

DOMINICAN ARTISTS

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PEOPLE of our times are becoming more interested in art. They are beginning to appreciate works of artistic value. Our public parks are being adorned with beautiful statues; our public halls are brightened by wonderful paintings; sculptors of ability are in great demand and our art schools are being flooded with ardent students. But in this growing appreciation of the beautiful, how many realize what art has done in the past and on what its achievements were built?

If an artist is inspired by a noble purpose, he has in him the possibility of accomplishing much good. This does not mean that art should be confined to the portrayals of Saints and holy people, but that the spirit in which a work of art is undertaken can often influence others for good or for evil. A beautiful portrait of a lady may portray a feeling of respect if painted by a reverential hand, and an ugly caricature may bring happiness and laughter to the countenance of those who feel depressed. Yet the painting of the same subject may be altogether different when worked by a hand guided by a less noble purpose.

Dominican artists have been men of sanctity who, having consecrated their lives to God as Friars Preacher and knowing that the spoken word would be forgotten all too soon, created more immortal works to sing their praises to the Most High. Little is known of their personalities except that their love of beauty was equalled only by their love of spiritual things. They were men with ideals, and men with determination enough to live up to their principles. Innovators they were and so wedded to truth that they created new schools in almost every department of the fine arts.

Begin with one who is justly considered the greatest of all Dominican painters. Fra Angelico painted mostly Saints and holy people, and those who saw his works knew immediately that the master was well acquainted with his subjects. So elevating

in thought were his pictures that they often gave rise to such expressions as: "If there are paintings in heaven, surely they must resemble those of Fra Angelico." "No one could paint such a picture without first having gone to heaven." And his success in art was due not so much to an innate ability to paint as to the spirit in which he undertook his great works. He painted a crucifix only when on his knees. Surely, an artist with God as his master could not help but paint beautiful pictures. Fra Angelico used art as a medium to lead himself and others along the path that leads to God. By so doing he won the admiration of such great artists as Michelangelo and Botticelli, and was revered by princes and popes.

Another well known Dominican painter is Fra Bartolomeo della Porta. Moved by the burning eloquence of Savonarola against the corrupt art of the fifteenth century, this Dominican influenced all Rome, Florence and Venice, by putting into color the words which Savonarola had expounded with his lips. And although Savonarola may seem to have failed in his attempted reform, in the end he succeeded in christianizing art and he won its service to the cause of religion. Fra Bartolomeo, the great admirer of Savonarola, did more than any other artist in these days of corrupted pagan morals, to bring art back to a high standard. He too like his brother religious, Fra Angelico, loved to paint Madonnas and Saints. He executed works on wood, canvas, and walls, immortalizing himself as a great artist, and ranks second only to Fra Angelico in the realm of Dominican artists.

In the art of glass-painting, James of Ulm, a Dominican lay-brother from Bologna, founded a school which became famous both for the sanctity of its men and for the artistry of its works. So exemplary was the life of James of Ulm, that the Catholic Church saw fit to number him among her beatified. Most of the works have been destroyed due to the fact that glass-paintings are the most perishable of all forms of art. But the windows in the Cathedral of San Petronio, the works which secured for him the greatest celebrity, are still preserved. He had a great influence on the glass-painters in the latter half of the fifteenth century, and he found successors among his own religious brethren, who inherited from him, not only his skill as an artist, but also to a great extent his very sanctity.

The Dominican Order as a patron of art found two capable subjects in the persons of Fra Sisto and Fra Ristoro architects

of the thirteenth century. Little is known of where they studied the art of building or from whom they studied it, but it is sufficient to know that they obtained such renown as architects that many private citizens of Florence, the Florentine Republic, and even Pope Nicholas III demanded their services. When they were not actually taken up in contemplative prayer they beautified Florence with palaces, bridges, many churches and other monuments of their Dominican zeal. The skill of these two Dominican lay-brothers may be seen in the fact that they managed to make the church of Santa Maria Novella appear much larger than it really is by diminishing the span of the arches from the entrance to the end of the church. This masterpiece in architecture has often been considered as the fairest church in Florence, which is noted for beautiful churches, and the most graceful church in all Italy, a land noted for its artistic structures. Their accomplishments in building were numerous. They rebuilt bridges destroyed by the flood in Florence in 1269, when the Arno overflowed its banks. They adorned the republic with many beautiful palaces, and were finally called to Rome by Pope Nicholas III to work in the Vatican.

Among Dominican sculptors is Father Dominico Portigiana (1536-1601), a most skillful caster in bronze, of whom little is heard. Bronze-casting is a difficult art and few artists attempt it. But, in his time, Father Portigiana was second to none in this art. He is considered with Ghiberti and Gian Bologna as one of the three greatest of all times ever to have worked in bronze. His gates of the Cathedral of Pisa are surpassed only by those "Portals of Heaven" cast by Ghiberti for the church of San Giovanni in Florence. He was a disciple of the great master-sculptor Gian Bologna, and often assisted him in his more important works. He worked with such diligence in the tiresome process of polishing and arranging the minor details that his finished bronzes often equalled, if they did not actually excel in beauty, the works of his master. He was also thoroughly acquainted with architectural work and he superintended the construction of various buildings for the religious of Florence and Fiesole. His works won such popularity for him in Florence, that the Grand Duke would have given him a pension had he been disposed to devote himself to the training of youths in the art of bronze casting. But Father Portigiana, regarding this as at variance with his religious vocation, finished the works in the

chapel of Saint Antoninus and continued his works under his religious superiors.

Another Dominican sculptor worthy of note is Fra Damiano Bergamo. This Dominican was so excellent a carver, joiner, and painter of wood that he surpasses all his predecessors and has been unequalled by his successors in this art. Others had worked in wood but they contented themselves with working in perspectives only, and with but two colors, black and white. Fra Damiano, on the other hand, employed methods unknown before his time, and produced varied colors on his wood-work by the use of chemicals, giving them a richness and an elegance which caused men to marvel at them. Indeed, Fra Damiano, Father Portigiana, and Fra Guglielma Agnelli, who distinguished himself in the sculpturing of statuary, may be said to form an illustrious triumvirate of sculptors which has never been surpassed in the annals of art.

The Dominican Order has had many other great artists among her children, painters, illuminators sculptors, wood-carvers glass-painters, miniaturists, engineers, and architects, many of whom gained distinction in their own respective art. Their names are at hand but space is lacking. Knowing that art is a strong exponent of Catholic truth, they used every form of art available, in an attempt to educate the masses. They built beautiful churches and decorated them with masterful paintings, magnificent statues, hand-carved altars, and priceless mosaics, in order to arouse the emotions of the faithful and to cause them to pray more fervently. One church, which has been mentioned above as the most graceful in all Italy, that of Santa Maria Novella, is said to have been built solely by Dominican hands from foundation stone to tower.

We know that Dominican artists must have been holy men even though history tells us very little about their characters. Art is a reflection of the soul of an artist and if we are to judge them by their accomplishments surely these men of God possessed pure simple true souls. The penetrating effect of their works is almost akin to grace for in beholding their Madonnas, their Saints, Angels and even the very simplest of their secular sketches, there is something that leads men heavenward. It is something that makes men want to be good. Modern artists, even the masters of the present day, lack something that helped Dominican artists achieve immortality. Artists are educated

men in these days just as they were in the past, but they seek immortality in things that are not immortal.

We have great sculptors in all our larger cities; we have master architects and we have able painters. But not all artists create new works with God's glory and the good of men in view. The earthly have used art for the vilest purposes, they have appealed to sensuality and are patronized by the rich profligates of the larger cities. Art in these days has a tendency to return to the old pagan ideals when licentiousness in art was encouraged, and not unlike those pagan days, it is having a demoralizing influence upon our people. All artists are not corrupt, but several modern artists, judging from their works, have never known real truth. The trouble is that the skilled artists of our day do not realize the eternal purpose of life. They paint landscapes which interest and please people who know these places or who know painting. They make images of our great men and women both on canvas and in marble; they accomplish marvelous feats of construction. All this is laudable and to be encouraged, but do they perpetuate themselves on ideals that are imperishable? Why not occasionally work on something that has a spiritual aspect, as did the great artists of old? See to what heights of fame Michelangelo rose as a sculptor, and the work which has always been considered his greatest as a sculptor is his *Pieta*, a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary holding her beloved Son on her lap, after He had been taken down from the cross. Its religious truth is eternal, and it helps its artist acquire immortality. Just recently, his *Cowper Madonna*, a picture measuring only twenty-four by seventeen inches, exchanged hands and brought the commanding price of \$725,000.00. Again, who is not acquainted with his *Sistine Madonna*? It has been copied over and over again, and no matter where one turns, if here is a trace of art around, this picture is present.

The religious works of all other great artists and of Dominican artists are remembered because they impressed their individuality on eternal ideas.