

# OBSERVATIONS

RELATIVE CHIEFLY TO

## PICTURESQUE BEAUTY

ON THE

## CITADEL-PARK





Reprinted by S.M.A.K. (the Municipal Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Ghent) on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary  
of the Reverend William Gilpin's tour of the Citadelpark  
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OBSERVATIONS,  
RELATIVE CHIEFLY TO  
PICTURESQUE BEAUTY,  
Made in the Year 1799,  
ON  
*Several Parts of Ghent ;*  
PARTICULARLY THE  
CITADEL-PARK of GHENT.

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VOL. I.

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FIRST EDITION.

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By WILLIAM GILPIN, A. M.  
PREBENDARY OF SALISBURY ; AND  
VICAR OF BOLDRE IN NEW-FOREST, NEAR LYMINGTON.

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WILLIAM GILPIN  
door Ellen Harvey

# OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

## CITADEL-PARK

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We travel for various purposes – to explore the culture of soils, to view the curiosities of arts, to survey the beauties of nature and learn the manners of men, their different politics and modes of life. The following little work proposes a new object of pursuit; that of examining the face of a country by the rules of picturesque beauty, that is, that peculiar kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture.

The Citadel-park, does not enjoy that grandeur of situation, which we admire elsewhere, yet as a park-scene, I am informed, it is now become superior in richness and picturesque beauty to anything of the kind in Ghent. The grand style of landscape is here nowhere to be found; the country in general is somewhat flat and uniform. Here however, this deficiency has been remedied and though there is nothing very peculiarly striking in the situation, the architects of the park have made a masterly use of the existing variety in point of ground, wood and water and have traced an abundance of easy roads that form pleasing lines in themselves and shew the beauties of the park to the best advantage. Little also has been spared in way of artificial ornament, the park being perhaps too amply supplied with statues, habitations and buildings of all kinds.

CITADEL-

PARK





I must however premise how ill-qualified I am to do justice to the park, were it only from having seen it under the circumstance of continued rain, which began early in the day before our voyage of its grounds was performed. It is true, scenery *at hand*, suffers less under such a circumstance, than scenery at a *distance*, which it totally obscures. The picturesque eye also, in quest of beauty, finds it almost in every incident and appearance of nature. Even the rain gave a gloomy grandeur to many of the scenes; and by throwing a veil of obscurity over the view, introduced something like a pleasing distance to scenes that would have otherwise suffered from a lack of *background*, being most amply supplied with *foreground*.

In such a walk particularly, the exhibitions of the convex mirror would have been amusing. A succession of high-coloured pictures is continually gliding before the eye. They are like the visions of the imagination; or the brilliant landscapes of a dream. Form, and colour fleet before us; and if the transient glance of a good composition happen to unite with them, we should not hesitate to fix and appropriate the scene. Unfortunately, in this instance, owing to the rain, we were forced to rely on direct observation alone.

Entering the park, the eye is first drawn to those museums of which we had heard so much. The most that can be said for the buildings is that they are *characteristic*, they are certainly not *picturesque*, although they were much improved by the beautiful grey harmonizing tint spread over them by the fog. Their interior beauties must compensate for their exterior defects.



Figure 1.  
The Cascade of the Citadel-park

Turning aside, we were struck by a small pond, taking a sweep round an artificial promontory of rock which is the grand feature of the view. It has rather a fantastic appearance, but it is not without its effect in marking the scene although what peculiarly marks this view is a fall, of not great height indeed, but enough to merit the name of a cascade. The roaring of the waters impressed a new character on the scene: in this direction all was agitation and uproar and every rock flared with wildness and terror. By contrast, the rear of the pond was all quietness and smoothness, a contrast that would have been picturesque, had it not been marred by the introduction of a small island whose regularity of shape betrayed the hand of man rather than the grand design of nature. The addition of a sculpture and a stone lamp to the rock and the island, respectively, illustrates most sadly the dictum that in all matters of ornament it is best to be sparing.

The foundations of these criticisms on smooth and agitated water is this: when water is exhibited in small quantities it wants the agitation of a torrent, a cascade, or some other adventitious circumstance to give it consequence, but when it is spread out in the reach of some capital river, in a lake, it is then able to support its own dignity: in the former case it aims at beauty; in the latter at grandeur. Some beauties however, the smooth river possesses above the rapid one. In the latter you cannot have those reflections which are so ornamental to the former. Here alas, the architects of the park have attempted to include all these beauties with the result that they achieve none.



Figure 2.  
The Triumphal Archway of the Citadel-park

Next to the museum we were surprised to find a splendid formal archway. The building is most harmonious but the picturesque eye finds little amusement among such objects. Indeed, it is most unhappily situated, being visible only from inside the museum and lacking entirely in that background which would enable it to function as the characteristic object of a scene.

It suffers also from having been painted a glaring white, contrasting unhappily with the beautiful weathered brick adjacent to it. A *speck* of white is often beautiful; but white in *profusion* is, of all tints, the most inharmonious. A white seat at the corner of a wood, or a few white cattle grazing in a meadow, enliven a scene perhaps more than if the seat or the cattle had been of any other colour. But buildings which we often see daubed over with white, make a disagreeable appearance and unite ill with the general simplicity of Nature's colouring.

In these remarks I mean only to insinuate, that *white* is a hue which nature seems studious to expunge from all her works, except in the touch of a flower, an animal, a cloud, a wave, or some other diminutive or transient object; and that *her mode* of colouring should always be the model of *ours*.

Further on, a most ill-judged oval pavilion intrudes unpleasantly on the sylvan scene. The fantastic nature of its decoration might yet be pleasing were it to be seen from more of a distance. As it was, the obscuring rain alone rendered it tolerable.



Figure 3.  
The Grassy Steps of the Citadel-park

It is only upon following the road that those beauties for which the park is renowned reveal themselves. The trees are particularly pleasing. Nothing can be more ornamental than several of the clumps; but many of the single trees are heavy and offend the eye. Almost any ordinary tree may contribute to form a group. Its deformities are lost in a crowd; nay, even the deformities of one tree may be corrected by the deformities of another. But few trees have those characters of beauty which will enable them to appear with advantage as individuals.

We now approached an opening in the trees distinguished by a wide expanse of grassy steps bordered with stones. While the softness of the herbage upon the different sides of these steps was pleasing, the steps themselves were a most unhappy ornament, suggesting nothing so much as miniature stone walls, the most offensive separation of property, whose rectilinear figures break the great flowing lines of nature and injure her features. Indeed, in distant views of cultivated countries, the parts which lie nearest the eye are commonly disgusting. The divisions of property into squares, rhomboids, and other mathematical forms, are most unpleasant. There cannot be a greater deformity in landscape.

These steps may have some purpose, I know not what it is. Indeed I can scarce imagine their introduction to be due to a desire to *ornament* the scene. It is however much to be regretted that the architects did not choose a more curving line for their construction, thereby uniting *function* with *elegance*.



Figure 4.  
The Rocks of the Citadel-park



The rocks, which are continually starting through the trees produce another ornament in the park. The rock, as all other objects, though more than all, receives its chief beauty from contrast. Some objects, independent of composition, are beautiful in themselves. But the rock, bleak, naked and unadorned seems scarcely to deserve a place among them. Tint it with mosses and lichens of various hues, and you give it a degree of beauty. Adorn it with shrubs and hanging herbage and you make it still more picturesque. Connect it with wood, and water, and broken ground, and you make it in the highest degree interesting. Its colour and its form are so accommodating, that it generally blends into one of the most beautiful appendages of the landscape.

Different kinds of rocks have different degrees of beauty. Those with which the park has been so amply scattered are of a grayish colour, are in general simple, rarely formal or fantastic, as suits such relatively modest specimens. They but seldom project into those beautiful square masses, yet broken and shattered in every line, which is characteristic of the most majestic species of rock. Sometimes they slant obliquely from the eye in shelving diagonal strata; and sometimes they appear in large masses of smooth stone, detached from each other and half buried in the soil. Rocks of this last kind are the most lumpish and the least picturesque and here where there is such deficiency in background, they serve primarily to remind the eye of those mountainous beauties that are so lacking in the Belgian landscape.



Figure 5.  
The Grotto of the Citadel-park

Following on, the road passes through an artificial cave or grotto made of large stones copiously ornamented with ferns, mosses and lichens and topped with a waving canopy of trees. Of all the views in the park, this is the most picturesque for while it lacks the background for which the grotto might function most perfectly as a characteristic object, the scene itself is most romantic and gives a loose to the most pleasing riot of imagination. The mind cannot but be reminded of hermits, *banditti*, and a thousand other frightful scenes. The stones too have been laid out with a pleasing carelessness that while it reveals the hand of *man*, reminds us yet of the wild exhibitions of *Nature*. As far as *foregrounds* alone make a picture (and they will do much better than *distances*,) we are here presented with a very beautiful one.

Such is the beautiful appearance which the grotto exhibits on the outside where we can obtain a nearer view and consider it as an independent object unconnected with landscape. It is only upon entering the grotto that the deficiencies of artifice are revealed; the interior is most unpleasantly monotonous and unvaried, although furnishing a most welcome respite from the increasing rain.

From here on the road is agreeable though I know not that it deserves any higher epithet. The forest through which it passes is adorned with little groves, and opening glades, which form a variety of second distances. But we seldom saw a foreground to set them off to advantage and the park suffers from that heaviness which arises from the continuity of the ground.



Figure 6.  
The Hermitage of the Citadel-park

We next passed a most curious dwelling, set into a rise of the land, forming thereby a sort of grotto-house. Ivy, in masses uncommonly large, had taken possession of many parts of the rock face and given a happy contrast to the grey-coloured stone and the rustic doorways. Mosses of various hues, with lichens and other humble plants hung from every joint and crevice, adding the richest finishing to the scene. On one side a list of names was carved into two tablets lending an air of solemnity to the scene. An abundance of trees behind and on top of the rise formed a most elegant background and we should have been most anxious to fix the scene had not the rain prevented the taking of a more than fleeting likeness. Only the addition of extensive formal plantings in front of and opposite the building, according most ill with its pastoral character, prevented us from imagining ourselves to be viewing the humble haunt of some ancient prophet or divine.

For while, as the embellishments of a house, or as the ornaments of little scenes which have nothing better to recommend them, a few flowering shrubs artfully composed may have their elegance and beauty; in scenes like this, they are only splendid patches, which injure the grandeur and simplicity of the whole. It is not the shrub which offends; it is the formal introduction of it. Wild underwood may be an appendage of the grandest scene: it is a beautiful appendage. A bed of violets or lilies may enamel the ground with propriety at the root of an oak; but if you introduce them artificially in a border, you introduce a trifling formality, and disgrace the noble object you wish to adorn.



Figure 7.  
The Rose-Trellis of the Citadel-park

Continuing on the road, our attention was caught by an extensive Rose-Trellis which demonstrated that the old idea that art must do something more than nature, is not yet obliterated. Not only are the roses of a glaring pink such as is never found in Nature, the trellis itself hurts the eye with its regularity, and disgusts by the vulgarity of its shape. The chief uses of planting are to set off beauty and to hide such deformities as we cannot remove but here the roses might well be allowed to run riot over the offending object without adding to the beauty of the scene. A mallet judiciously used might be of service in fracturing some of it; as a ruin, overgrown with flowering vines, it might yet exhibit a pleasing desolate grandeur.

As such scenes demonstrate, by comparison with the works of Nature, the vistas of art cannot be but tame and formal. They consist of streets with the unvarying repetition of doors and windows; or they consist of trees planted nicely in rows; a succession of mere vegetable columns; or they consist of some other species of regularity: but Nature's vistas are of a different cast. She forms them sometimes of mountains, sometimes of rocks, and sometimes of woods. But all her works are the works of a master. She is always great in design and an admirable colourist also, but she is seldom so correct in composition, as to produce a harmonious whole. Either the foreground or the background is disproportioned; or some awkward line runs across the piece; or a tree is ill-placed; or something or other is not exactly what it should be.

Hence the painter who adheres strictly to the composition of nature will but rarely make a good picture. It is here that artifice has its place. When the eye is to be confined within the frame of a picture and can no longer range among the varieties of nature, we want the abbey or the castle to give consequence to the scene. Indeed, the landscape painter seldom thinks his view perfect without characterizing it by some ornament of this kind.

The rain was now set in, and would not permit us to continue our journey so we were forced to quit the park in some haste. We should have liked to have examined the rest of the park which is spoken of as wonderfully amusing. A sculpture of two lions fighting and various ornamental buildings, including an asylum for distressed dogs, and various lakes were specially recommended to our notice. How these various objects are brought together, I know not. I should fear there are too many of them to fall into such composition as would appear to advantage on canvas.

THE END





ACCOUNT  
OF THE  
PRINTS

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With regard to the prints, which adorn this volume, I can only say, that few of them pretend to be exact portraits. They in general only characterize the scenes through which the reader is carried. They were slightly taken in the course of a hasty journey; and at best meant only to preserve the great lines of the country: and even this, I fear, not always accurately. I have heretofore made concession to the public, that when I have seen a line out of place, I have a great propensity to correct it by one that is more picturesque.



