

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ART. VI.—BERNARDINO LUINI AND RELIGIOUS ART.

THE relation of art to religion is a theme which has often occupied a conspicuous place in English literature. It would still supply material for countless volumes. But it may be questioned whether at the present time the subject is one which would be likely to evoke general interest. The gradual spread of ecclesiastical sentiment has, indeed, done much to encourage good taste and refined workmanship in the material appointment of Anglican churches throughout this land, and many of them (including, of course, some of our cathedrals) contain examples of modern sculpture, mural painting, and stained glass which reflect high credit on the artists who designed them. But such objects are probably regarded by the great majority of each congregation as so many conventional appurtenances which might be replaced, at any time, by others entirely different in style, provided they were sufficiently ornate, and fulfilled their ostensible purpose. To the architect, antiquary, and clerical amateur we are indebted for that affinity of character which, as a rule, pervades all details associated with our English Gothic Revival. To the mere devotee the question, no doubt, seems one of minor importance.

Ruskin once went so far as to say that in his own personal experience he had never met an entirely religious-minded person who cared much about art at all. Without endorsing this opinion, it may be generally admitted that those works which, either in illustration of sacred or of Divine precept, most deeply move the pious observer do not necessarily commend themselves to a cultivated taste. The moral purpose of a picture may be excellent while its æsthetic value is third-rate. Most of us have seen commonplace prints, published within the last few years, which, from an artistic point of view, are absolutely devoid of merit, but which, nevertheless, have become immensely popular as the presentment of some obvious allegory appealing to simple-hearted sentimentalists.

In bygone ages the Church was, of course, the chief patron of all art, and, as a direct consequence, the best pictorial work of those days was devoted to sacred subjects. But it is a popular error to suppose that altar-pieces of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, which seem to us imbued with a genuinely devotional spirit, were always executed by painters of saintly life or orthodox belief. If there were some who, like Fra Angelico, led devout and holy lives, there must have been many others who were Christians only in name. Among examples of the early Italian school none are distinguished

by a purer grace and deeper reverential sense than the Madonnas and saints of Perugino. Yet, if we may believe Vasari, the artist was—at least, for some years of his life—a confessed agnostic.

The designs of Fra Filippo Lippi are instinct with a saintly charm suggestive of austerity and religious fervour. But the painter, when a middle-aged priest, eloped with a nun who had consented to sit to him as a model.

Notwithstanding such cases, it is certain that nine-tenths of the chefs-d'œuvre in pictorial art which have won the admiration of mankind are closely associated with the history and doctrines of Christianity.

While I was Keeper of our National Gallery, one of my duties was to receive and conduct through the building any royal or otherwise distinguished visitors who wished to examine its contents. On one occasion a certain Oriental potentate came there with that object. On my inquiring what class of art most interested him, he at once intimated that he would be glad to see any remarkable works in the collection. "But," he added with great emphasis, "I don't like religious pictures." It need scarcely be said that, after the condition thus imposed, His Highness's visit was not a protracted one. To omit from notice every religious picture in the Trafalgar Square or any other national museum would assuredly be to miss most gems of a collection. Not long afterwards I had the honour of acting as official cicerone to a still more illustrious foreigner, noted among European Sovereigns for his intellectual culture, his modest bearing and affability. I soon discovered that he was familiar with the characteristic qualities of many great masters, but the one whose works most attracted him was unquestionably Murillo. He stood entranced before the "Pedroso" altar-piece, representing the Holy Family, and the picture of "St. John and the Lamb," which evidently moved him to emotion. In the course of conversation he expressed his opinion that Murillo was a greater painter than Raphael.

I ventured to inquire the reason for this judgment. "Because," replied the King, "when Raphael selected sacred subjects he humanized them, but Murillo, in adopting human subjects, made them divine!"

It was difficult to agree with this view, but, not presuming to differ from His Majesty, I merely said: "Sir, I shall remember that."

In the religious world there is no doubt that Murillo's art satisfies the taste of many humbler critics than this royal personage, though, I expect, on very different grounds from the one which he suggested. To the exquisite technique of

the painter's work, and his strong sense of physical beauty, may be traced much of the admiration with which his productions are regarded, but among ordinary amateurs their popularity may be ascribed to their realistic character.

There is no mystery to solve, no symbolism to unravel. St. Joseph is a superior-looking peasant in the prime of life; the Blessed Virgin a pretty village maiden; the infant Saviour a comely child. It is true that these figures are posed with a due regard for symmetry of composition which seems almost inconsistent with the simple portraiture of the group. But the dignity attained by earlier painters in dealing with similar presentations—that ideal spirituality of expression, the stately attitudes and traditional splendour of garb which belong to *quattro-cento* designs are absent here.

It would be impossible to guess which epoch or which class of art associated with the treatment of sacred subjects has been most successful in creating a sense of veneration. Among the uneducated we know that it may be evoked by works of very inferior merit. An Italian peasant kneeling before some tinsel-crowned figure of the Virgin in his village church is as much enthralled by its contemplation as if he were offering up his prayers before the San Sisto Madonna.

Even enlightened connoisseurs are not unanimous in deciding which painter appeals most strongly to what may be called the devotional instincts of our nature. Masters of the "primitive" schools record facts in sacred history with gravity and even reverence, but the grotesque forms in which such incidents are portrayed almost require the interpretation of an antiquary to invest them with interest.

The religious art of a somewhat later period, without offending the taste, is apt to tax the intelligence of experienced observers. Why, for instance, should St. Peter appear clad in the vestments of a medieval Bishop? To pious Protestants the Virgin Mary represented in queenly robes and wearing a jewelled crown seems grossly superstitious. Here is St. Sebastian, pierced by a dozen arrows, calmly gazing heavenwards, without a sign of physical pain! In one picture we find St. John the Baptist depicted as a youthful companion of the child Jesus. In another he appears as an adult, watching the infant Saviour as He lies on His mother's lap.

Lovers of ancient art are, of course, accustomed to these inconsistencies and anachronisms, which do not in the least degree detract from their admiration. But the critic of more realistic works, apart from the question of their technical merit, has still to deal with considerations of taste. Even those who fully appreciate the creative genius and extraordinary power of Michelangelo must confess that in his most famous con-

ceptions there is but little which reflects the modern spirit of Christianity. Titian and Rubens reached the highest pinnacle of fame in the practice of their art, but their quasi-dramatic treatment of sacred history is often repugnant to the purist.

An exquisite ideality pervades certain productions of the Venetian school, and in the altar-pieces by such masters as Giovanni Bellini, Basaiti, Cima, and Bissolo physical grace is generally combined with a saintly character of expression which seems almost inspired. Among Bolognese painters Francia stands almost alone in his capacity for infusing a deep religious sentiment into compositions tending to incite devotion. His "Pieta," representing Madonna mourning over the body of our Lord, is perhaps the most pathetic picture of its class in our national collection.

By common consent Raphael's name stands foremost among the great masters who devoted their talents to the service of the Church. Excepting a few works in the field of portraiture, his brush seems to have been almost exclusively employed on sacred subjects. He changed his style, as we know, more than once. His earliest pictures retain the simplicity and refinement of Perugino, though they lack something of the spiritual interest which that master's productions possess. In later life he attained an excellence that was all his own, and of its kind probably unrivalled, but it partakes of an academic character which, notwithstanding his consummate dexterity in draughtsmanship and the wonderful range of his conceptive genius, fails to enlist our sympathies in the same degree as the nature of other work, far less ambitious in aim and perhaps inferior in technical skill, but possessing qualities more consonant with humanity.

It is a strange fact that in the annals of sacred art the name of Bernardino Luini should have remained so long unhonoured. Vasari, who had reached manhood before the great painter's death, and who might have ascertained full particulars of his life and works, passes him over with a brief mention; and although Lanzi in the eighteenth century to some extent repairs this omission, posterity is still uninformed respecting the biographical details of Luini's career.

It is, indeed, only within the last fifty years that the merits of this gifted artist have been adequately appreciated. Yet North Italy abounds with examples of his genius. He is represented in the State galleries of Paris, Berlin, Munich, and Vienna, while several of his works have found their way to England.

The large and elaborate fresco, representing the Passion and Crucifixion of our Lord, which he painted over the chancel arch in the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli at

Lugano has, unfortunately, suffered too much from restoration to indicate the exquisite refinement and tenderness of Luini's art. Numerous other specimens may be seen in the Brera Gallery at Milan, in the Ambrosian Library, and in the private museums and churches of the same city. But it is generally admitted that the purest and saintliest works from his brush are contained in the church known as "the Sanctuary of the Virgin" at Saronno. The town, a small and quite unimportant one, is within an hour's ride of Como. Luini's frescoes occupy several walls at the east end of the church. Two of them are in an ante-chapel, and represent respectively "The Marriage of the Virgin" and "Christ disputing with the Doctors."

In the former we see the high-priest standing between St. Joseph and his holy bride, while a group of friends is assembled on each side, the men on the left hand and the women on the right. All these figures are of life size, or nearly so. The head of St. Joseph bears a strong resemblance, both in features and expression, to the traditional portraiture of our Lord. He stands with downcast eyes and modest mien, clad in a blue tunic and a maize-coloured pallium. The high-priest wears a vestment of dark lilac over a robe of lighter shade. The Virgin's blue mantle is lined with a yellowish material over a white skirt; the whole dress simple in form, but cast in admirable folds. Madonna's face suggests a rustic type of beauty, with tresses of fair hair bound behind her head. The hands throughout this picture are daintily modelled, the flesh tones delicate even to paleness. The draperies are faultless in arrangement, but the blue colour used for some of them has been, unfortunately, fugitive. Otherwise the chromatic scheme presents a perfect harmony, and finds an excellent foil in the dark-brown wood of the chapel furniture.

With great ingenuity the painter has succeeded in avoiding a formal composition by giving variety to the action of his figures. On the left of the picture two youths, apparently rejected suitors, are breaking their symbolical rods, in accordance with an ancient Jewish custom, while the right of the foreground is occupied by the dignified figure of a woman picturesquely attired in a richly brocaded dress. Refined taste and deep reverential feeling are manifest throughout the work.

The companion picture appears on the opposite wall of the chapel. Our Lord, represented in youth rather than childhood, stands near a central throne, around which the Doctors are seated, and extends His hand to welcome His mother, who meets Him with a mingled expression of love and respect.

It is as though He had been interrupted in His discourse by her approach, but He greets her with filial affection. On the left of the picture are seen the Doctors disputing, their faces animated by varied expressions of doubt, earnest thought, and in some cases of pious conviction. Seated on a marble bench to the right of the foreground is a venerable man, said to be a portrait of Luini himself, with a flowing white beard. He holds a closed volume on his knee, and turns his eyes towards the scene of discussion with an interested but somewhat sad cast of countenance.

The draperies introduced in the picture are more defined by *chiaroscuro* than those in the companion work. Plum colour of various shades, maize-yellow, violet-blue, toned crimson, and pale green are disposed with the painter's usual skill and taste. Each of these frescoes occupies a mural space measuring about 7 feet by 10 feet.

The sacrarium of the church contains two frescoes of much larger size. The one on the left side of the altar represents "The Presentation in the Temple." Simeon, a venerable figure, clad in a robe of reddish-brown with a super-vestment of pale blue, holds the infant Saviour in his arms. Near him stands the Blessed Virgin, whose features are distinguished by more physical beauty here than in the pictures previously described. She clasps her hands, upraised in prayer, as she approaches St. Simeon. Behind her, bearing the traditional basket of doves, trips a fair-haired maiden, wearing a white-sleeved dress covered by an ample tunic, with sandals on her feet. The naïve, unconscious grace of this charming figure is worthy of Luini's happiest inspiration. On the left of the scene are a group of holy women accosted by St. Joseph, here represented in the prime of life. Another beautiful male head is that of the youthful attendant, who bears the high-priest's mitre. The architectural background of this picture shows the painter's thorough knowledge of perspective, and is extremely interesting. Under an arch of the portico is seen a landscape with buildings, and in the middle distance are a few (now faded) figures representing "The Flight into Egypt." Even on this pictorially subordinate portion of the work Luini has bestowed the most scrupulous care, as may be noticed in his accurate appreciation of mountain form and the touch of nature suggested by a palm-tree bending before the wind.

The picture is, in short, full of detail, which, however interesting to examine personally, cannot here be described at length. It is signed (on a *cartellino*) by the painter, and dated 1526.

On the right-hand wall of the sacrarium there is another

large fresco representing "The Adoration of the Magi." This is in better preservation than the last-described picture, and is, perhaps, on the whole a finer work. The figure of the King, represented on the extreme left of the foreground, is a model of manly grace. He is attired in robes of great splendour, which the painter has depicted with consummate skill as to form and colour.

The Virgin's features belong to the same type as that adopted by Luini in the "Presentation" picture, but here they are more beautiful. The lilac-coloured robe is nearly concealed by a large blue mantle, which falls from her head to the ground. The infant Christ, whom she bears on her lap, turns to greet one of the Magi, who, draped in a magnificent mantle, kneels in adoration. Close behind him is a youthful page, bearing his master's cap of State. The face of this boy is curiously reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," and suggests the influence of that master in this among many other of Luini's works.

This picture is, among other reasons, noteworthy for the number of animals introduced in the scene. The traditional ox and ass appear in the manger; several of the princely retinue are mounted on horseback, while in the middle distance camels, and even a giraffe, form part of the approaching procession. The forms of the last-named creatures would not quite satisfy an accurate zoologist, but more familiar beasts are portrayed with great dexterity.

It is, however, on the personification of human life, with infinite variety of age, character, and expression, that the painter has bestowed his chief skill in this interesting and truly marvellous work. There is scarcely a line or passage of colour which could be altered with advantage. When I last saw it a few vertical cracks had appeared on the surface of the plaster. It is to be hoped that it may be long preserved from more serious injury.

In a semi-octagonal *Córo*, behind the high altar, are four more frescoes by Luini. One of them, painted on a (feigned) niche, represents St. Catherine holding a closed volume with one hand and a palm-branch with the other. In a corresponding panel on the opposite wall may be seen "St. Apollonia" bearing iron pincers, the emblem of her martyrdom. She is clad in a very picturesque robe of pale blue, with an over-garment of (now faded) plum colour, while a green mantle is thrown lightly over her shoulders. In the features and expression of this singularly charming figure we are again reminded of Da Vinci.

Two other frescoes in the *Córo* were some years ago partly concealed by *sedilia*, which form part of the chapel furniture.

But I managed to look at them, and they are, perhaps, now open to general inspection. They represent two kneeling angels, bearing a *navicula* and other sacred utensils.

I spent nearly a whole day in the sanctuary, examining its pictorial treasures, and quite absorbed by their beauty. The sacristan, a most intelligent Italian, told me that the building was rarely visited by tourists, but that in previous years Mr. Ruskin had devoted considerable time to the study of its contents, which, as we know, he enthusiastically admired.

I have described them at some length because, amid countless examples of religious art to be found in the public picture-galleries and churches of Europe, I remember none—not even those executed by the most distinguished masters, from Fra Angelico to Raphael—which ever impressed me so much by their deep devotional feeling, combined (as in this case) with a highly refined sense of physical beauty in form and colour, and, above all, with a freedom from every taint of affectation.

There have been few painters of note who failed to receive—even in their lifetime—a generous acknowledgment of their ability. But the world has taken far too long to recognise and appreciate the unique character of Luini's genius.

CHARLES L. EASTLAKE.



ART. VII.—UPON PERSONAL EXPENDITURE.

“A well-ordered budget is as necessary for a citizen as a nation.”

“It is in personal expenditure we all find scope for the continuous daily application of Christian principles.”

“A purchase is a vital, and not only a commercial, transaction.”

BISHOP WESTCOTT.

THERE is a well-known story about an eminent statesman being made furiously angry because in his sermon a preacher offered somewhat plain advice and exhortation upon certain details relative to the conduct of a man's private or personal life.

That the preacher could claim the authority of the Bible for trenching upon this field none will doubt. It may possibly have been the rarity of the choice of such a topic for consideration in the pulpit which upset the statesman's mental equilibrium. We cannot speak of the proportion of sermons upon such subjects at the date of this explosion. Is that proportion to-day as great as it might with advantage be? A well-known dignitary of the Church has quite lately given it as his opinion that “there are reasons in the circumstances