

PHASES OF ART

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God and Man



OD is the great Artist. Because He is All-Beauty, He is Himself His own inspiration. In Himself He sees beautiful things that man's eye has never seen, nor his ear heard.

God conceived this beautiful world; that was poetry. He formed it; that was sculpture. He colored it; that was painting. To His own image and likeness He made men and women; that is His masterpiece. He is the divine and eternal Artist, the artist of artists, the artist of beauty. He is the sublime, exalted Beauty, magnificent, supreme. For He is God.

Man, the man artist,—who is he? He is God's pupil, a poor, fumbling imitator of God's masterpieces. Nature is his only starting-point; nature is his only book of ideas. He must bring it through his senses; he must study it. From it alone can he obtain inspiration. Imitate it he must, in his creation of art. For though he form in his imagination the elements of a new picture, extraordinary, lofty, and sublime, yet God had painted that same picture in His own divine Mind, even before the creation of the world. No image ever conceived by man and no picture ever limned by him is independent of God's knowledge. For the man artist is God's pupil.

The First Artist

Let us pay tribute to the first artist. His pictures do not draw large crowds to great galleries. There are none there. It is on the walls of caves that the first artist's creations are chalked. For he was a cave-dweller. Surely he was not a brute animal, and just as surely he was not a *link* between beast and man. For no brute and no super-beast draw pictures in their lairs. Neither brute nor super-beast stands off at a distance to admire a work of beauty. But this cave-dweller drew, and admired his drawings. Down in his deeper self, down in his soul he must have dreamed dreams of loveliness and beauty. He dreamed of pleasanter dwellings, for he beautified his own. He dreamed of nature. He saw the slim, graceful deer. He

knew the thrill of gorgeous sunsets. He divined exquisite faces in the flames of his evening fire. He lay in tall grass to watch graceful figures form and unform in the down of the floating clouds. He peered at delicate designs in the fragrant flowers and in the thick leaves of the trees. Beauty for him was everywhere. His seeing and his musing and his dreaming forced him to express their images in broad, sweeping lines on the walls of his cave, and to seek pigments from earth and plant and beast. He showed other men what they had seen every day, yet never seen once. He opened the eyes and the souls of his wife and children and his fellows.

Art in Greece and Rome

Long ages passed, civilizations fell and rose, rose and fell, till Greece and Rome came and surpassed them all. Their noblest sons admired beauty and expressed it in art. They admired nature—their splendid painted and colored frescoes were alive with God's glory. They admired the body's beauty—they carved it in immaculate white marble. Their gods and goddesses were made as fair as man's trained hand and eye could sculpture them; they were overwhelmingly beautiful. Their mythology expressed itself in art. Artistically expressed mythology became their theology, and they paid worship before their statues to the divinities that lingered near to see. The pagans celebrated joyful festivals before them. They sang rhythmic, melodious songs about them. They plucked the lyre's strings, and danced gracefully around them.

But when later generations realized that the beautiful statues of their gods and goddesses were only shadows of shades that were not and could not be, their mythology ceased to be theology. Then the gay life of the festivals to the gods lost its savor and became dreary. The rhythmic, melodious songs faded into a gloomy memory and ghostly echo of the past. The graceful dances in temple and grove became meaningless and a drudgery. The delicate music of the harps sounded a last faint note and died away. Paganism was weary. In frescoes, mosaic work, sculpturings, and architecture, it had given its best to the world. Now it lay dying, its heart dismal, empty of hopes and dreams. Death was a door to nothingness. It died, but it yielded a rich heritage to Christian civilization. And soon this dead Grecian and Roman world was to be reborn, regenerated in the water of the Church's baptism. Because these nations had made their gods and goddesses as beautiful as possible, they were better prepared to be raised to life again. For love of natural

beauty had gone before a love of the supernatural beauty of the Christian religion.

Christian Art Down the Centuries

The consuming and zealous faith of the early Christians in the doctrines of the Church was so strong that it demanded external expression. The faithful had to manifest their belief in the sublime, majestic teachings of Christ. On the walls of the catacombs, artists depicted the articles of their creed in rich symbols. A dove represented the Holy Spirit or the soul of man. A pelican or a mystical fish represented Christ. The Eucharist, the mystery of bread and wine that is not bread and wine, was symbolized by a vine, milk, or bread. Sin, death, resurrection, the future life, and the sacraments that gave them God's grace to persevere in trial and persecution, were shown in type and figure.

It was Rome's bitter persecution that led the early Christians thus to employ secret symbols of the mysteries of their Faith. No representations of Christ or His miracles could be allowed, lest the pagans discover Christian homes or places of worship. Representations of the God-man suffering and dying on the cross, or hiding His divine identity under the veils of bread and wine, were avoided most of all, lest holy things be trodden under the hoofs of swine. The Romans despised humility and were afraid to display sympathy for suffering. Their outlook on life and manhood was wofully warped and false. Only carefully and slowly and tactfully could 'Christ and Him crucified' be preached to those whom He had died to save. So the Master lifeless on His cross was typified by a slain lamb. Seven long centuries were to pass before an assembly of Greek Bishops dared to decree that pictures of Our Lord should show Him pouring out His life blood on the Tree of shame, and before our crucifix assumed its present form.¹ Meanwhile, art through symbols helped priests and catechists in the religious instruction of catechumen and neophyte, and kept the consoling and strengthening truths of Faith before the eyes of suffering and hounded Christianity.

In her infancy then and down to the fourteenth century, the Church expressed her doctrines first in impressive symbols and later in both symbols and pictures, far more than she does today. Since most of the faithful could not read, religious art was one of their principal professors in the Faith. Lowly wayside shrines as well as towering churches were decorated with pictures and images of Christ, the

¹ La Farge, John, *The Gospel Story in Art*, p. 284.

Saints, and holy things. From the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, moreover,—the period of the building of the Gothic cathedrals,—representations even of the common things of everyday life were introduced into places of worship. On the walls were painted pictures of the stars, of the moon and sun, of fruit, flowers, and animals. To the Moyen Age, all nature spoke of God. The heavens showed forth the glory of God, and the firmament declared the work of His Hands.² Creation had pointed out God to His sons; His sons wished in turn to lead creation back to their Father.

Protestantism and Art

What rôle did Protestantism take on the stage of art? Before we see, let us recall the last act before the new heresy's entrance into the vast drama:—the Act of the Renaissance. There was something majestically beautiful about it. Beauty was expressed for the men of that age in everything. As was just noted, the faithful knew that everything came from God. They knew that everything must return to Him. The perfection of a homemade table or chair meant as much to them, in a way, as their artistic work on the Gothic cathedrals. For they tried to acquire perfection in doing everything, great or small. This perfection meant for them the perfection of their soul. It was a perfection that brought them nearer to heaven, nearer to their God. Their soul's life was measured for them in terms not material and physical, but supernatural and spiritual. Above everything in this world, on their journey to heaven they valued the soul and its perfection.

The spirit of the era of the Renaissance was bright and warm. Artists painted marble statues and wood carvings in brilliant colors. Their clothes, their houses, their walls and ceilings were glad with summer's hues. Christ was depicted and imaged in public places that were visible from their own doors and windows. They would not have been too greatly surprised to see Christ in person walking down their streets.

Then the curtain rose on Protestantism. Summer was over for art. The enchanting, delicate colors faded into decay like once gaudy autumn leaves sadly withering. The cheerful hues were dejected to gloom and despondency. Time chipped the brilliant tints from marble statues and wood carvings. Protestantism brought cold, damp, dreary winter to churches once Catholic. Beautiful and inspiring stained-glass windows were shattered. Paintings and statues were

² cf. *Psalm* xviii, 2.

destroyed. Sanctuaries were robbed of their lovely altars. The new creeds moved in, and with them stalked in frost and ice.

Protestants have interested themselves in art, and indeed, have given the greatest names to the science of esthetics.³ But their contradictory systems conflict harshly as their sects, agreeing only in this, the leaving out of the soul of man, and the forgetting of his sublime dignity. They dare not take into account his purpose in life and his eternal destiny.

What have these Protestants produced after being in the field of art for over three hundred years? They have produced material, physical beauty. The Greeks did that, too. But as a group they have never attained to true spiritual beauty.

During the last few years, Protestantism has been coming back to the aim and the methods of Catholic art. The irony of it! Non-Catholic artists are desiring to bring Catholic beauty back in brilliant colored paintings, in graceful statues, and in fine architecture. They desire the truly beautiful. They will take hold of its body, perhaps; but never will they grasp its soul until they find its secret within the one true Fold. May God direct their search, and speed them on their way.

The Future of Christian Art

The history of art has revolved, roundly speaking, in cycles of five hundred years. In the fifth century before Christ, the pagan world produced its greatest works of material and natural beauty. Christ came; and when His Church split open the chrysalis of the catacombs and flew out into God's sunlight, gorgeous and beautiful, her artists built the seven great churches of Rome. In the third period, from the fifth to the tenth century, Romanesque architecture evolved. The next cycle witnessed the birth and burgeoning of Gothic art with its masterpiece, the cathedral, and looked on at the beginning of the Renaissance. The latter gave to the world paintings and carvings that later days have tried in vain to equal in conception and execution. It was the golden period of art. Its joyous, vibrant melody still drifts across the still night waters of time, far more welcome to our earth-tired ears than the clanging, discordant notes of the artistic aberrations of today. Since the day of the Renaissance passed, few masterpieces have taken shape under pen or chisel of either Catholic or Protestant artists.

³ e.g., Baumgarten, Hegel, Kant, Schopenhauer, Herbart; Malherve, Boileau, Perrault, Taine, Voltaire, Diderot.

The principal reason hindering a fruitful harvest from the Protestant Churches has been discussed in a previous paragraph. The yield of the Catholic Church has been scanty because she has been absorbed to a large extent in defending her doctrines against modern heresies and in protecting and strengthening her children in their Faith. Moreover, the loftiest spiritual art cannot be created in an atmosphere of social unrest. Art demands tranquillity. The centuries from the Renaissance on have been turbulent for the Church, and even today she enjoys little peace and quiet. She is undergoing persecution under one form or another in nearly every country of the world.

But when peace and tranquillity return to our distracted world, perhaps once more our Faith will burst forth in glorious, uplifting art. It is time. The cycle is here again. The second cycle of the world's art, corresponding to the first cycle of the art of the Church, was majestic in its capture of beauty. The third period, that concurrent with the "Dark Ages," saw a decline. But in the fourth era, Europe rose upward with the spires of the Gothic cathedrals. With the Protestant period, came a second decline. Will not another cycle of attainment soon begin to send up its fragrance toward heaven? Again the world will know that all art comes from God, and that art is not for art's sake, but for man's—to lead him along his narrow road to God.

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