VAL D'ARNO

LECTURE I[1]

NICHOLAS THE PISAN

1. On this day, of this month, the 20th of October, six hundred and twenty-three years ago, the merchants and tradesmen of Florence met before the church of Santa Croce;[2] marched through the city to the palace of their Podesta; deposed their Podesta; set over themselves, in his place, a knight belonging to an inferior city; called him "Captain of the People"; appointed under him a Signory of twelve Ancients chosen from among themselves; hung a bell for him on the tower of the Lion, that he might ring it at need, and gave him the flag of Florence to bear, half white, and half red.[3]

The first blow struck upon the bell in that tower of the Lion began the tolling for the passing away of the feudal system, and began the joy-peal, or carillon, for whatever deserves joy, in that of our modern liberties, whether of action or of trade.

2. Within the space of our Oxford term from that day, namely, on the 13th of December in the same year, 1250, died, at Ferentino, in Apulia, the second Frederick, Emperor of Germany; the second also of the two great lights which in his lifetime, according to Dante's astronomy,

[1] [First delivered on October 20, 1873.]

[2] [Ruskin here summarises the account in Villani's *Istorie Fiorentine*, book vi. ch. 39 (vol. ii. pp. 113–114 of the edition of the book in *Classici Italiani*, Milan, 1802).]

[3] [On the significance of this day, see further §§ 102–104, 232, 259 (below, pp. 62–63, 135, 151–152).]

ruled the world,—whose light being quenched, "the land which was once the residence of courtesy and valour, became the haunt of all men who are ashamed to be near the good, or to speak to them."

> "In sul paese, ch' Adise e Pò riga,
> Solea valore e cortesia trovarsi,
> Prima che Federigo avesse briga;
> Or può sicuramente indi passarsi,
> Per qualunque lasciasse, per vergogna
> Di ragionar co' buoni, ad appressarsi."
>
> *Purg.*, cant. xvi. [115–120].[1]

3. The "Paese, ch' Adise e Pò riga" is of course Lombardy; and might have been enough distinguished by the name of its principal river. But Dante has an especial reason for naming the Adige. It is always by the valley of the Adige that the power of the German Cæsars descends on Italy;[2] and that battlemented bridge, which doubtless many of you remember, thrown over the Adige at Verona, was so built that the German riders might have secure and constant access to the city. In which city they had their first stronghold in Italy, aided therein by the great family of the Montecchi, Montacutes, Mont-aigu-s, or Montagues; lords, so called, of the mountain peaks; in feud with the family of the Cappelletti,—hatted, or, more properly, scarlet-hatted, persons. And this accident of nomenclature, assisted by your present familiar knowledge of the real contests of the sharp mountains with the flat caps, or petasoi, of cloud (locally giving Mont Pilate its title,[3] "Pileatus"), may in many points curiously illustrate for you that contest of Frederick the Second with Innocent the Fourth, which in the good of it and the evil alike, represents to all time the war of the solid, rational, and earthly authority of the King, and State, with the more or less spectral, hooded, imaginative, and nubiform authority of the Pope, and Church.

[1] [Compare "Verona and its Rivers," § 29 (Vol. XIX. p. 445).]
[2] [Compare, again, "Verona and its Rivers," Vol. XIX. p. 431.]
[3] [On this name, see Vol. VII. p. 164 *n*.]

4. It will be desirable also that you clearly learn the material relations, governing spiritual ones,—as of the Alps to their clouds,[1] so of the plains to their rivers. And of these rivers, chiefly note the relation to each other, first, of the Adige and Po; then of the Arno and Tiber. For the Adige, representing among the rivers and fountains of waters the channel of Imperial, as the Tiber of the Papal power, and the strength of the Coronet being founded on the white peaks that look down upon Hapsburg and Hohenzollern, as that of the Scarlet Cap in the marsh of the Campagna, "quo tenuis in sicco aqua destituisset,"[2] the study of the policies and arts of the cities founded in the two great valleys of Lombardy and Tuscany, so far as they were affected by their bias to the Emperor, or the Church, will arrange itself in your minds at once in a symmetry as clear as it will be, in our future work, secure and suggestive.

5. "Tenuis, in sicco." How literally the words apply, as to the native streams, so to the early states or establishings of the great cities of the world. And you will find that the policy of the Coronet, with its tower-building; the policy of the Hood, with its dome-building; and the policy of the bare brow, with its cot-building,—the three main associations of human energy to which we owe the architecture of our earth (in contradistinction to the dens and caves of it),—are curiously and eternally governed by mental laws, corresponding to the physical ones which are ordained for the rocks, the clouds, and the streams.

The tower, which many of you so well remember the daily sight of, in your youth, above the "winding shore" of Thames,[3]—the tower upon the hill of London; the dome which still rises above its foul and terrestrial clouds; and the

[1] [Compare § 110, below, p. 67.]
[2] [Livy, i. 4, 5.]
[3] [See Pope's *Windsor Forest*:—

"Oh, wouldst thou sing what heroes Windsor bore,
What kings first breath'd upon her winding shore."]

walls of this city itself, which has been "alma," nourishing in gentleness, to the youth of England, because defended from external hostility by the difficultly fordable streams of its plain, may perhaps, in a few years more, be swept away as heaps of useless stone; but the rocks, and clouds, and rivers of our country will yet, one day, restore to it the glory of law, of religion, and of life.

6. I am about to ask you to read the hieroglyphs upon the architecture of a dead nation, in character greatly resembling our own,—in laws and in commerce greatly influencing our own;—in arts, still, from her grave, tutress of the present world. I know that it will be expected of me to explain the merits of her arts, without reference to the wisdom of her laws; and to describe the results of both, without investigating the feelings which regulated either. I cannot do this; but I will at once end these necessarily vague, and perhaps premature, generalizations; and only ask you to study some portions of the life and work of two men, father and son, citizens of the city in which the energies of this great people were at first concentrated; and to deduce from that study the conclusions, or follow out the inquiries, which it may naturally suggest.

7. It is the modern fashion to despise Vasari.[1] He is indeed despicable, whether as historian or critic,—not least in his admiration of Michael Angelo; nevertheless, he records the traditions and opinions of his day; and these you must accurately know, before you can wisely correct. I will take leave, therefore, to begin to-day with a sentence from Vasari, which many of you have often heard quoted, but of which, perhaps, few have enough observed the value.

"Niccola Pisano finding himself under certain Greek sculptors who were carving the figures and other intaglio ornaments of the cathedral of Pisa, and of the temple of St. John, and there being, among many spoils of marbles,

[1] [For Ruskin's views of Vasari, see the passages collected at Vol. XII. p. 258 *n.*; to which add, in this volume, pp. 218–219, 370, 395 *n.*]

brought by the Pisan fleet,* some ancient tombs, there was one among the others most fair, on which was sculptured the hunting of Meleager." †

Get the meaning and contents of this passage well into your minds. In the gist of it, it is true, and very notable.

8. You are in mid-thirteenth century; 1200–1300. The Greek nation has been dead in heart upwards of a thousand years; its religion dead, for six hundred. But through the wreck of its faith, and death of its heart, the skill of its hands, and the cunning of its design, instinctively linger. In the centres of Christian power, the Christians are still unable to build but under Greek masters, and by pillage of Greek shrines; and their best workman is only an apprentice to the "Graeculi esurientes"[1] who are carving the temple of St. John.

9. Think of it. Here has the New Testament been declared for 1200 years. No spirit of wisdom, as yet, has been given to its workmen, except that which has descended from the Mars Hill on which St. Paul stood contemptuous in pity.[2] No Bezaleel[3] arises, to build new tabernacles, unless he has been taught by Daedalus.

10. It is necessary, therefore, for you first to know precisely the manner of these Greek masters in their decayed power; the manner which Vasari calls, only a sentence before, "That old Greek manner, blundering, disproportioned,"—Goffa, e sproporzionata.

* "Armata." The proper word for a land army is "esercito."

† Vol. i. p. 60, of Mrs. Foster's English translation,[4] to which I shall always refer, in order that English students may compare the context if they wish. But the pieces of English which I give are my own direct translation, varying, it will be found, often, from Mrs. Foster's in minute, but not unimportant, particulars.

[1] [Juvenal, iii. 78; quoted also in *Aratra Pentelici*, § 206 (Vol. XX. p. 351).]

[2] [Acts xvii. 22; referred to also in Vol. VII. p. 408, and Vol. XVIII. p. 136.]

[3] [Exodus xxxvi. 1, etc. Compare *The Æsthetic and Mathematic Schools*, § 111 (below, p. 266).]

[4] [In Bohn's Library; referred to in the editorial notes of this edition as "Bohn's."]

"Goffa," the very word which Michael Angelo uses of Perugino.* Behold, the Christians despising the Dunce Greeks, as the Infidel modernists despise the Dunce Christians.

11. I sketched for you, when I was last at Pisa, a few arches of the apse of the duomo, and a small portion of the sculpture of the font of the temple of St. John.[1] I have placed them in your Rudimentary Series, as examples of "quella vecchia maniera Greca, goffa e sproporzionata." My own judgment respecting them is,—and it is a judgment founded on knowledge which you may, if you choose, share with me, after working with me,—that no architecture on this grand scale, so delicately skilful in execution, or so daintily disposed in proportion, exists elsewhere in the world.

12. Is Vasari entirely wrong then?

No, only half wrong, but very fatally half wrong. There are Greeks, and Greeks.

This head with the inlaid dark iris in its eyes,[2] from the font of St. John, is as pure as the sculpture of early Greece,[3] a hundred years before Phidias; and it is so delicate, that having drawn with equal care this and the best work of the Lombardi at Venice (in the church of the Miracoli),[4] I found this to possess the more subtle qualities of design. And yet, in the cloisters of St. John Lateran at

* Compare *Ariadne Florentina*, § 46 [Vol. XXII. p. 329].

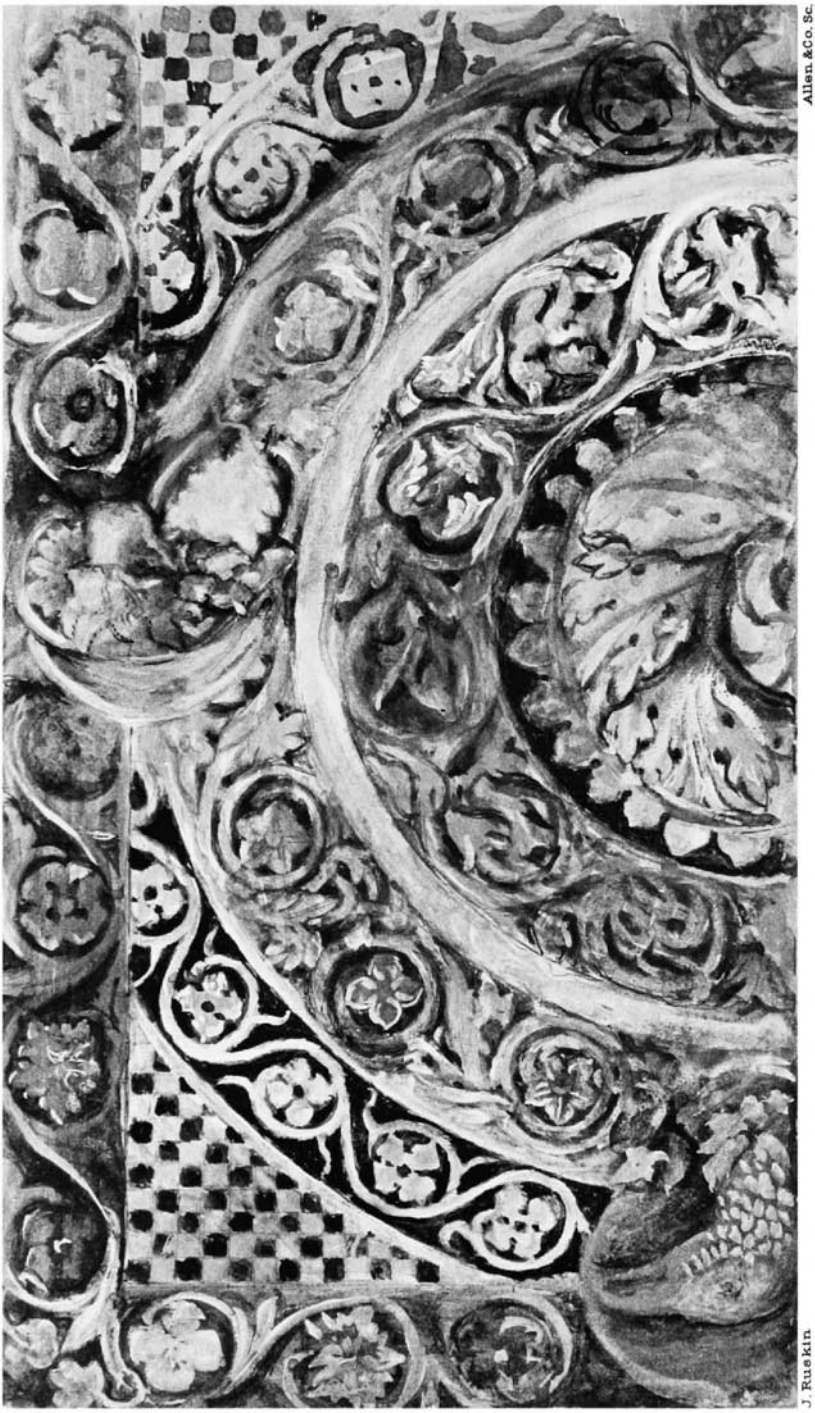
[1] [Plates III. and IV. The drawing of the apse is No. 76 in the *Reference* Series (Vol. XXI. p. 33). The portion of the sculpture of the font—the head described in § 12—is No. 99 in the same series (*ibid.*, p. 35). Ruskin made the sketches in May 1872 (see Vol. XXII. p. xxvi.).]

[2] [See Plate XXXVIII. in Vol. XXI. The drawing is No. 99 in the Reference Series (*ibid.*, pp. 147–148).]

[3] [Ruskin refers to this passage in a letter to Professor Norton from Lucca, August 18, 1874 (see a later volume), remarking that he was driven by a native Etruscan "with the same black eyes that are inlaid on the Font of Pisa"; and explaining that "the effete Greek of St. John Lateran is real Byzantine—polluted at Rome to its death."]

[4] [See Vol. XI. p. 393; and for the work of the Lombardi generally, Vol. V. p. 75. Ruskin's drawing of the Church of the Miracoli is not known to the editors.]

Arches of the Apse of the Duomo, Pisa
1872



Study of a Panel on the Font of the Baptistery, Pisa
1872

Rome,[1] you have Greek work, if not contemporary with this at Pisa, yet occupying a parallel place in the history of architecture, which is abortive, and monstrous beyond the power of any words to describe. Vasari knew no difference between these two kinds of Greek work. Nor do your modern architects. To discern the difference between the sculpture of the font of Pisa, and the spandrels of the Lateran cloister, requires thorough training of the hand in the finest methods of draughtsmanship; and, secondly, trained habit of reading the mythology and ethics of design. I simply assure you of the fact at present; and if you work, you may have sight and sense of it.

13. There are Greeks, and Greeks, then, in the twelfth century, differing as much from each other as vice, in all ages, must differ from virtue. But in Vasari's sight they are alike; in ours, they must be so, as far as regards our present purpose. As men of a school, they are to be summed under the general name of "Byzantines"; their work all alike showing specific characters of attenuate, rigid, and in many respects offensively unbeautiful, design, to which Vasari's epithets of "goffa, e sproporzionata" are naturally applied by all persons trained only in modern principles. Under masters, then, of this Byzantine race, Niccola is working at Pisa.

14. Among the spoils brought by her fleets from Greece, is a sarcophagus, with Meleager's hunt on it, wrought "con bellissima maniera," says Vasari.

You may see that sarcophagus[2]—any of you who go to Pisa;—touch it, for it is on a level with your hand; study it, as Niccola studied it, to your mind's content. Within ten yards of it, stand equally accessible pieces of Niccola's own work and of his son's. Within fifty yards of it, stands the Byzantine font of the chapel of St. John.

[1] [There is at Brantwood a beautiful drawing by Ruskin of part of these cloisters; for his praise, at an earlier period, of some of the work in them, see Vol. VIII. p. 177 *n.*]

[2] [Plate V.]

Spend but the good hours of a single day quietly by these three pieces of marble, and you may learn more than in general any of you bring home from an entire tour in Italy. But how many of you ever yet went into that temple of St. John, knowing what to look for; or spent as much time in the Campo Santo of Pisa, as you do in Mr. Ryman's shop[1] on a rainy day?

15. The sarcophagus is not, however (with Vasari's pardon), in "bellissima maniera" by any means. But it is in the classical Greek manner instead of the Byzantine Greek manner. You have to learn the difference between these.

Now I have explained to you sufficiently, in *Aratra Pentelici*, what the classical Greek manner is.[2] The manner and matter of it being easily summed—as those of natural and unaffected life;—nude life when nudity is right and pure; not otherwise. To Niccola, the difference between this natural Greek school and the Byzantine, was as the difference between the bull of Thurium and of Delhi (see Plate 22 of *Aratra Pentelici*[3]).

Instantly he followed the natural fact, and became the Father of Sculpture to Italy.

16. Are we, then, also to be strong by following the natural fact?

Yes, assuredly. That is the beginning and end of all my teaching to you. But the noble natural fact, not the ignoble. You are to study men; not lice nor entozoa. And you are to study the souls of men in their bodies, not their bodies only. Mulready's drawings from the nude[4] are more degraded and bestial than the worst grotesques of the Byzantine or even the Indian image makers. And your modern mob of English and American tourists, following a lamplighter through the Vatican to have pink light thrown

[1] [The printseller's shop in the High Street.]
[2] [See Vol. XX. pp. 334 *seq.*]
[3] [Vol. XX. p. 349.]
[4] [At the Victoria and Albert (South Kensington) Museum (compare Vol. XXII. p. 235); and for a summary of Ruskin's references to Mulready, see Vol. IV. p. 336 *n.*]