

### *Masterly Imitators*

THERE have been found occasionally some artists who could so perfectly imitate the spirit, the taste, the character, and the peculiarities of great masters, that they have not unfrequently deceived the most skilful connoisseurs. Michael Angelo sculptured a sleeping Cupid, of which having broke off an arm, he buried the statue in a place where he knew it would soon be found. The critics were never tired of admiring it, as one of the most precious relics of antiquity. It was sold to the Cardinal of St. George, to whom Michael Angelo discovered the whole mystery, by joining to the Cupid the arm which he had reserved.

An anecdote of Peter Mignard is more singular. This great artist painted a Magdalen on a canvas fabricated at Rome. A broker, in concert with Mignard, went to the Chevalier de Clairville, and told him as a secret that he was to receive from Italy a Magdalen of Guido, and his masterpiece. The chevalier caught the bait, begged the preference, and purchased the picture at a very high price.

He was informed he had been imposed upon, and that the Magdalen was painted by Mignard. Mignard himself caused the alarm to be given, but the amateur

would not believe it; all the connoisseurs agreed it was a Guido, and the famous Le Brun corroborated this opinion.

The chevalier came to Mignard:—"Some persons assure me that my Magdalen is your work."—"Mine! they do me great honour. I am sure that Le Brun is not of this opinion."—"Le Brun swears it can be no other than a Guido. You shall dine with me, and meet several of the first connoisseurs."

On the day of meeting, the picture was again more closely inspected. Mignard hinted his doubts whether the piece was the work of that great master; he insinuated that it was possible to be deceived; and added, that if it was Guido's he did not think it in his best manner. "It is a Guido, sir, and in his very best manner," replied Le Brun, with warmth; and all the critics were unanimous. Mignard then spoke in a firm tone of voice: "And I, gentlemen, will wager three hundred louis that it is not a Guido." The dispute now became violent: Le Brun was desirous of accepting the wager. In a word, the affair became such that it could add nothing more to the glory of Mignard. "No, sir," replied the latter, "I am too honest to bet when I am certain to

win. Monsieur le Chevalier, this piece cost you 2000 crowns: the money must be returned, the painting is *mine*." Le Brun would not believe it. "The proof," Mignard continued, "is easy. On this canvas, which is a Roman one, was the portrait of a cardinal; I will show you his cap." The chevalier did not know which of the rival artists to credit. The proposition alarmed him. "He who painted the picture shall repair it," said Mignard. He took a pencil dipped in oil, and rubbing the hair of the Magdalen, discovered the cap of the cardinal.—The honour of the ingenious painter could no longer be disputed; Le Brun vexed, sarcastically exclaimed, "Always paint Guido, but never Mignard."

There is a collection of engravings by that ingenious artist Bernard Picart, which has been published under the title of *The Innocent Impostors*. Picart had long been vexed at the taste of his day, which ran wholly in favour of antiquity, and no one would look at, much less admire, a modern master. He published a pretended collection, or a set of prints, from the designs of the great painters; in which he imitated the etchings and engravings of the various masters, and much were these prints admired as the works of Guido, Rembrandt, and others. Having had his joke, they were published under the

title of *Impostures Innocens*. The connoisseurs, however, are strangely divided in their opinion of the merit of this collection. Gilpin classes these "Innocent Impostors" among the most entertaining of his works, and is delighted by the happiness with which he has outdone in their own excellences the artists whom he copied; but Strutt, too grave to admit of jokes that twitch the connoisseurs, declares that they could never have deceived an experienced judge, and reprobates such kinds of ingenuity, played off at the cost of the venerable brotherhood of the cognoscenti!

The same thing was however done by Goltzius, who being disgusted at the preference given to the works of Albert Durer, Lucas of Leyden, and others of that school, and having attempted to introduce a better taste, which was not immediately relished, he published what were afterwards called his *masterpieces*. These are six prints in the style of these masters, merely to prove that Goltzius could imitate their works, if he thought proper. One of these, the Circumcision, he had painted on soiled paper, and to give it the brown tint of antiquity, had carefully smoked it, by which means it was sold as a curious performance, and deceived some of the most capital connoisseurs of the day, one of whom

bought it as one of the finest engravings of Albert Durer. Even Strutt acknowledges the merit of Goltzius's *masterpieces!*

To these instances of artists I will add others of celebrated authors. Muretus rendered Joseph Scaliger, a great stickler for the ancients, highly ridiculous by an artifice which he practised. He sent some verses which he pretended were copied from an old manuscript. The verses were excellent, and Scaliger was credulous. After having read them, he exclaimed they were admirable, and affirmed that they were written by an old comic poet, Trabeus. He quoted them, in his commentary on Varro *De Re Rustica*, as one of the most precious fragments of antiquity. It was then, when he had fixed his foot firmly in the trap, that Muretus informed the world of the little dependence to be placed on the critical sagacity of one so prejudiced in favour of the ancients, and who considered his judgment as infallible.

The Abbé Regnier Desmarais, having written an ode, or, as the Italians call it, Canzone, sent it to the Abbé Strozzi at Florence, who used it to impose on three or four academicians of Della Crusca. He gave out that Leo Allatius, librarian of the Vatican, in examining carefully the MSS. of Petrarch preserved there, had found two pages slightly glued, which having separated, he had

discovered this ode. The fact was not at first easily credited; but afterwards the similarity of style and manner rendered it highly probable. When Strozzi undeceived the public, it procured the Abbé Regnier a place in the academy, as an honourable testimony of his ingenuity.

Père Commire, when Louis the XIVth resolved on the conquest of Holland, composed a Latin fable, entitled "The Sun and the Frogs," in which he assumed with such felicity the style and character of Phœdrus, that the learned German critic Wolfius was deceived, and innocently inserted it in his edition of that fabulist.

Faminius Strada would have deceived most of the critics of his age, if he had given as the remains of antiquity the different pieces of history and poetry which lie composed on the model of the ancients, in his *Prolesiones Academicæ*. To preserve probability he might have given out that he had drawn them from some old and neglected library; he had then only to have added a good commentary, tending to display the conformity of the style and manner of these fragments with the works of those authors to whom he ascribed them.

Sigonius was great master of the style of Cicero, and ventured to publish a treatise *De Consolatione*, as a composition of Cicero recently discovered; many were deceived by the counterfeit, which was performed with

great dexterity, and was long received as genuine; but he could not deceive Lipsius, who, after reading only ten lines, threw it away, exclaiming, "*Vah! non est Cicero-nis!*" The late Mr. Burke succeeded more skilfully in his "Vindication of Natural Society," which for a long time passed as the composition of Lord Bolingbroke: so perfect is this ingenious imposture of the spirit, manner, and course of thinking, of the noble author. I believe it was written for a wager, and fairly won.