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Alexander Lindsay

Excerpt

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LETTER V.

SCHOOL OF SIENA.

RISE AND RESTORATION OF PAINTING, IN CONNECTION WITH GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE—CONTEMPLATIVE—PREPARATION FOR FRA ANGELICO AND PERUGINO.

WE have still to trace the development of the Contemplative principle in the school of Siena, and in the Florentine painters, Orcagna and Fra Angelico, the heirs and transmitters of the mystical enthusiasm of the Byzantines and of the early Church,—a less numerous but most interesting race, whose spirit, inherited by Donatello more especially of the two great Tuscan sculptors, and by him communicated to Verrocchio, descended through that channel to Leonard da Vinci, Perugino and Raphael, and, partly at least, to Michael Angelo, whose oceanic mind alternately lashed the stars or undulated peacefully and still, as I have seen the waters glassing themselves for days together under the shadow of Mount Ida.

Respecting Siena, indeed, and her school of Painting, you are already familiar with much that I

should otherwise have been obliged to touch upon here,—her rise as a political state long before Florence, the origin of her school, responsive to the regenerating impulse of Niccola Pisano, at a period when Giotto was still a student under Cimabue,—on the one hand, her Ghibelline politics, her enthusiastic devotion to the Virgin, especially after the battle of Monte-Aperto, and her generally exalted sense and feeling of religion ; on the other, her corresponding tendency in art to the abstractive, symbolical, allegorical and lyrical, rather than the dramatic, inducing, by a natural sympathy, a closer adherence to the old traditional compositions, and a stronger infusion of the spirit of Christian Greece, in its purest form, than we observe in any other school of Italy except the Umbrian. I have also noticed the loftier and more dignified view taken of their art by the Sienese painters in the Statutes of their Company or Association, drawn up (originally) towards the close of the thirteenth century:—It is at this precise period that Mino and Duccio flourished, the earliest of those painters in whom the influence of Niccola Pisano, and the consequent adoption of the central principle of Christian art, are recognisable. With these artists, therefore, we will commence our examination of the school.—Whether Ugolino, the last of the Semi-Byzantine succession from Guido, ought to be ranked beside them, depends on the testimony of the altar-pieces of S. Croce and S. Maria Novella at Florence, now for many years missing ; neither the Madonna of Orsanmichele, beautiful as it is, nor any

of the works attributed to him at Siena and elsewhere, justifying such a classification.*

SECTION I.—*The Fathers of the School, Mino and Duccio.*

OF Mino—more fully designated Ser Mino di Simone† — the ‘Maestà,’ or Madonna — painted in fresco in 1287,‡ when Giotto was only thirteen years old, in the palace of the Podestà, on a wall subsequently incorporated into the Palazzo Pubblico in such a manner that it now forms the western extremity of the Sala del Consiglio,§ is the sole authentic relic. It reminds one, in its grandeur, of the mosaics of Mino’s namesake and contemporary, the Franciscan of Turrìta. But the identity of these

* Of Ugolino and his predecessors, the immediate successors of Guido, I have spoken *supra*, tom. ii, p.69, *note*.

† In 1298 he is designed ‘Minuccio,’ (*Lettere Sanesi*, tom. i, p. 290,)—the diminutive of a diminutive—Minuccio, Mino, Giacomino, Giacomo. The Siense of the middle ages were noted for their love of diminutives. *Ibid.* p. 282.

‡ See the ‘Lettere Sanesi,’ tom. i, p. 290. The fresco had been finished before the 12th of August, 1289, when nineteen “*lire*” were paid “a Maestro Mino Pittore, il quale dipense la Vergine Maria e altri Sancti nel Palazzo del Comune nella Sala del Consiglio, per resto di lire 22 che doveva avere per detta opera.” *Ibid.*

§ “Prima del 1287, il Podestà di Siena abitava nel Palazzo del Bolgano, in cui ora abita il Capitano di Giustizia, essendo stato rimodernato. Ma siccome un muro del Bolgano, dalla parte del Colegio Tolomei era forte, e non gustavasene il disegno, si unì alla nuova fabbrica, e così conservossi la pittura di Mino su quello esistente.” *Lett. Sanesi*, tom. ii, p. 178.

artists, assumed originally by Dellavalle,* is disproved by irresistible evidence.†

The composition covers the whole extremity of the hall; the Virgin sits enthroned under a *baldacchino*, or canopy, supported by the twelve Apostles and the tutelary Saints of Siena; the child Jesus stands on her knee, looking straight forwards, blessing with his right hand, and holding in his left the charter by which the city was gifted to his Mother before the battle of Monte-Aperto,—both figures are full of majesty and dignity; two angels, kneeling in front of the throne, offer them lilies. The whole is enclosed within a magnificent fresco framework of medallions and ornament.‡ The Virgin is crowned, the type of her face Byzantine, but in the noblest sense of the epithet; the colouring, on the contrary, is much lighter than the Greek, and bears the strongest resemblance to that of Simon di Memmo, pupil, it is believed, of Mino, and who repainted the whole fresco except the two principal figures; to these, therefore, Mino's praise must be restricted, and to the general merit of the composition,—unless, indeed, as I suspect, it had descended traditionally from some earlier artist; not merely Mino's scholars, but his contemporary and rival, Duccio himself,

* *Lettere Sanesi*, tom. i, pp. 288, *sqq.*

† By the death of the mosaicist at least ten years before the painter.

‡ For a minute description see Dellavalle, *Lett. Sanesi*, tom. i, p. 291. The Virgin and child are engraved in Rosini's 'Storia della Pittura,' tav. 6.

seeming to have considered it as a common heritage of Sienese art.*

A long poetical inscription, partly obliterated, runs along the base of the fresco; this is one of the most pleasing characteristics of the Semi-Byzantine or Contemplative schools; poetry and art thus play into each other's hands in happiest unison. Sometimes, however, and even here, such inscriptions are intruded into the field of the composition, and even issue in cartels from the lips of the personages represented,—a most objectionable licence, although it is wonderful how readily the taste reconciles itself to it.†

* It was repeated, as we shall see, with little variation, by Duccio in 1310, in his great altarpiece for the Cathedral,—in 1317 by M. Lippo di Memmo in the Sala del Consiglio at S. Gimignano,—and subsequently in a picture by Simon di Memmo, now lost, described by Ghiberti and Vasari. It may have descended to Mino either from Diotisalvi or Guido, the chiefs of the Semi-Byzantine school of Siena, anterior to the influence of Niccola Pisano.

† Under the feet of the Virgin were inscribed the following lines:—

“ Li angelichi fioretti, rose e gigli,
 Onde s' adorna lo celeste prato,
 Non mi dilectan più che i buon consigli;
 Ma talor veggio chi per proprio stato
 Disprezza me, e la mia terra inganna,
 E quanto parla peggio è più lodato,—
 Guardi ciascun cui questo dir condanna!” *

—The scrolls held by the surrounding Saints expressed their

* “ The angelic flowers, the lily and the rose,
 That heaven's bright meadow decks herself withal,
 Delight me not more than good counsels do;
 But sometimes see I who for selfish gain
 Despise me, and my common-wealth betray,
 Winning, the worse they speak, the louder praise,—
 Take each one heed, whom this my word condemns!”

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No notice occurs of Mino subsequently to 1303,*—he probably died young; his name was forgotten; the Maestà, as early as Ghiberti's time, was attributed solely to Simon, its restorer; nor was it till the close of last century that the researches of Della-
valle established its true filiation, enabling me thus to vindicate Mino's dignity as the patriarch of one of the two great rival branches of the school of Siena.

Very different has been the fate of Duccio,† one

prayers for the prosperity of Siena, to which the Virgin replied as follows:—

“ Diletti miei, ponete nelle menti,
Che li devoti vostri preghi onesti
Come vorrete voi farò contenti,—
Ma se i potenti a' debil sien molesti,
Gravando loro o con vergogna o danni,
Le vostre orazion non son par questi,
Ne per qualunque la mia terra inganni.” (*)

—*Lettere Sanesi*, tom. ii, p. 284, from a MS. letter of the Cav. Benvoglianti, dated 1701; and Rosini, *Storia, &c.*, tom. i, p. 213.

* According to Romagnoli, cited by Rosini, tom. ii, p. 40.—Dellavalle found no notice of him subsequent to the payment to “Minuccio Pittore” in 1298. *Lett. Sanesi*, tom. i, p. 290.

† A name contracted either from Orlanduccio or Guiduccio, augmentatives of Orlando and Guido. He is described as “Duc-cius pictor olim Boninsegne civis Senensis,” in the contract, pre-sently to be noticed, for the great altar-piece of the Duomo.—According to Tizio, who settled at Siena in 1482, and compiled a history of the republic still preserved there in manuscript, he

“ Sons of my love, the prayerful and the pure!
Deem it for truth, your prayers are heard in heaven,—
I will content ye to your hearts' desire;
But if the son of power oppress the weak,
Crushing him down with injury or shame,
For him, and such as him, your prayers are vain,
Or for whoe'er my common-wealth betray.”

of those happy mortals whom countrymen and foreigners, contemporaries and posterity, have alike delighted to honour. He figures as a painter as early as 1282,* and must have been of established reputation in 1285, when engaged to paint a large picture, in competition with Cimabue, for S. Maria Novella at Florence.† This indeed has disappeared, but the great altar-piece executed twenty-three years later for the cathedral of his native town still sur-

was pupil of a painter named 'Segna.' *L. Sanesi*, tom. ii, p. 68.—'M. Segna di Bonaventura' is proved to have painted in 1305, in 1314, in 1316, and as late as 1327. *Ibid.* tom. ii, pp. 70, 235, and Romagnoli, as cited by Rosini, tom. ii, p. 29.—A picture in the Academy, representing four Saints in compartments, of much merit, and engraved by Rosini, tom. ii, p. 28, is signed "Segna me fecit," but is certainly in a later style than that of Duccio. Possibly therefore there may have been two painters of the name, unless indeed we may suppose that Tizio mistook the name of Duccio's father, 'Boninsegna,' for that of his supposed master.—A Virgin and child—the Greek face very sweet—and highly finished—painted by order of the Great Council, 16 October, 1319, by M. Buonaventura, may be seen in the church of the Concezione, over the door of the corridor leading to the Cathedral,—possibly he may have been the father or master of the M. Segna, who flourished between 1305 and 1327.

* When he was paid eight *soldi* for a painting in the 'libri del Camerlingho,' *L. Sanesi*, tom. i, p. 277.

† Contract, dated 5 April, 1285, cited by Rosini, *Storia*, &c., tom. i, p. 223. It represented the Virgin and child with attendant Saints.—The Annunciation, painted by Duccio, according to Vasari, for the church of the Trinità at Florence, is now lost. The Baron von Rumohr cites payments to Duccio on the 8th October, 1285, and in 1290 and 1291, for paintings in the books of the Chamberlain at Siena, and in December, 1302, for a *tavola*, or *Maestà*, and its *predella*; in this for the first time he is designed 'Maestro.' *Ital. Forschungen*, tom. ii, p. 11.

vives, though in a sadly mutilated condition. The contract between the Operajo and the painter, dated the 9th of October, 1308, a most interesting document, has been printed by Dellavalle; it confirms what Mancini tells us of Duccio's religious and patriotic character;* he pledges himself to execute the picture "to his best ability, and as the Lord shall give him cunning," and to devote himself entirely to the task until it be accomplished. His remuneration is to be sixteen soldi per day, for every day that he may work upon it, the colours and other materials to be provided by his employers. And to the fulfilment of this engagement he binds himself, of his own free will, by a solemn oath on the Evangelists.†

The picture was completed in 1310, after three years' labour, and at an expense of three thousand gold florins,‡ and was carried, on the 8th of June, from the artist's residence, outside the Porta Laterina, to the Duomo, in solemn procession, the priests chanting, leading the way, the 'Signori Nove' and

* Quoted in the 'L. Sanesi,' tom. ii, pp. 66, 67.

† The contract is printed at length in the 'L. Sanesi,' tom. ii, p. 75. Duccio engages, "pingere et facere dictam tabulam quam melius poterit et sciverit, et Dominus sibi largietur, et laborare continue in dictam tabulam temporibus quibus laborare poterit in eadem. Et non accipere vel recipere aliquid aliud laborerium ad faciendum donec dicta tabula completa et facta fuerit. . . . Insuper dictus Duccius ad majorem cautelam juravit sponte ad Sancta Dei Evangelia corporalia tacto libro predicta omnia et singula observare et adimplere bonâ fide sine fraude in omnibus et per omnia, sicut superius continetur."

‡ See the old chroniclers quoted by Dellavalle, *L. Sanesi*, tom. ii, pp. 68, 69.

officers of state, with the men, women, and children of Siena, fasting and with lighted candles, following in due rank and gradation,—the shops closed, and every bell of the city ringing merrily out “in honour of so noble a picture,” till, after making the circuit of the Piazza del Campo, they ascended to the Duomo and proceeding to the high altar, installed it in the place left vacant by the removal of the Madonna delle Grazie, to which the city had been granted on the occasion so frequently alluded to, before the battle of Monte-Aperto. “The rest of the day,” says the old chronicler who describes the scene, “was spent in prayers and almsgiving to the poor, beseeching God, and his mother, our Advocate, to defend us from adversity and evil, and preserve us from the hands of all traitors and enemies to Siena.”*

This altar-piece must have been beautiful indeed, judging from the fragments that remain of it. Its appearance was that of a grand Gothic architectural façade, divided into one large and innumerable small compartments, surmounted by pyramids and minarets, the whole covered on both sides with painting, its isolated position between the nave and the choir requiring this. It retained its position till the year 1472, when it was removed to make way for the bronze tabernacle by Vecchietta; it was then thrust into a small closet in the third story of the Opera, and, as if that degradation were not sufficient, cut to

* From an ancient chronicle, of the fourteenth century, in the Library of the University of Siena, *Lett. Sanesi*, tom. ii, p. 67.

pieces to facilitate its admission. It lay there for many years in utter neglect, and when it at last re-emerged, shorn of its Gothic glories, a mutilated trunk, it was sawn asunder, and the two halves hung up, facing each other, like the dissevered limbs of a martyr, in the northern and southern transepts of the Duomo,* where we now behold and groan over their fate,—for, in spite of dirt and injury, a more interesting monument of early art nowhere exists.

The Madonna, and the Saints that support her canopy, in what has been the principal face of the picture, are very noble; the type of her face is Byzantine; many of the other heads are the same as in the great fresco of the Sala del Consiglio, and the same peculiar line at right angles with the mouth may be noticed in both,—one might have thought it an early work of Simon di Memmo.† But the smaller subjects on the reverse are far more remarkable, and so different, moreover, in style, that it is difficult to suppose them by the same artist. They are twenty-six in number, the largest, the Crucifixion, occupying the upper half of the centre. Niccola Pisano's influence is everywhere visible, but as inspiration merely,—his faults are avoided.

* *Lettere Sanesi*, tom. ii, pp. 70, 71.—It was probably during its eclipse in the Opera, forgotten and uncared for, that Vasari sought for, but could not find it.

† Duccio's name appears in the rhyming inscription as given by Von Rumohr, and which probably should be read as follows,—

“ Mater Sancta Dei, sis causa Senis requiei,
Sis Ducio vita, te quia pinxit ita!”

--substituting 'causa' for 'gavisa.'