student may attain a knowledge of genius. For this purpose Reynolds' early statement that genius is the product of rules has very real significance.

The attitude he was opposing is the still popular one, namely that

1 William Blake, Marginal Notes to the Discourses, Discourse VII
a painter is born, not taught. Reynolds was not concerned with the production of genius. He felt this would assert itself if he concerned himself with propounding the general precepts of art. Whether he should not have addressed his student's genius much more directly is a question upon which teachers would dispute. His attitude was conservative in this as in everything.

Reynolds continues his defense of rules as the basis of genius by asserting that as a man grows old and his judgment increases his genius is in no way lessened, that it usually matures with the man into a fuller expression. Although such an illustration is undoubtedly true, it does nothing to substantiate Reynolds' argument. That both judgment and genius mature in an older man, may or may not link the qualities of age and genius. If they are to be associated, judgment may relegate rules to the background. In short, judgment is based on experience, not on rules, and experience does not always cause the formulation of rules.

Reynolds treats genius more soundly in Discourse XI. He endeavors to show how genius manifests itself in works of art and specifically in paintings. The practical application of his idea of genius lifts this Discourse above all those which precede it. Reynolds does not relinquish his touchstone of "general nature," but points out that the excellence of painting is something apart from other excellencies:

"It is not properly in the learning, the taste, and the dignity of the ideas that genius appears as belonging to the painter. There is a genius particular and appropriated to his own trade (as I may call it),
distinguished from all others.¹

Nowhere else does Reynolds make this point, and not before this Discourse does he proceed to base his theory on it. This point marks the essential difference between the twentieth century approach to art and that of the eighteenth century. When Reynolds makes the distinction of art as separate from nature his ensuing thought has significance as modern criticism. Following as it does the Discourse on Sculpture, this one has saving grace in that it rests upon a primarily sound assumption. Reynolds' treatment of sculpture is extraordinarily narrow. He disregards everything but classical work, and is very dogmatic in his opinions about it. In Discourse XI he is no less dogmatic, insisting that there is one, and only one, source of genius in painting. For all that, he has chosen a sound one, and although he is again narrow in his understanding, his premise is substantial.

Reynolds calls the particular genius of the painter one of "mechanical performance:"

"This genius consists, I conceive, in the power of expressing that which employs your pencil, whatever it may be, as a whole; so that the general effect and power of the whole may take possession of the mind, and for a while suspend the consideration of the subordinate and particular beauties or defects."²

The importance of the work of art "as a whole" is the core of the modern theories of art. It is fundamental to the aesthetic principles which conclude in granting art a dynamic relation

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¹ Discourse XI, p. 161
² Ibid.
to life.\(^1\) The implication of Reynolds' Grand Style was to establish art as an arbitrary system, divorced from experience, in which good and bad was pre-determined by the characteristics of the system. By giving art an individual existence Reynolds at once negates what he has earlier established as his concept of art. His idea of general nature — the backbone of the Grand Style — undergoes a distinct revision. As has been shown in an earlier chapter the concern with ideal forms of nature as aesthetic reality are changed in Discourse XI:

"There are in all considerable objects great characteristic distinctions which press strongly on the senses, and therefore fix the imagination."\(^2\)

It is obvious that in grasping and portraying such general impressions as Reynolds indicates, the painter is no longer concerned with ideals in the sense which the follower of the Grand Style searches nature to find. Although Reynolds has not abandoned nature he is emphasizing its expression in painting terms.

Reynolds defines the character of "the whole" as an immediate conception, different from its parts:

"These (the characteristic distinctions) are by no means, as some persons think, an aggregate of all

\(^1\) This may be more evident if stated in broader terms. By considering unity or wholeness as the aim of art, art immediately assumed identity. This grants it a legitimate place in nature. It is no longer a confused hybrid creation dependent upon illusion and imitation. Through its identity it becomes possible for art to maintain broader relations with life. It is no longer an illusion but quite as tangible as a rock, a tree or any other part of nature.

\(^2\) Discourse XI
the small discriminating particulars; nor will such
an accumulation of particulars ever express them."¹

Again the vital character of art emerges. The life in
a work of art is the formulation of unity through its parts and
the realization of the specific nature of the new unity. Creation
of this life is brought about by grasping the total composition.
Reynolds has spoken formerly only of the side issues of painting.
Now he speaks directly of the fundamental need in any art form —
it's expression "as a whole," and he associates genius with this
achievement.

In connection with becoming aware of the whole situ-
ation in either nature or painting, Reynolds advocates observing
the effect objects "have upon the eye when it is dilated, and
employed upon the whole, without seeing any one of the parts dis-
tinctly."² A painter striving to see relationships in what he is
painting knows the value of this advice. It may be of consider-
able importance that Reynolds advocates this method of observing
rather than the older one of squinting at the painter's work.
Dilating the eye does not destroy spacial relationships as does
squinting, and Reynolds may have been slightly aware of that
subtlety of vision which Cezanne achieved by means of dilating his
eyes while observing nature. However, this is pure speculation
and has not sufficient support to dwell upon longer.

The principle of "adequate expression" or "dexterity"
is another piece of the equipment of genius in art. Reynolds

¹ Ibid.
² Ibid., p. 163
gives a definition of dexterity which is well worth quoting:

"I do not mean by dexterity a trick or mechanical habit, formed by guess, and established by custom, but that science, which, by a profound knowledge of ends and means, discovers the shortest and surest way to its own purpose." 1

Defined in this light dexterity becomes the ability to understand materials and use them professionally, a very essential aspect of either art or trade.

Conception of the whole and adequate expression are summed up by Reynolds as the "power to generalize" and the "simplicity of the means employed." These two factors constitute genius wherever it is found in paintings. He is dogmatic about this, but it is sound dogma.

Further in Discourse XI Reynolds makes another very unexpected statement:

"Whether it is the human figure, an animal, or even inanimate objects, there is nothing, however unpromising in appearance, but may be raised into dignity, convey sentiment and produce emotion, in the hands of a painter of genius." 2

Consider such an idea in the light of Reynolds' contemporary philosophy! The Great Chain of Being is violated. It is true he does not say that a lowly subject will have equal dignity with a lofty one, but he grants everything the possibility of receiving dignity from the hands of a genius. This is similar to saying that the universal appeal of any subject depends upon the simple fact of its being painted. The art of painting

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1 Ibid.
2 Ibid., p. 166
an object into something, which by its nature is universal.

This is a logical conclusion from the recognition of the importance of unity or wholeness in art. When anything assumes a genetic individuality it assumes automatically universal interest, appeal, dignity or any other proper attribute. Reynolds is logically pursuing the course dictated by his original sound assumption. It is strange that he cannot sense how irreconcilable are his former assertions and his present thesis.

Another observation which shows Reynolds' sensitivity to art appreciation is the value he sets upon the rough sketches of the masters:

"..... their value arises from this, that they give the idea of a whole...... on whatever account we value these drawings, it is certainly not for high finishing, or a minute attention to particulars."¹

An "anatomical" study of everything is advocated, but Reynolds insists that the genius, when painting, subordinates such knowledge to the unity of his picture.

No clearer description of the purpose of art could be cited than this:

"It is by this (unity), and this alone, that the mechanical power is ennobled, and raised much above its natural rank. And it appears to me, that with propriety it acquires this character, as an instance of that superiority with which mind predominates over matter, by contrasting into one whole what nature has made multifarious."²

¹ Ibid., p. 168
² Ibid., p. 171
Dividing the Discourses for the sake of analysis presents obvious difficulty because Reynolds' thought must be likewise divided, and there is such coherence within the writing that this is not possible. It is true that the later Discourses bear little relationship to the first ten. Although Reynolds has attempted to maintain his belief in the Grand Style, the last five Discourses are the result of a far more mature view of art. They show this not only by content analysis but by infinitely greater clarity of statement and unity of purpose. There are no longer digressions upon the mannerisms of the school, the merits of classical costume, the defense of bad painters, Caracci and Rosa. He is content to speak in terms of esthetic values and the occurrence of really memorable phrases becomes far more frequent.

Nevertheless, it is difficult in spite of the break in the continuity of the Discourses, to separate the ideas expressed in them, and classify them as has been attempted in this paper. The distinctions between Reynolds' ideas of Genius, Imitation, Invention, Esthetics, and sound Teaching Practice are only verbal. There is too strong an attempt to unify all his beliefs, ever to permit one to separate them and find unrelated parts. The Grand Style is the core of Reynolds' Esthetics from beginning to end, although it underwent such an evolution as to have an entirely new character in the later Discourses.

The coherence of ideas prevents this chapter from unfolding any new developments in Reynolds' beliefs, but it will show
both the breadth which his theory attains and its practical application to the study of art.

The short Discourse IX is an attempt to show the relation of art to society. Here it is stated that art is an outgrowth of man's leisure. Man is a being of sensual and intellectual desires. When society is properly adjusted and the sensual wants supplied, then art is created to satisfy the intellectual thirst. The danger which Reynolds sees for the artist is that of continuing to satisfy only the sensual side of man:

"Our art, like all arts which address the imagination, is applied to a somewhat lower faculty of the mind, which approaches nearer to sensuality; but through sense and fancy it must make its way to reason; for such is the progress of thought, that we perceive by sense, we combine by fancy, and distinguish by reason; and without carrying our art out of its natural and true character, the more we purify it from everything that is gross in sense, in that proportion we advance its use and dignity; and in proportion as we lower it to mere sensuality, we pervert its nature and degrade it from a liberal art; and this is what every artist ought well to remember."

The artist's business is to "contribute in his sphere to the general purpose and perfection of society" by realizing through his art a beauty which is "general and intellectual" with the final achievement of Virtue as the end of art. This is a philosophy of art very like Diderot's, which controlled contemporary French taste. It is a logical view, if the premise it is based upon is to be acknowledged. Reynolds' reasoning is once again admirable and once again it is his premise which invalidates the conclusions of his theory. To draw a sharp distinction between sense perception

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1 Reynolds' Discourses, The World's Classics CXLI, Oxford Univ. Press, 1907, Discourse IX, p. 144
and intellect, and to turn art solely to the task of improving the intellect is in essence Reynolds' object. There is neither precedent nor reason for a sharp division between sensuality and intelligence, and to say that art has any other aim than its own creation is to limit its scope. It would seem a sounder thesis to suggest that both sensuality and intellect should strive towards unified expression, and when such is achieved, art is created and understood. It is inconceivable that art should demand the suppression of any part of man's nature. The present day trend of art stresses the sensual appeal at the expense of the intellectual. Matisse's desire for a picture that is analogous to a comfortable armchair is a strong advocate for the very theory which Reynolds opposed. But, and this is very significant, Matisse does not wish to discard the intellectual content of art. Rather he is concerned with re-enforcing the sensuality of art by sound reasoning. In other words he is welding together both passion and reason. Reynolds insisted upon discarding passion. The significance of such uniting as Matisse has done is that intellect is no longer isolated from life. By combining it with sensuality it ceases to be an absolute quality, as Reynolds considered it, and becomes a part of common experience. So with the philosophy of Matisse, Reynolds' ideal of an art which serves the people by elevating their lives towards virtues becomes practical; no longer the narrow moral virtue of Diderot but the virtue of integrated experience and of unified, purposeful life.

Reynolds is insistent upon the value of intellect in art.
In Discourse IV he advances intellectual significance as the reason beneath the formulation of the Grand Style: "The value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it, or the mental pleasure produced by it." 1

In this context Reynolds does not inform the reader what he means by the term "mental." This has led to confusion. It may be that he has intended a far broader interpretation than that implied by the word "intellectual." William Blake undoubtedly had a broader meaning in mind when he jotted down, "Why does he not always allow this?" 2

Blake considered "mental" as synonymous with "conceptual." This would be consistent with his thought. But in the light of what Reynolds says later in Discourse IX it is safe to judge that his idea of "mental" was more akin to "rational." It is fairly safe, then, to venture the statement that Reynolds' Esthetics were based in the rationalism of his day. Reason was bound to the Grand Style through man's desire to arrive at perfect nature in order to improve his fellow man through exhibiting to him the artist's conception of perfection. "Upon the whole, it seems to me that the object and intention of all the arts is to supply the natural imperfection of things." 3

Thus Reynolds establishes a system of motive, action and result which is as complete in itself as the challenge and solution

1 Discourse IV, p. 36
2 William Blake, Marginal Notes on Reynolds' Discourses, reprinted in E.J. Ellis, The Real Blake, Chatto and Windus, 1907, p. 383
3 Discourse XIII, p. 210
of a jig-saw puzzle. But it is equally isolated from experience. Also the problem raised and the solution is at once similar, yet very different from the concern of the artist as it is conceived today. The problem is still to improve the public, but more indirectly than Reynolds conceived. Art would not thrive without an audience; whether of the public or of the artist alone, and the experiencing of art can be as broadening, elevating or degrading as can any other experience. A delight in art is a better sermon than any ever preached by a moralist.

Reynolds was a Rationalist, but no narrow, out and dried rationalist.

"Reason without doubt must ultimately determine everything; at this minute it is required to inform us when that very reason is to give way to feeling."¹

He says this in connection with appreciating a masterpiece. His reason is ever conveniently elastic. Reynolds was too much a man of his times for the empirical philosophies not to have affected his thought. Empiricism was directly opposed to the Newtonian scheme. Reynolds unites the philosophies in this way:

"Experience is all in all, but it is not everyone who profits by experience; and most people err, not so much from want of capacity to find their object, as from not knowing what object to pursue."²

Thus he honours neither experience nor theory above each other, but shows the need for both. The artist is prone to straddle the philosophical fence, and he is privileged to do so, because art determines philosophy. Reynolds' conservative middle

¹ Ibid., p. 197
² Discourse III, p. 26
position determines the value one can attach to the Discourses; they will never be considered wholly wrong and never wholly right. For whether the artist becomes theorist or practitioner he will find a companion in Reynolds; though sometimes a shallow one.

Throughout the Discourses there are many passages which might be cited as indicative of Reynolds' aesthetic beliefs. However, since the Discourses were not written at one time, and consequently exhibit a definite growth of understanding, it is more profitable to consider Discourse XIII as a mature expression of Reynolds' art philosophy.

The purpose of this Discourse is to define the character of art as something other than imitation. The course followed by Reynolds is a comparison of several arts in order to arrive at a conclusion in regard to the principles of art:

"To enlarge the boundaries of the Art of Painting, as well as to fix its principles, it will be necessary that, that art, and those principles should be considered in their correspondence with the principles of the other arts, which like this, address themselves primarily and principally to the imagination."1

This is an approach of which no one could disapprove. It immediately establishes the distinct, independent existence of art which is requisite for a growth and development of that field. The importance of the individuality of art as a species, is fundamental to the dynamic conception of art. It enables art to reflect and influence life, as does every vital experience. Reynolds unfortunately did not fully realize this, and his later arguments fail upon this score.

1 Discourse XIII, p. 194
In pursuing his theories Reynolds establishes "imagination" as superior to reason in matters of art; "For though it may appear bold to say it, the imagination is here the residence of truth." This is consistent with Discourse IV in which Reynolds says: "The great end of art is to strike the imagination."  

In this early Discourse Reynolds follows his assertion with the argument that technique should be concealed for the sake of the thing represented. This is hardly a logical sequence from the premise. But in Discourse XIII Reynolds has matured his argument into a consistent aesthetic doctrine. Here "imagination" is opposed to "any principles falsely called rational." It becomes directly associated with intuition:

"There is in the commerce of life, as in art, a sagacity which is far from being contradictory to right reason, and is superior to any occasional exercise of that faculty, and does not wait for the slow progress of deduction, but goes at once, by what appears a kind of intuition, to the conclusion. A man endowed with this faculty, feels and acknowledges the truth, though it is not always in his power, perhaps, to give a reason for it."  

Reynolds continues by saying that reason should give way to this intuition because reason "however powerfully exerted on any particular occasion, will probably comprehend but a partial view of the subject." In other words intuition is the human faculty best suited for understanding the "wholeness" of a work of art. There need be no pains expended to show at what variance this view is from that expressed early in the Discourses, where Reynolds

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1 Ibid., p. 195  
2 Discourse IV, p. 39  
3 Discourse XIII, pp. 195-196
repeatedly assures the student that a reliance on his own genius will be fruitless. What could be a better argument for self sufficiency within the artist than this doctrine of guidance by intuition?

Reynolds continues his theory of art by asserting that naturalism, or imitation of nature, is only the goal of "inferior" forms of the arts. Low comedy is cited as such an inferior form, the sandal painted by Apelles, the comic humour of Molière, are also low art forms, according to Reynolds. Obviously he has adopted a false standard of judgment in relegating these arts to a low position. Nevertheless, his theory is sound and what he is attempting to express is simply that any art form which elects naturalism as its object is a low form, not necessarily even art:

"So far is art from being derived from, or having any immediate intercourse with, particular nature as its model, that there are many arts that set out with a professed deviation from it. This is certainly not so exactly true in regard to painting and sculpture."¹

He immediately cites poetry as such an art; the use of verse is "artificial." Drama is included; the settings and lighting are obvious deceptions and give a sense of unreality. Reynolds soundly says: "I would not admit as sound criticism the condemnation of such exhibitions because they are unnatural."²

But why he should draw a line between these arts and the visual arts is nowhere made at all clear. Is the measured line of poetry, the rhythm of music, or the technique of acting any less

¹ Ibid., p. 199
² Ibid., p. 201
suggestive of imitation than are the pigments of a painting or the stone of a work in sculpture?

Reynolds flounders yet more deeply as he continues. Towards the end of the Discourse he almost retracts what he had set forth so boldly in his first paragraph:

"When this comparison of art with art, and of all art with the nature of man, is once made with success, our guiding lines are as well ascertained and established as they can be in matters of this description."¹

This is his positive assertion at the outset of the Discourse. It is hardly consistent with what he later says:

"It is, I know, a delicate and hazardous thing (and as such I have already pointed it out) to carry the principles of one art to another....."²

It seems that Reynolds has become confused with his own arguments and examples. One illustration will show how Reynolds has lost the firm ground of his premise. In speaking of the formal garden he says:

"..... it is, however, when so dressed, no longer the subject for the pencil of a landscape-painter, as all landscape-painters know, who love to have recourse to nature herself, and to dress her according to the principles of their own art."³

The confusion is almost complete. Art has once again lost its identity and become the child of nature and imitation. He has similar remarks on the painting of theatrical poses or situations. The object of these illustrations is to show that the artist should not try to carry over the forms of one art into another.

1 Ibid., p. 194
2 Ibid., p. 208
3 Ibid., p. 206
The examples do not demonstrate the theory. They are quite beside the point because they show only the confusion of art as nature.

The Discourse is closed with some observations on the architecture of Vanbrugh, which Reynolds treats frankly with the eye of a painter, and in consequence is able to draw some legitimate parallels between painting and architecture. It is surprising that Reynolds, who had instinct and judgment enough to formulate the premise upon which Discourse XIII is based, had not the ability to sustain it throughout his argument. The reader is left with that same confusion which had been cleared away in the first few paragraphs.

Although "the object of painting is to please the mind," Reynolds acknowledges that there is a sensuality in the response to art which must be catered to. The mind is pleased by the painter through a knowledge of Reason and Imagination. Reason is discussed in Discourse VII. Imagination is rather slighted in the discussion but is treated in the following Discourse. "Common sense" is too narrow a definition for reason. It must "give way to a higher sense," which has its end in "general nature." Prejudices, too, if of long enough standing and wide influence, might be considered a part of reason. This discussion is hardly specific enough to merit attention. Reynolds found as a painter that it paid to observe popular prejudices, but he fails to define any of them, and a critic may do little more than suggest that, in reality,

1 Discourse VII, p. 102
they are not significant influences on works of art.

Reynolds does attempt to discuss the sensuous character of imagination in the following Discourse. He points out that painting is not able to use the devices of poetry or drama to entertain the imagination but must instead use "novelty, variety, and contrasts."

"... these qualities, on examination, will be found to refer to a certain activity and restlessness which has a pleasure and delight in being exercised and put in motion. Art therefore only administers to those wants and desires of the mind."\(^1\)

The function of each quality is defined:

"Variety reanimates the attention, which is apt to languish under a continual sameness. Novelty makes a more forcible impression on the mind than can be made by the representation of what we have often seen before, and contrasts rouse the power of comparison by opposition."\(^2\)

Reynolds is at last speaking of the direct effect of a work of art upon the senses. The three qualities he has chosen have one characteristic in common. They all presuppose an existing order from which they deviate slightly. One would hesitate to draw a definite line between novelty and variety, and contrast only exists as a departure from sameness. The distinction which Reynolds makes between the three qualities tends to separate them from the work of art and associate them with experience in nature. In the structure of a painting variety and novelty are both accomplished through contrast. One could speak of a novel pose which a model assumes but after it is painted it is an organization of

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\(^1\) Discourse VIII, p. 120
\(^2\) Ibid.
contrasting shapes and the novelty is in terms of their arrangement, no longer in terms of the pose.

Reynolds in speaking of these three qualities in painting is attempting to verbalize the fundamental principles of art, namely that art is order relieved by variety. The principle of continuity, mentioned in the Introduction, is another such attempt. Reynolds' fault lies in confusing this one issue by three apparently different definitions: novelty, variety and contrast.

Reynolds continues his Discourse by insisting that an over-use of any of the qualities of painting is contrary to the natural "disposition to indolence" which rules the human mind and so be displeasing. Such an idea is of real value to the painter for it sets a limit to variety, just as Reynolds' earlier idea limited the degree of monotony possible to art. The necessity for variety or contrast in a work of art is primary, but too great variety results once again in monotony, and art must exist in a "middle state," to use Pope's expression.

Nowhere in the Discourses is there a clear statement of Reynolds' esthetic doctrine, unless the Grand Style is to be accepted as inclusive of his beliefs. The reader is justified in hesitating to accept this as Reynolds' most mature statement, since the later Discourses contain many views which are incompatible with the Grand Style. Sprinkled through the Discourses are many passages which deal with esthetic principles, and although they lack integration some of them are very significant.

Reynolds' value for the study of nature is very high.
"The art of seeing Nature, or, in other words, the art of using models, is in reality the great object, the point to which all our studies are directed."\(^1\)

When the artist loses contact with nature, he is "all abroad at the mercy of every gust of fashion, without knowing or seeing the point to which... (he) ought to steer."\(^2\)

Reynolds' contempt for fashion is one of the themes which recur in many places. As a practical painter his defense against its inconstancy was, lamely enough, a return to classical garments. In these he found the simplicity which in his opinion distinguished the greatest paintings. His plea for the study of nature, one can realize is limited by his idea of general nature, which is a pure rationalization, having no place in the creative act, but it causes him to make a significant observation. The painter who does not study nature becomes a mannerist, one who copies the superficial tricks of other painters. A consequence of this reasoning would suggest that the same cause, lack of nature-study, underlies the sterility of those painters who stress technique, and have as the end of their art the exotic handling of paint. As soon as the painter's technique becomes static, he ceases to produce vital art.

In Discourse V Reynolds has a long passage on the "union of excellencies." This is completely theoretical and leads to a conclusion which rests in nature, not in art. The "excellencies"

\(^1\) Discourse XII, p. 192
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 191
are moral values, as elegance, valour, dignity. He sums up his argument in these words: "The summit of excellence seems to be an assemblage of contrary qualities, but mixed in such proportions that no one part is found to counteract the other."¹ This is inconceivable in a work of art.

What Reynolds chooses to name the "subordination of excellencies" follows his treatment of the "union," and it resolves itself into a discussion of the styles of painting. Reynolds admits the ornamental style "not to be wholly unworthy the attention of those who aim at the Grand Style, when it is properly placed and properly reduced."² It may be used to "mitigate the rigor of the great style," as Caracci used it. Of course this is a denial of his former contention that any contamination of the Grand Style with inferior painting would be ridiculous. But it is an inconsistency which need not concern the modern reader, to whom the Grand Style is meaningless.

Another style of painting is discussed. This is the "original or characteristic style." Salvator Rosa is its great exponent.

"This.... being less referred to any true archetype existing either in general or particular nature, must be supported by the painter's consistency in the principles which he has assumed, and in the union and harmony of his whole design."³

Here is another saving example of Reynolds' natural sensitivity. Poussin and Rubens are also examples of "the same mind.

¹ Discourse V, p. 57
² Ibid., p. 58
³ Ibid., p. 62
being seen in all the various parts of the art."1 One is at rather a loss to understand why Rosa should be assigned the place of a genius, as he is in the Discourse, but overlooking this, the whole theory shows an awareness of the painter's efforts. Many men cannot see merit beyond the limitations of their own styles. What Reynolds observed was not very profound, indeed, it was little more than a mannerism of these painters. El Greco is a marked example of Reynolds' "characteristical style," but El Greco is not great because of his mannerism. Nevertheless, it shows imagination on the part of Reynolds that he could find merit in these men whose paintings were so different from his own. It leads one to believe that had he lived in a time when thought had been clarified, when rationalism no longer held undisputed dominion, he could have produced better criticism and a sounder art. Reynolds was primarily an intellectual. If he did not understand an action he could not successfully perform it. The confusions in the Discourses must have influenced his painting.

Another contradiction in the Discourses, although not important, is the shift of preference from the "imperfect artist of the highest order" to the "genius in a lower rank of art."2 Perhaps this change of view was occasioned by Reynolds' affection for Gainsborough, whom he considered superior to many bad history-painters. A slight change such as this is to be hoped for in the Discourses, which were written over a considerable period of years.

1 Ibid., p. 64
2 Discourses V and XIX
If there were no change there would also be no growth and so a resulting paucity of ideas. Reynolds' later opinion is a broader one, and would receive the critics' sanction today.

A remark which has deeper significance, and even shows the relation of art and life, is made in Discourse VII:

"..... the same habit of mind, which is acquired by our search after truth, in the more serious duties of life is only (sic) transferred to the pursuit of lighter amusements. The same disposition, the same desire to find something steady, substantial, and durable, on which the mind can lean, as it were, and rest with safety, actuates us in both cases. The subject only is changed."1

Had this, in its broadest application, been the center of Reynolds' thought, the Discourses would be held in great respect by artists to this day. Unfortunately Reynolds' search for truth was short-circuited by the neo-Platonic idea of truth as an absolute. Truth could not become, for him, the relative value, it must be for all living, changing things, and once again Reynolds' theory fails in its conclusion, though its premise is sound.

From his own experience Reynolds writes many sentences which express a vivid sense of artistic truth. His expression is epigrammatic: "..... it may not be amiss to suggest that perhaps a confidence in the mechanic produces a boldness in the poetic."2

This is said of Michael Angelo. It is one of Reynolds' daring generalizations which instantly clarify many of the apparently conflicting aspects of art. For the art student, it is similar to the sight of a masterpiece which immediately sets his mind at

1 Discourse VII, p. 109
2 Discourse XIV, p. 235
ease and offers an "open sesame" to the whole realm of art. Such
an experience is probably one of the most influential to which an
artist is exposed. It can change his entire art, and advance his
work to a place of importance, at a single stride. Delacroix went
through such an experience when he saw Constable's landscapes and
at once repainted his Massacre at Scio.

There would be little point in going through the Discoursess to find more such illuminating statements. Their success
is entirely dependent upon the receptivity of the reader, and for
each there would be different passages which might have real pertin-
ence. Reynolds' prose is forceful. Much has been written on the
Discourses as literature. This is not the province of this paper.
Many of Reynolds' phrases are cumbersome, but many others have great
poignancy.

Although the Discourses are addressed to the students of
the Royal Academy there is relatively little which deals directly
with the process of studying. As Reynolds says in Discourse XII,
he does not feel justified in laying down a method of approaching
art, but would rather trust the student's own enthusiasm to guide
him to the right goal. However, in Discourse II Reynolds outlines
the "Course and Order of Study." The three periods of an artist's
development which he suggests have received already such just critic-
isms that it seems hardly worth mentioning them. They may be summar-
ized thus:

1. Proficiency in using paint.

2. Collection of ideas to be expressed; or a study of the
masters.
3. Use of the artist's own discrimination; emancipation from authority.¹

Leslie and Taylor² question how the first stage in the development can be accomplished without the use of the last. Reynolds' error is in breaking up into stages a process which takes place within the artist at one time. William Blake points out the fault with more wit.³ He suggests that if the student is a fool at the start of such a process, he will simply multiply his foolishness at its conclusion. Blake's criticism would suggest too that the method was false, but his doctrine of "once a fool, always a fool" was not shared by Reynolds, nor can it be by any practical teacher. Reynolds has analysed his own development, but ignored the subtle processes which take place within the artists subconsciously aware, and which are so important in forming the changes which his art manifests. Otherwise he woulo never have excluded discrimination from the first acts of the art student. If the stages he describes are considered simultaneous rather than separated by divisions in time they present a fair picture of the way a student arrives at an understanding of art.

In his discussion of "excellencies," which has been mentioned earlier in this chapter, Reynolds points out "two different modes," either of which the student may adopt without degrading the dignity of his art: "the object of the first is to com-

¹ Discourse II, pp. 11-12
³ H.J. Ellis, The Real Blake, Chatto and Windus, 1907, p. 379
bime the higher excellencies and embellish them to the greatest advantage; of the other, to carry one of these excellencies to the highest degree. 1

He offers no practical examples of either method, and the reader is left with an intangible feeling that here is a theory which looks better on paper than in practice. The "higher excellencies" were difficult to conceive even in the discussion about them, and that they should be "embellished" seems only to increase their vagueness. Perhaps the merit of the theory is its latitude of interpretation.

Discourse XII is one of the soundest pieces of Reynolds' writings. It might well be read by every art teacher, for although its ideas have wide acceptance today, they are fundamentals which are too often overlooked by instructors. Discourse XII is based upon the excellent assumption that the human being is not a machine. Reynolds refuses to establish a method or system for the student to follow. He places the full responsibility of work and progress upon the student's enthusiasm:

"I would rather wish a student, as soon as he goes abroad, to employ himself upon whatever he has been incited by any immediate impulse, than to go sluggishly about a prescribed task." 2

This advice is for advanced students; advanced in merit rather than time. Reynolds takes this distinction for granted.

Method and industry are condemned as ends for the art student. 3

1 Discourse V, p. 67
2 Discourse XII, p. 177
3 Discourse VII, p. 91. This quotation summarized Reynolds' attitude towards industry: "Success in your art depends almost entirely on your own industry, but the industry which I principally recommended is not the industry of the hands but of the mind."
Reynolds is not advocating dissipation as a way of life for the artist; no one could believe that of Reynolds, but he is recognizing the need which genius demands, which is joy in expression. It is not enough to labor at copying, or to satisfy the routine of the classroom. Desire must motivate the painter. Loose methods of study do less harm than "false opinions and vicious habits" which are the outgrowth of regular procedure in art teaching.

Reynolds' first positive advice seems rather at variance with his earlier "order of study;"

"Among the first moral qualities, therefore which a student ought to cultivate, is a just and manly confidence in himself, or rather in the effects of that persevering industry which he is resolved to possess."¹

This is synonymous with a reliance upon one's own genius, which Reynolds is at pains to discourage in Discourse II. The inconsistency is unimportant beside the broadening awareness which the later statement shows. The Discourse is concluded with practical advice to the painter which is quite sound, and needs no discussion.

Principles are the basis of Reynolds' method (if he may claim one). They are the motive behind the Discourses and there is continual admonition to formulate and follow principles:

"It is not by laying up in the memory the particular details of any of the great works of art that any man becomes a great artist, if he stops without making himself master of the general principles on which these works are conducted."²

There is a tendency in Reynolds' own painting to stop

¹ Ibid., p. 180
² Discourse XI, p. 173
with the principles; not to consider them as means only but to believe the whole end of art accomplished when its principles are fulfilled. It is true that a work of art inevitably conforms with certain principles but, by its nature, it is unique and defies a final analysis through a knowledge of principles. Reynolds shows a realization of this property of art when he reassures the student that only the spirit of a rule need be observed; a literal adherence is not necessary. \(^1\) This is once again directed to the advanced student. Reynolds never alters his dictum of Discourse I that "implicit obedience to the Rules of Art, as established by the great masters should be extracted from the young students." The shortcoming of such an approach is simply that the great masters did not formulate the principles. The lesser men, the critics, art teachers, and painters seeking a short-cut to technical excellence, are the formulators of principles. Their opinions are partial, limiting views of the masters' works. They represent the narrow understanding of the observer, not that of the artist, and they may be disregarded entirely unless they deal directly with the artist's medium. It is legitimate, and even necessary to recognize that there are certain practices which are desirable and many which are unsuitable in the manipulation of any medium. It is to Reynolds' credit that, with the exception of the Grand Style, his advice is quite practical and deals largely with the technique of using paint. Such advice grows from his own practices which, however impermanent technically, lend validity to his statements.

\(^1\) Discourse VIII, p. 130
One quotation will show his occupation with the technical aspect of painting:

"The properties of all objects as far as the painter is concerned with them, are: the outline, or drawing, the colour, and the light and shade. The drawing gives the form; the colour its visible quality and the light and shade its solidity."¹

The artist can no longer agree with his distinct division of the properties. To achieve unity, the drawing, the colour, the shading must become one single property. Nevertheless, the passage shows Reynolds' ability to abstract nature into the idiom of painting, and he does this frequently while speaking of the act of painting. It is when Reynolds seeks final causes and absolutes that theory leads him towards an art which will prove only an empty cul de sac, and from which all intelligent men will revolt. Reynolds himself evidenced such a revolt, as violent as so impervious a man could, when in his last Discourse he hints at a more mature understanding of his art. One cannot restrain agreement with Leslie and Taylor who suggest that a pamphlet of warnings and instructions should be bound into every edition of the Discourses. The importance of the Discourses is not to be found in the field of criticism or advice to the art student. It is rather to be regarded as the opinion of a thoughtful man who has erected criteria of judgment and, finding them inadequate, voluntarily broadens them. Growth and change of ideas are apparent in the last Discourses even though Reynolds never emancipates himself completely from his early misconceptions.

¹ Discourse XI, p. 163
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