

## ARTICLE VI.

EARLY HISTORY OF ITALIAN PAINTING.<sup>1</sup>

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THE existence of an authentic history of early Italian painting is a matter of deep interest to all classes of students, but to none more than to ministers. In addition to its value as a means of artistic cultivation, it has for them, in view of the close connection existing between the rise of art in the thirteenth century and the development of a religious movement that was the great fact of its age, a special — we might say, indeed, a professional — interest. The work of Crowe and Cavalcaselle, of which this Article aims at giving some outline, while it does not dwell on the fact of this relationship, or make any particular effort to illustrate it, is, as an art history, one of great thoroughness. It is specially full and satisfactory in its treatment of the earliest period of the revival — giving careful and discriminating analyses of the paintings of Giotto and other artists, the inspiration of whose works was that of a lofty idealism. Its generalizations, also, are, with a few exceptions, carefully made and well sustained.<sup>2</sup> We do not hesitate to say that a more clearly defined view of the growth of painting as a whole, and a more distinct impression of the lesser, as well as of the great, epochs in that growth may be obtained from it than from any other one work as yet given to English readers.

After a review of the course of Christian art during the period of its decline from pagan models, the birth-place of

<sup>1</sup> A History of Painting in Italy. By J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle. 3 vols. London: John Murray. 1864.

<sup>2</sup> A notable exception to this is to be found in the notice of Orcagna, the account of whom (Vol. i. p. 427), taken in connection with the outline, previously given, of the course of painting between Giotto and Ghirlandaio (p. 246), is calculated to puzzle the most careful reader.

distinctively Italian painting is found in Giotto.<sup>1</sup> Cimabue, though the forerunner of the new birth, is classed as belonging essentially to the old dispensation. From this starting-point the history of painting in Central Italy is followed, with an appearance of great circumspection, through the Giottesque period of idealism completed by Masaccio and Angelico, through the period of the descent into materialistic forms of thought and realism in painting, — when artists, struggling with technical difficulties and engrossed in the imitation of an unselect nature, lost sight of the higher purposes of art, — and part way through the grand period of the later development. Andrea del Sarto is the last painter treated of. Raphael, Michael Angelo, and Leonardo da Vinci are not touched upon. As has been said, a much larger space is devoted to the consideration of the earlier artists than in any preceding history. And to many readers the resulting slow progress of the work, in connection with a somewhat nerveless style, will prove tedious to a degree. The writers take for granted an enthusiasm on the part of the reader, and apparently make little effort to be attractive, or to stimulate the attention of the many who read works on art for the sake of having an interest in the subject awakened. It should be observed, however, that the nature of the work undertaken renders it almost necessarily less interesting to the majority of readers than those books whose chief aim is biographical, rather than scientific or artistic.

A history of painting has a different end in view from a history of painters. In the latter, interest centres round individuals. It is a succession of detached stories, admitting variety of treatment and the introduction of personal anecdote, which, however remotely connected with art, is calculated to enlist the sympathy of the reader. In the other, art is the unit; the artist is a factor; and, in the course of the one long story that it wishes to tell, much that is of general interest must be sacrificed. Taken separately, they furnish answers to two quite distinct questions. Standing

<sup>1</sup> A.D. 1276-1336.

before the Transfiguration, one's first inquiry will naturally relate to the immediate author of the work. What was the man like who could conceive and execute a painting of such perfection? What kind of a nature had he? Under what influences was he formed? The story of Raphael's life gives a satisfactory answer to these questions; but in the answering they suggest another, and send us back to ask, What is the *whole* history of this painting? Raphael is but the last one who had a hand in it. Coming to the end of what may be attributed to his particular genius, there is still disclosed a vast work that has been wrought out by the patience of other intellects — a great accumulation of artistic power — the common stock of his generation, and the result of centuries of growth. What is the history of this growth?

The work of Crowe and Cavalcaselle has for its chief object the answering of this question. While the lives of the prominent painters are more or less distinctly outlined, the larger share of attention is directed to their paintings, which are carefully analyzed and classed, with a view to determining the relation which each artist sustained to the growth of the great whole. Thus the history of painting is systematized; and, unquestionably, a great service has been rendered to the student of art by the faithful manner in which the task has been performed.

Every year adds new material for the production of an authentic history of painting. By the removal of whitewash from frescos that have been lost for centuries whole chapters are disclosed to those who can read their language; while public and private documents, hitherto inaccessible, or for some other reason unimproved, are now and again yielding important data to patient research. In the volumes before us there is evidence of much careful diligence in the collecting and sifting of new material of this kind. Partly from the new light thus obtained, and partly in their capacity as experts, the authors arrive at some conclusions which are widely at variance with opinions hitherto held. A few examples of this are as follows: The frescos of the Church

of the *Incoronata*, in Naples, are not the work of Giotto. This rests upon undoubted historical evidence. Giotto never went to France; the frescos in Avignon, attributed to him, are by Simone Memmi. The frescos of the Campo Santo of Pisa, said to be by Orcagna, are by a Siennese painter, probably by one of the Lorenzetti. The frescos of the Cappellone dei Spagnuoli are not by Simone Memmi, but probably by Antonio Veneziano.<sup>1</sup> Masolino did not paint in the Brancacci chapel.

The course of Italian painting, during its growth period, was far from being an even progress. It had its retrograde movements, its revolutions, its infatuations. It had also its double line of development, in rival schools. The school of Florence, represents the grand movement. But from the very outset another influence was at work. Duccio of Sienna flourished contemporaneously with Giotto; and his genius gave birth to a school of painting, which, for more than a century and a half—first in Sienna, and afterward in Umbria—held an independent course. This school, while it had some conspicuous excellences, was devoid of those qualities on which greatness in art depends. Duccio, unlike Giotto, clung to the past, and contented himself with reproducing, with great improvements in detail, its conventional compositions and worn-out types. The vehement and exaggerated action, also, which characterized the old art, and which in Giotto gave place to a noble repose and dignity, was retained by Duccio; and his followers, with whom conservatism became the rule, transmitted almost without alteration, these strongly-marked peculiarities from one generation to another. As has been said some of these peculiarities were excellences. The school of Sienna was pre-eminent as a school of sentiment. It expressed, even to exaggeration, the feminine qualities of tenderness and grace, and fostered the religious element, though not without much affectation. It was distinguished also for brilliant and lively color, for lavish ornamentation, and for a most elaborate finish in details.

At various points in the grand progress, these qualities

<sup>1</sup> In the use of proper names we have followed the orthography of the authors.

exerted a marked influence on individual Florentine painters, more especially on Orcagna and Fra Angelico. But it was not till the days of Perugino and Raphael — who, bred in the Umbrian school, already modified by Florentine influences, matured their style in Florence — that the two schools became thoroughly fused in the advanced painting of the close of the fifteenth century.

In the mean time, Florence had been occupying itself with the sterner problems of art. The period embraced between Giotto and Raphael — about two centuries — was a most remarkable one for the number of great Florentines which it produced. Orcagna, Masaccio, Angelico, Brunelleschi, Donatello, Ghiberti, Uccelli, Ghirlandaio, Verrocchio, Leonardo, Michael Angelo, are some of the more prominent names. But besides these, there were others who encountered boldly the limitations of which they were conscious, and who won important ground in the onward movement of their profession.

The magnitude of the advantage possessed by Florence in the broad and true foundation which Giotto laid is emphasized by Crowe and Cavalcaselle; and great prominence is given to the influence exerted, not alone in the early stages of progress, but throughout the whole course of the renaissance, by the grand principles which he developed. Giotto's was a mind of an eminently intellectual cast. "He was to the art what Dante was to the poesy of his country." Every subject that received his attention became elevated by his treatment of it. As an idealist he always aimed at producing a great whole, and he possessed a genius capable of grasping, without assistance, the great secrets of grandeur in composition. Masterly distribution, breadth of handling, and a severe simplicity in design, combined with repose, decorum, and great nobleness of mien in simple figures, were the distinguishing features of the art which he bequeathed to Florence. Nor was this all. Giotto was many-sided. He had a feeling for art in all its members. Besides giving a grand impulse to the artistic spirit of his age, he contributed largely to the growth of art in all its parts. "In composition, form, design,

expression, and color, he gave it one uniform stamp of originality in progress, an universal harmony of improvement."

With the single exception of Orcagna, no one from Giotto to Ghirlandaio was distinguished for a like many-sided development. "Art, after Giotto, became divided. Some clung to the more special aim of developing form, and in this were, at first, not very successful; others chose color or relief; others again sunk themselves in a search for accessories or detail. None took up art in all its branches where Giotto left it." The immediate successors of the great master, those who had been educated under his eye, did nothing for the progress of art, except in so far as their deficiencies showed what art had to avoid. "The melancholy, but unquestionable, truth respecting these, is that they reduced what in Giotto was art to the dimensions of a trade. Whilst they enjoyed the advantage of his compositions which they copied; whilst they considered themselves freed from the necessity of exercising the gifts of fancy, they were but too obviously induced to devote exclusive attention to ease and rapidity of hand." Taddeo Gaddi and Jacopo di Casentino were representatives of this class. "But by their side arose others that were freer participators of the impulse which Giotto had given."

Giovanni da Milano and Giottino were both innovators in the direction of a closer imitation of nature in details. Giotto, intent upon the grandeur of the whole, was, to a certain extent, neglectful of precision of detail. Giovanni was distinguished for careful minuteness of drawing and research of form, but his art was realistic, and he failed in that subordination of parts to the whole, which was the predominant element in the greatness of Giotto. Giottino, while he was, equally with Giovanni da Milano, a student of form and detail, and while he carried naturalism quite as far, yet did this without such detriment to the mass, and, to a good degree, observed the maxims of the great master. But it is in Andrea Orcagna<sup>1</sup> that the first worthy successor of Giotto appears.

Died about 1376.

“Orcagna not only understood and grasped the great maxims and laws of Giotto, but he combined, like that great master, all the essentials which unite to make an art progress.” “His was a mind of wonderful scantling — of that tough and durable material which is rarely found more than once in a century; one which, by the very nature of its being, exercises a striking influence on its contemporaries, and gives a bias to all that comes in contact with it.” His contributions to Florentine art, consisted first in his happy combination of Siennese excellences with the art of Giotto. “Orcagna introduces a more yielding and sensitive religious feeling into art, — the mild, soft mysticism which finds its culminating point in Angelico. He is a link in the chain of Giotto, Masolino, Masaccio. From the school of Florence he derives his greatest qualities, from that of Sienna, from Simone, and the Lorenzetti the lesser ones. He tempered the sternness of the first with the softness of the second, combining in his figures tenderness and grace with severity of form, decorum, and nobleness of deportment.” In the more careful rendering of form, also, as well as in the matters of foreshortening, perspective, and chiaroscuro he shows himself in advance of the art of Giotto.

Antonio Veneziano, the next link in the chain, while he was an industrious student and imitator of nature, is more especially important as marking a period of progress in technical execution. New methods of glazing were introduced by him, which were used to advantage by Masolino and Angelico, and in a much improved form by Masaccio. Masolino<sup>1</sup> — of whose style much more is now known than was known by Vasari, owing to the recent uncovering of an important series of frescos, signed with his name, in Castiglione — was in some respects the forerunner of Masaccio and Angelico. He developed the science of perspective, and made a more careful study of the nude than any of his predecessors. He was also distinguished for the expression of religious feeling akin to that of Angelico. But his art was characterized by

Born, 1383.

faulty distribution, and by a want of harmony in the parts. "In single figures, the head frequently did not correspond with the proportions of the frame, the figure with the group into which it was introduced, the group with others in the vicinity, the whole with the architecture."

Fra Angelico<sup>1</sup> and Masaccio<sup>2</sup> complete the Giottesque period. The former had his own peculiar inspiration and development in the realm of religious mysticism — a realm in which he has never been equalled. As to his art education, he was formed by Orcagna and Masolino. "Masolino gave him the artistical and practical; Orcagna's works acted on the peculiar bent of his mind." In the great essentials of art he ranks with the first. "The harmony of his lines in composition is equal to that of the greatest composers, — equal to that of Giotto." Angelico, more truly than Masaccio, closes the Giottesque period. Not simply because he outlived him by many years, but because he worked altogether in the spirit of the old art. Masaccio occupies a peculiarly isolated position in the history of painting. He is like an eminence thrown up by the meeting of opposing forces. Thoroughly imbued with the spirit and principles of Giotto, he at the same time received, and with wonderful skill combined, the science of the new art with the idealism of the old. In his rendering of the human form, in the application of the rules of linear and aerial perspective, in giving to architecture its proper place and proportion, he was closely related to the times of the higher development of art. "Masaccio treated art in general, perfecting that of Giotto, modernizing it, and holding out his hand to Raphael and Michael Angelo, but losing something of the sentiment and decorous grandeur of the early Florentine." "His representation is true, his perspective bold, his atmosphere almost perfect; but muscular form overweighs the idea of dignity and religious decorum."

As has been said, Masaccio occupied his eminence alone. After him a new set of influences absorbed men's minds, and a new art arose, which was at first a descent from the grand

<sup>1</sup> 1387-1455.

<sup>2</sup> 1402-1429.

style of the Giottesque. The early part of the fifteenth century was an age of novelties, an age of discoveries, and in painting it was an age of crudities. A powerful impulse had been given to the study of science, of nature, of architecture, and sculpture. The worship of antique statuary, which came in with the fifteenth century, had a most stimulating influence on the sculptors of the time; and Ghiberti and Donatello, men of great genius, elevated this branch of art to an imposing position. The effect of this upon painting is strongly marked. Nearly every artist, from Uccelli to Ghirlandaio, shows, in the hard lines and sculptural character of his figures, that the work of the chisel has been deeply impressed on his mind. In addition to this, the style of Donatello, distinguished as it was for the display of physical force and the choice of unselect muscular forms, exercised a dominant influence on the taste of two generations of artists. Another effect of the study of the antique was, that it sent men back to nature. They understood that nothing truly great could come from mere imitation; and in the study of all natural appearances they sought for a new perfection that should rival that of the past. But in this effort they illustrated the truth that art is long. "Most tarried by the way, lost sight of the aim toward which the subtle knowledge of nature should have led them, and became realistic imitators, who forget that the ideal is based on selection."

But, on the other hand, this was an age in which much honest and valuable work was performed, — work that had to be done before the perfected art of the later time was possible. The laws of linear perspective and foreshortening were now, for the first time, fully developed by Paolo Uccello.<sup>1</sup> He gave himself to this study as to a specialty; and so engrossed in the pursuit did he become, that the main motive of many of his pictures seems to have been to show how difficulties in this direction could be surmounted. At the same time, he was led by this study into a research of animal life, and into the careful delineation of details hitherto disregarded. He

Born 1396, and was living in 1469.

delighted in battle-pieces, in which he could display his knowledge of horses, armor, saddlery, and plumes, in subjects that allowed of profuse finery in dress and ornamentation; and he embraced every opportunity to introduce into his pictures studies of dogs, cattle, wild animals, serpents, birds, and fishes, bestowing careful attention on such matters as plumage, scales, and the characteristic movements of different animals.

Great improvements were made, during this period, also, in the chemistry of painting. The method of painting in oils employed by the Florentines was not, according to Crowe and Cavalcaselle, that of the Van Eycks, introduced by Antonello da Messina, but an invention of their own, begun by the Peselli and Baldovinetti, and worked out by the experiments of a succession of artists. Again, the study of the human form, having received a powerful impulse from Donatello, was pursued with enthusiastic ardor. The first results of this study were crude, angular, and unlovely forms—the outgrowth of a conscientious study of coarse and muscular subjects, and a faithful copying of every defect. But the mistakes, as well as the achievements, of these workers with nature were important elements in the subsequent success of Signorelli, Raphael, and Michael Angelo.

Andrea del Castagno,<sup>1</sup> who, by the researches of Signor Gaetano Milanesi, has been finally cleared of the charge of having murdered Domenico Veneziano, was the contemporary of Uccelli and Donatello. He was of a coarser fibre than either, but an artist of great vigor, participating in the spirit of Donatello, and the imitator in painting of his sculptural boldness. “The action of his figures was, in truth, full of energy and swing; but in expression he was one of the most vulgar of the realists. As a colorist he was distanced by almost all his contemporaries, and never produced anything but hard, raw, and unpleasant work. Yet the strength that was in the man is still imposing; and Castagno deserves the place which he occupies in art history.”

<sup>1</sup> 1590-1457.

A group of painters farther on in the fifteenth century — Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo, Verrocchio, and Botticelli — combined this same careful study of the nude and the worship of unselect muscular forms, with the imitation in painting of silver and bronze works. Fashion had at this time given to articles of chiselled bronze and silver the precedence in art patronage; and pictures — which were very generally executed in the goldsmith's shop — came to resemble these in color and in other features.

Domenico Ghirlandaio,<sup>1</sup> who was probably bred a goldsmith, may be classed with the foregoing artists, as being one whose style was strongly affected by the influence of bronze sculpture. But taking a wider view of the history of painting, he is to be classed by himself. Like Giotto, he was one of the great landmarks in the history of Florentine art. He founded his style on the great qualities of the earlier masters; but he combined with their excellences the lessons taught by the research of a later generation. "He gathered and harvested for subordinate use the experience of architects, of students of perspective, of form, of proportion, and light and shade, and learnt to apply the laws of chiaroscuro to the human frame and to the still life that surrounds it. Without adding anything specially to the total amount of experience acquired by the efforts of successive searchers, he garnered the whole of it within himself, and combined it in support and illustration of the great maxims which he had already treasured up, and thus conduced to the perfection of the masculine art of Florence, which culminated at last by the joint energy and genius of himself, Fra Bartolommeo, Raphael, and Michael Angelo."

Piero della Francesca,<sup>2</sup> a pupil of Domenico Veneziano, has an unusually imposing place assigned him by our authors. He is described as "a man of a rare type, endowed with great penetration and powers of reflection, able to fathom the problems of abstruse science, and capable to search and

<sup>1</sup> Born 1449, died about 1498.

<sup>2</sup> Born at Borgo San Sepolcro in Umbris, between 1415 and 1420; still living, 1509.

co-ordinate the secrets of nature. He was, in a word, an artist enjoying a happy conjunction of the talents which adorned the Van Eycks and Leonardo da Vinci. . . . . With more science than Uccelli or Mantegna, he turned his knowledge of linear perspective to admirable account, and learnt not merely to fix rectangular planes in perfect order, but to measure them, and thus set his figures at their just proportional height in the most advantageous situations. . . . . He was the forerunner and superior of Domenico Ghirlandajo in the mode of projecting shadows, and thus added to art a new perfection. . . . . He carried out improvements in the mode of oil-coloring that place him next in Italy to Antonello da Messina, not because he followed the Van Eyck method introduced by the Sicilian, but because he added something like perfection to the system of the Florentine innovators. And thus we have before us a vast genius, who only wanted the essential quality of selection in the human form to become one amongst the very greatest men of his country. . . . . It is but a just tribute to his memory to add, that, having formed the bold and vehement style of Luca Signorelli, their combined influence extended to all the schools of their native country."

It is to the influence of Piero della Francesca and his master, Domenico Veneziano, that the elevation of the Perugian school, not hitherto satisfactorily accounted for, is attributed. Through Bonfigli and Fiorenzo di Lorenzo, they contributed powerfully to the formation of Perugino, and through him, and still more directly through Giovanni Santi, the father of Raphael, to the early education of the greatest of masters.

As has been said elsewhere the life and works of Raphael are not touched upon in these volumes. But those of Perugino and his associates are treated at considerable length. A much higher place is claimed for Baldassare Peruzzi, the Siennese, as a painter, than has hitherto been accorded to him. Fra Bartolommeo, Albertinelli, Andrea del Sarto, and the group of Florentine artists connected with them, close the record for Central Italy as thus far given.