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Sacred and Legendary Art

Published in 1848, this two-volume work was received with great praise. During a celebrated career, Anna Brownell Jameson (1794–1860) produced Shakespeare criticism, travel writing, biography, and art history, and was admired by contemporaries such as Mary Shelley and Thomas Carlyle. Taking an aesthetic rather than religious approach, the work is a study of the legends represented in Western art of the Middle Ages, ordered taxonomically. Though Jameson is considered the first professional female art critic, this is a reductive label; she was, rather, one of the great art critics of her age and her work is still of importance to art historians. Volume 1, which is richly illustrated, covers the literary origins of the legends and surveys the representation of angels and archangels, the Four Evangelists, the Twelve Apostles, the Doctors of the Church, and a number of significant saints, including Mary Magdalene.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05178-1 - Sacred and Legendary Art: Volume 1

Anna Jameson

Frontmatter

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Sacred and Legendary Art

VOLUME 1

ANNA JAMESON



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108051781

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2012

This edition first published 1848

This digitally printed version 2012

ISBN 978-1-108-05178-1 Paperback

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05178-1 - Sacred and Legendary Art: Volume 1

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The Assumption of the Magdalene.

Sacred
AND
Legendary Art.

BY MRS. JAMESON.

VOL. I.

CONTAINING
LEGENDS OF THE ANGELS AND ARCHANGELS, THE EVANGELISTS,
THE APOSTLES, THE DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH,
AND MARY MAGDALENE.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR
LONGMAN, BROWN, GREEN, AND LONGMANS,
PATERNOSTER-ROW.
1848.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05178-1 - Sacred and Legendary Art: Volume 1

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[More information](#)

LONDON :
SPOTTISWOODE and SHAW,
New-street-Square.

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05178-1 - Sacred and Legendary Art: Volume 1

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P R E F A C E.

THIS book was begun six years ago, in 1842. It has since been often laid aside, and again resumed. In this long interval, many useful and delightful works have been written on the same subject, but still the particular ground I had chosen remained unoccupied; and amid many difficulties, and the consciousness of many deficiencies, I was encouraged to proceed, partly by the pleasure I took in a task so congenial, — partly by the conviction that such a work has long been wanted by those who are not contented with a mere manual of reference, or a mere catalogue of names. This book is intended not only to be consulted, but to be read,— if it be found worth reading. It has been written for those who are, like myself, unlearned, yet less, certainly, with the idea of instructing, than from a wish to share with others those pleasurable associations, those ever new and ever various aspects of character and sentiment as exhibited in art, which have been a source of such vivid enjoyment to myself.

This is the utmost limit of my ambition; and knowing that I cannot escape criticism, I am at least anxious that there should be no mistake as to purpose and intention. I hope it will be clearly understood that I have taken throughout the æsthetic and not the religious view of those productions of art which, in as far as they are informed with a true

and earnest feeling, and steeped in that beauty which emanates from genius inspired by faith, may cease to be Religion, but cannot cease to be Poetry; and as poetry only I have considered them.

The difficulty of selection and compression has been the greatest of all my difficulties; there is not a chapter in this book which might not have been more easily extended to a volume than compressed into a few pages. Every reader, however, who is interested in the subject, may supply the omissions, follow out the suggestions, and enjoy the pleasure of discovering new exceptions, new analogies for himself. With regard to the arrangement, I am afraid it will be found liable to objections; but it is the best that, after long consideration, and many changes, I could fix upon. It is not formal, nor technical, like that of a catalogue or a calendar, but intended to lead the fancy naturally from subject to subject as one opened upon another, with just sufficient order to keep the mind unperplexed and the attention un-fatigued amid a great diversity of objects, scenes, stories, and characters.

The authorities for the legends have been the *Legenda Aurea* of Voragine, in the old French and English translations; the *Flos Sanctorum* of Ribadeneira, in the old French translation; the *Perfetto Legendario*, editions of Rome and Venice; the *Legende delle Sante Vergini*, Florence and Venice; the large work of Baillet, *Les Vies des Saints*, in thirty-two volumes, most useful for the historical authorities; and Alban Butler's *Lives of the Saints*. All these have been consulted for such particulars of circumstance and character as might illustrate the various representations, and then compressed into a narrative as clear as I could render it. Where one

authority only has been followed, it is usually placed in the margin.

The First Volume contains the legends of the scriptural personages, and the primitive fathers.

The Second Volume contains those sainted personages who lived, or are supposed to have lived, in the first ages of Christianity, and whose real history, founded on fact or tradition, has been so disguised by poetical embroidery, that they have in some sort the air of ideal beings. As I could not undertake to go through the whole calendar, nor yet to make my book a catalogue of pictures and statues, I have confined myself to the saints most interesting and important, and (with very few exceptions) to those works of art of which I could speak from my own knowledge.

The legends of the monastic orders, and the history of the Franciscans and Dominicans, considered merely in their connexion with the revival and development of the fine arts in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, open so wide a range of speculation, — the characteristics of these religious enthusiasts of both sexes are so full of interest and beauty as artistic conceptions, and as psychological and philosophical studies so extraordinary, that I could not, in conscience, compress them into a few pages: they will form a separate volume complete in itself.

The little sketches and woodcuts are trifling as illustrations, and can only assist the memory and the fancy of the reader; but I regret this the less, inasmuch as those who take an interest in the subject can easily illustrate the book for themselves. To collect a portfolio of prints, including

those works of art which are cited under each head as examples, with a selection from the hundreds of others which are not cited, and arrange them in the same order, — with reference not to schools, or styles, or dates, but to subject merely, — would be an amusing, and, I think, not a profitless occupation. It could not be done in the right spirit without leading the mind far beyond the mere pleasure of comparison and criticism, to “thoughts more elevate, and reasonings high” of things celestial and terrestrial, as shadowed forth in form by the wit and the hand of man.



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170. Laus Deo.

Introduction.

I. OF THE ORIGIN AND GENERAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LEGENDS REPRESENTED IN ART.

WE cannot look round a picture gallery — we cannot turn to a portfolio of prints after the old masters — we cannot even look over the modern engravings which pour upon us daily, from Paris, Munich, or Berlin, without perceiving how many of the most celebrated productions of Art, more particularly those which have descended to us from the early Italian and German schools, represent incidents and characters taken from the once popular legends of the Catholic Church. This form of “*Hero-Worship*” has become, since the Reformation, strange to us — as far removed from our sympathies and associations as if it were antecedent to the fall of Babylon, and related to the religion of Zoroaster, instead of being left but two or three centuries behind us, and closely connected with the faith of our forefathers and the history of civilization and Christianity. Of late years, with a growing passion for the works of Art of the Middle Ages, there has arisen among us a desire to comprehend the state of feeling which produced them, and the legends and traditions on which they are founded; — a desire to understand, and to bring to some surer critical test, representations which have become familiar without being intelligible. To enable us to do this,

we must pause for a moment at the outset ; and, before we plunge into the midst of things, ascend to higher ground, and command a far wider range of illustration than has yet been attempted, in order to take cognizance of principles and results which, if not new, must be contemplated in a new relation to each other.

The *Legendary Art* of the Middle Ages sprung out of the legendary literature of the preceding ages. For three centuries at least, this literature, the only literature which existed at the time, formed the sole mental and moral nourishment of the *people* of Europe. The romances of Chivalry, which long afterwards succeeded, were confined to particular classes, and left no impress on Art, beyond the miniature illuminations of a few manuscripts. This legendary literature, on the contrary, which had worked itself into the life of the people, became, like the antique mythology, as a living soul, diffused through the loveliest forms of Art, still vivid and vivifying, even when the old faith in its mystical significance was lost or forgotten. And it is a mistake to suppose that these legends had their origin in the brains of dreaming monks. The wildest of them had some basis of truth to rest on, and the form which they gradually assumed was but the necessary result of the age which produced them. They became the intense expression of that inner life, which revolted against the desolation and emptiness of the outward existence; of those crushed and outraged sympathies which cried aloud for rest, and refuge, and solace, and could nowhere find them. It will be said, "In the purer doctrine of the GOSPEL." But where was that to be found? The Gospel was not then the heritage of the poor: Christ, as a comforter, walked not among men. His own blessed teaching was inaccessible, except to the learned: it was shut up in rare manuscripts; it was perverted and sophisticated by the passions and the blindness of those few to whom it *was* accessible. The bitter disputes in the early Church relative to the nature of the Godhead, the subtle distinctions and incomprehensible arguments of the theologians, the dread entertained by the predominant church of any heterodox opinions concerning the divinity of the Redeemer, had all conspired to remove *Him*, in his personal character of Teacher and Saviour, far away from the hearts of the benighted and miserable people—far, far away into regions

INTRODUCTION.

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speculative, mysterious, spiritual, whither they could not, dared not, follow Him. In this state of things, "Christ became the object of a remoter, a more awful adoration. The mind began, therefore, to seek out, or eagerly to seize, some other more material beings in closer alliance with human sympathies."¹ And the same author, after tracing in vivid and beautiful language the dangerous but natural consequences of this feeling, thus sums up the result: "During the perilous and gloomy days of persecution, the reverence for those who endured martyrdom for the religion of Christ had grown up out of the best feelings of man's improved nature. Reverence gradually grew into veneration, worship, adoration: and although the more rigid theology maintained a marked distinction between the honour shown to the martyrs, and that addressed to the Redeemer and the Supreme Being, the line was too fine and invisible not to be transgressed by excited popular feeling."

"We live," says the poet, "through admiration, hope, and love." Out of these vital aspirations—not indeed always "well or wisely placed," but never, as in the heathen mythology, degraded to vicious and contemptible objects—arose and spread the universal passion for the traditional histories of the saints and martyrs—personages endeared and sanctified in all hearts, partly as examples of the loftiest virtue, partly as benign intercessors between suffering humanity and that Deity who, in every other light than as a God of vengeance, had been veiled from their eyes by the perversities of schoolmen and fanatics, till He had receded beyond their reach, almost beyond their comprehension. Of the prevalence and of the incalculable influence of this legendary literature from the seventh to the tenth century, that is, just about the period when Modern Art was struggling into existence, we have a most striking picture in Guizot's "Histoire de la Civilisation." "As after the siege of Troy (says this philosophical and eloquent writer) there were found, in every city of Greece, men who collected the traditions and adventures of heroes, and sung them for the recreation of the people, till these recitals became a national passion, a national poetry, so, at the time of which we speak, the

¹ Milman, *Hist. of Christianity*, iii. 540.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05178-1 - Sacred and Legendary Art: Volume 1

Anna Jameson

Frontmatter

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traditions of what may be called the heroic ages of Christianity had the same interest for the nations of Europe. There were men who made it their business to collect them, to transcribe them, to read or recite them aloud, for the edification and delight of the people. And this was the only literature, properly so called, of that time."

Now, if we go back to the *authentic* histories of the sufferings and heroism of the early martyrs, we shall find enough there, both of the wonderful and the affecting, to justify the credulity and enthusiasm of the unlettered people, who saw no reason why they should not believe in one miracle as well as in another. In these universally diffused legends, we may recognize the means, at least one of the means, by which a merciful Providence, working through its own immutable laws, had provided against the utter depravation, almost extinction, of society. Of the "Dark Ages," emphatically so called, the period to which I allude was perhaps the darkest; it was "of Night's black arch the key-stone." At a time when men were given over to the direst evils that can afflict humanity, — ignorance, idleness, wickedness, misery; at a time when the every day incidents of life were a violation of all the moral instincts of mankind; at a time when all things seemed abandoned to a blind chance, or the brutal law of force; when there was no repose, no refuge, no safety anywhere; when the powerful inflicted, and the weak endured, whatever we can conceive of most revolting and intolerable; when slavery was recognized by law throughout Europe; when men fled to cloisters, to shut themselves from oppression, and women to shield themselves from outrage; when the manners were harsh, the language gross; when all the softer social sentiments, as pity, reverence, tenderness, found no resting-place in the actual relations of life; when, for the higher ranks, there was only the fierce excitement of war, and on the humbler classes lay the weary, dreary monotony of a stagnant existence, poor in pleasures of every kind, without aim, without hope; *then* — wondrous reaction of the ineffaceable instincts of good implanted within us! — arose a literature which reversed the outward order of things, which asserted and kept alive in the hearts of men those pure principles of Christianity which were outraged in their daily actions; a literature in which peace was represented as better than war, and

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sufferance more dignified than resistance ; which exhibited poverty and toil as honourable, and charity as the first of virtues ; which held up to imitation and emulation, self-sacrifice in the cause of good, and contempt of death for conscience sake : a literature, in which the tenderness, the chastity, the heroism of woman, played a conspicuous part ; which distinctly protested against slavery, against violence, against impurity in word and deed ; which refreshed the fevered and darkened spirit with images of moral beauty and truth ; revealed bright glimpses of a better land, where “the wicked cease from troubling,” and brought down the angels of God with shining wings and bearing crowns of glory, to do battle with the demons of darkness, to catch the fleeting soul of the triumphant martyr, and carry it at once into a paradise of eternal blessedness and peace !

Now the Legendary Art of the three centuries which comprise the revival of learning, was, as I have said, the reflection of this literature, of this teaching. Considered in this point of view, can we easily overrate its interest and importance ?

When, after the long period of darkness which followed upon the decline of the Roman Empire, the Fine Arts began to revive, the first, and for several ages the only impress they received, was that of the religious spirit of the time. Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Architecture, as they emerged one after another from the “formless void,” were pressed into the service of the Church. But it is a mistake to suppose that in adroitly adapting the reviving Arts to her purposes, in that magnificent spirit of calculation which at all times characterized her, the Church from the beginning selected the subjects, or dictated the use that was to be made of them. We find, on the contrary, edicts and councils *repressing* the popular extravagances in this respect, and denouncing those apocryphal versions of sacred events and traditions which had become the delight of the people. But vain were councils and edicts ; the tide was too strong to be so checked. The Church found herself obliged to accept and mould to her own objects the exotic elements she could not eradicate. She *absorbed*, so to speak, the evils and errors she could not expel. There seems to have been at this time a sort of compromise between the popular legends, with all their wild mixture of northern and

classical superstitions, and the Church legends properly so called. The first great object to which reviving Art was destined, was to render the Christian places of worship a theatre of instruction and improvement for the people, to attract and to interest them by representations of scenes, events, and personages, already so familiar as to require no explanation, appealing at once to their intelligence and their sympathies ; embodying in beautiful shapes (beautiful at least in their eyes) associations and feelings and memories deep rooted in their very hearts, and which had influenced, in no slight degree, the progress of civilization, the development of mind. Upon these creations of ancient Art we cannot look as *those* did for whom they were created ; we cannot annihilate the centuries which lie between us and them ; we cannot, in simplicity of heart, forget the artist in the image he has placed before us, nor supply what may be deficient in his work, through a reverentially excited fancy. We are critical, not credulous. We no longer accept this polytheistic form of Christianity ; and there is little danger, I suppose, of our falling again into the strange excesses of superstition to which it led. But if I have not much sympathy with modern imitations of mediæval art, still less can I sympathise with that narrow puritanical jealousy which holds the monuments of a real and earnest faith in contempt : all that God has permitted once to exist in the past should be considered as the possession of the present ; sacred for example or warning, and held as the foundation on which to build up what is better and purer. It should seem an established fact, that all revolutions in morals, in government, and in art, which begin in the spirit of scorn, and in a sweeping destruction of the antecedent condition, only tend to a reaction. Our puritanical ancestors chopped off the heads of Madonnas and saints, and paid vagabonds to smash the storied windows of our cathedrals ; — *now*, are they coming back to us, or are we not rather going back to them ? As a Protestant, I might fear lest in doing so we confound the eternal spirit of Christianity with the mutable forms in which it has deigned to speak to the hearts of men, forms which must of necessity vary with the degree of social civilization, and bear the impress of the feelings and fashions of the age which produced them ; but I must also feel that we ought to comprehend, and to hold in due reverence, that which has once been consecrated to holiest aims, which has shown us what

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a magnificent use has been made of art, and how it may still be adapted to good and glorious purposes, if, while we respect these time-consecrated forms and types, we do not allow them to fetter us, but trust in the progressive spirit of Christianity to furnish us with new impersonations of the good—new combinations of the beautiful.

I hate the destructive as I revere the progressive spirit. We must laugh if any one were to try and persuade us that the sun was guided along his blazing path by “a fair-haired god who touched a golden lyre;” but shall we therefore cease to adore in the Apollo Belvedere the majestic symbol of light, the most divine impersonation of intellectual power and beauty? So of the corresponding Christian symbols:—may that time never come, when we shall look up to the effigy of the winged and radiant angel trampling down the brute-fiend, without a glow of faith in the perpetual supremacy and final triumph of good over evil!

It is about a hundred years since the passion, or the fashion, for collecting works of Art, began to be generally diffused among the rich and the noble of this land; and it is amusing to look back and to consider the perversions and affectations of the would-be connoisseurship during this period;—the very small stock of ideas on which people set up a pretension to taste—the false notions, the mixture of pedantry and ignorance, which every where prevailed. The publication of Richardson’s book, and Sir Joshua Reynolds’s Discourses, had this advantage, that they, to a certain degree, diffused a more elevated idea of Art as *Art*—and that they placed connoisseurship on a better and truer basis. In those days we had Inquiries into the Principles of Taste, Treatises on the Sublime and Beautiful, Anecdotes of Painting, and we abounded in Antiquarian Essays on disputed Pictures and mutilated Statues: but then, and up to a late period, any inquiry into the true spirit and significance of works of Art, as connected with the history of Religion and Civilization, would have appeared ridiculous—or perhaps dangerous:—we should have had another cry of “No Popery,” and acts of parliament forbidding the importation of Saints and Madonnas. It was fortunate, perhaps, that connoisseurs meddled not with such high matters. They talked volubly and harmlessly of “hands,” and “masters,” and “schools,”—of “draperies,” of “tints,” of

“handling,”—of “fine heads,” “fine compositions;” of the “grace of Raphael,” and of the “Correggiosity of Correggio.” The very manner in which the names of the painters were pedantically used instead of the name of the subject, is indicative of this factitious feeling; the only question at issue was, whether such a picture was a genuine “Raphael?” such another a genuine “Titian?” The spirit of the work—whether *that* was genuine; how far it was influenced by the faith and the condition of the age which produced it; whether the conception was properly characteristic, and of *what* it was characteristic—of the subject? or of the school? or of the time?—whether the treatment corresponded to the idea within our own souls, or was modified by the individuality of the artist, or by received conventionalisms of all kinds—these were questions which had not then occurred to any one; and I am not sure that we are much wiser even now; yet, setting aside all higher considerations, how can we do common justice to the artist, unless we can bring his work to the test of truth? and how can we do this, unless we know what to look for, what was *intended* as to incident, expression, character? One result of our ignorance has been the admiration wasted on the flimsy mannerisms of the later ages of Art; men who apparently had no definite *intention* in anything they did, except a dashing outline, or a delicate finish, or a striking and attractive management of colour.

It is curious, this general ignorance with regard to the subjects of Mediæval Art, more particularly now that it has become a reigning fashion among us. We find no such ignorance with regard to the subjects of Classical Art, because the associations connected with them form a part of every liberal education. Do we hear any one say, in looking at Annibal Caracci’s picture in the National Gallery, “Which is Silenus, and which is Apollo?” Who ever confounds a Venus with a Minerva, or a Vestal with an Amazon; or would endure an undraped Juno, or a beardless Jupiter? Even the gardener in Zeluco knew Neptune by his “fork” and Vulcan by his “lame leg.” We are indeed so accustomed, in visiting the churches and the galleries abroad, and the collections at home, to the predominance of sacred subjects, that it has become a mere matter of course, and excites no particular interest and attention. We have heard it all

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accounted for by the fact that the Church and churchmen were the first, and for a long time the only patrons of art. In every sacred edifice, and in every public or private collection enriched from the plunder of sacred edifices, we look for the usual proportion of melancholy martyrdoms and fictitious miracles,—for the predominance of Madonnas and Magdalenes, St. Catherines and St. Jeromes; but why these should predominate, why certain events and characters from the Old and the New Testament should be continually repeated, and others comparatively neglected; whence the predilection for certain legendary personages, who seem to be multiplied to infinity, and the rarity of others:—of this we know nothing.

We have learned, perhaps, after running through half the galleries and churches in Europe, to distinguish a few of the attributes and characteristic figures which meet us at every turn, yet without any clear idea of their meaning, derivation, or relative propriety. The palm of victory, we know, designates the martyr, triumphant in death. We so far emulate the critical sagacity of the gardener in Zeluco that we have learned to distinguish St. Laurence by his gridiron, and St. Catherine by her wheel. We are not at a loss to recognize the Magdalene's "loose hair and lifted eye," even when without her skull and her vase of ointment. We learn to know St. Francis by his brown habit and shaven crown and wasted ardent features; but how do we distinguish him from St. Anthony, or St. Dominick? As for St. George and the dragon—from the St. George of the Louvre,—Raphael's,—who sits his horse with the elegant tranquillity of one assured of celestial aid, down to him "who swings on a sign post at mine hostess's door,"—he is our familiar acquaintance. But who is that lovely being in the first blush of youth, who, bearing aloft the symbolic cross, stands with one foot on the vanquished dragon? ii. p. 134. "That is a copy after Raphael." And who is that majestic creature holding her palm branch, while the unicorn crouches at her feet? p. 139. "That is *the* famous Moretto at Vienna." Are we satisfied?—not in the least! but we try to look wiser, and pass on.

In the old times the painters of these legendary scenes and subjects could always reckon securely on certain associations and certain sympathies in the minds of the spectators. We have out-

grown these associations, we repudiate these sympathies. We have taken these works from their consecrated localities, in which they once held each their dedicated place, and we have hung them in our drawing rooms and our dressing rooms, over our pianos and our side-boards—and now what do they say to us? That Magdalene, weeping amid her hair, who once spoke comfort to the soul of the fallen sinner—that Sebastian, arrow-pierced, whose upward ardent glance spoke of courage and hope to the tyrant-ridden serf,—that poor tortured slave, to whose aid St. Mark comes sweeping down from above—can they speak to *us* of nothing save flowing lines and correct drawing and gorgeous colour? must we be told that one is a Titian, the other a Guido, the third a Tintoret, before we dare to melt in compassion or admiration?—or the moment we refer to their ancient religious signification and influence, must it be with disdain or with pity? This, as it appears to me, is to take not a rational, but rather a most irrational as well as a most irreverent view of the question; it is to confine the pleasure and improvement to be derived from works of art within very narrow bounds; it is to seal up a fountain of the richest poetry, and to shut out a thousand ennobling and inspiring thoughts. Happily there is a growing appreciation of these larger principles of criticism as applied to the study of art. People look at the pictures which hang round their walls, and have an awakening suspicion that there is more in them than meets the eye—more than mere connoisseurship can interpret; and that they have another, a deeper significance than has been dreamed of by picture dealers and picture collectors, or even picture critics.

II. OF THE DISTINCTION TO BE DRAWN BETWEEN THE DEVOTIONAL AND THE HISTORICAL SUBJECTS.

At first, when entering on a subject so boundless and so diversified, we are at a loss for some leading classification which shall be distinct and intelligible, without being mechanical. It appears to me, that all sacred representations, in as far as they appeal to sentiment and imagination, resolve themselves into two great classes, which I shall call the DEVOTIONAL and the HISTORICAL.

Devotional pictures are those which portray the objects of our