



St. Dominic's Tomb

THE TOMB OF SAINT DOMINIC

"Just as the heart can be chained by the melody of sweet sounds, so, too, can it be reached quickest, through the eye, by sculpture." This is one of the great lessons worthy of imitation that the Church may be said to have learned from the ancient pagan. But the acquisition was not to degenerate to the low level of the pagan ideal. It was to broaden, to awaken in the Christian the high ideals taught by the Master; and to be the means of perpetuating the memories of noble men and great events. There have been periods of neglect, even of decline, in this fostering care of the great art of sculpture by the Church; but these have been but the resting-places, the breathing spaces as it were, in which she has gathered new force to accomplish new wonders. Sculpture has been and is to the Church one of the many means for the sanctification of her children. Witness the work found in the ancient Catacombs; it may be rude and lifeless, but nevertheless it expresses those ideals which led men and women to give their blood to perpetuate Christianity.

Likewise sculpture has been the means through which the Church has kept alive the memory of the saints and their heroic deeds for Christ. Every city of Catholic Europe can boast of some masterpiece of sculpture that in this way inspires respect for the past and holiness for the future. But none is as fortunate as Bologna which in just civic pride boasts of the precious tomb that contains the body of Saint Dominic.

After the death of Saint Dominic his body was placed in a simple coffin and laid in the ground, where it remained for twelve years. The inhabitants of Bologna becoming aware that they possessed a precious treasure, at length, aided by Pope Gregory IX, had the remains disinterred publicly on May 24th, 1233, and in jubilant procession bore them to a simple monument of unsculptured marble called the Ark. At the present time the whole magnificent tomb of the Holy Patriarch, in its completed state, is called the Ark, and stands in the Chapel of St. Dominic within the Church of the same name, where it was originally placed. It measures twenty feet in extreme height, in length about eight feet, and in width about four feet.

We do not intend to go into details in regard to the many subjects that adorn the tomb. Our endeavor will be to narrate the history of the tomb; to name its artists, to set forth their

work in so far as that work is known to us; and to give the appreciations of men capable of criticising the cradle of modern art. The tomb of Saint Dominic is called "the cradle of modern art" because there are found, what are considered by many, the masterpieces of the father of modern plastic art, Niccola Pisano. From here may be traced the history of modern plastic art. This branch of sculpture relates its story by making figures live, by giving them naturalness in pose, gesture and expression and by adding to nature the power of religious expression. Thus it differs from the sculptural works anterior to its introduction by Niccola Pisano, which were "not only stiff, conventional, lifeless or exaggerated, but also devoid of any art in composition, or any nobility in gesture, fervor, elevation." This truly great artist was born at Pisa. The exact date of his birth is unknown. It is generally supposed that he was born within the years 1205-1207. While yet a youth he found favor with Frederick II of Swabia, who took him to Rome and thence to Naples. His works include Castle Capuano and Castle dell' Uovo. The alto-rilievo, over the side door of the Cathedral of Lucca, of the Deposition. He designed the famous Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua; and the designs for the church of Ferra, Venice, are by some attributed to him. In Florence he designed the interior of Sta Trinità. Returning to Pisa from Florence he erected the campanile for the church of S. Niccolò. In 1242 we find him at Pistoja where he superintended the building of the cathedral of that city; and in 1263 the restoration of S. Pietro Maggiore. The remodelling of S. Domenico at Arezzo, the Duomo at Volterra, the Pieve and Sts. Margherita at Cortona took up much of his time. The pulpit in the cathedral, Sienna, was the work of the year 1260, and another pulpit for the Duomo of Sienna followed in 1266. Among Niccola's last works, in architecture, was the abbey and church of La Scorgola, and in sculpture, the statuettes for the famous Fonte Maggiore at Perugia which were erected after his design. He died at Pisa in 1278.

In 1266 we find Niccola at work on his most famous accomplishment, the shrine of our Holy Father Saint Dominic. Although he was not to execute all the subjects on the Ark, to his judgment was left the task of designing that portion of the Ark wherein rest the ashes of the Holy Patriarch, and he it was who carved thereon legends of the Friar's life; a statue of the Virgin and Child, which foreshadows all the Madonnas of modern

art; and finally in company with his pupil, Fra Guglielmo, the Acanthus leaves and birds which adorn the upper cornice of the Ark. The legends carved on the tomb and attributed to the Pisan are the miraculous resuscitation of the young Napoleon; the trial by fire; Dominic's commission from Sts. Peter and Paul to preach; his own commission to his brethren and the miraculous provision of bread. Father Marchese says "the workmanship of the two angels in the miraculous provision of bread is of such rare excellence, that no one who has seen the grotesque sculptures of that age, and the following, could believe it to be a work of the thirteenth century." Niccola's statues of the four Doctors are criticised by Davia, who finds fault with their proportions, but admires the style of the heads and the elaborate execution. The Acanthus leaves and birds, Father Marchese thinks "admirably designed and executed." Lord Lindsay has summed up beautifully, in truly critical style, the work of this famous artist. "In comparing the advent of Niccola Pisano to that of the sun I am conscious of no exaggeration. . . . In practice, if not in theory, he first established the principle that the study of nature, corrected by the ideal of the antique and animated by the spirit of Christianity, personal and social, can alone lead to excellence in art; each of the three elements of human nature—matter, mind and spirit—being thus brought into union and cooperation in the service of God, in due relative harmony and subordination. The influence of Niccola was special, direct, peremptory from the very first. In sculpture, it was felt, in the vaults of St. Denis and in the remotest forests of Germany, before the close of the thirteenth century." Speaking of the Ark the same critic judges it to be "a marvel of beauty, a shrine of peace and Christian feeling; which you will pilgrimage to with deeper reverence every time you revisit Bologna."

Niccola brought with him a pupil, Fra Guglielmo, a native of Pisa and a Dominican. The Dominican carved the legends of Blessed Reginald smitten with sickness; his miraculous cure and reception of the scapular; the deliverance from temptation; the vision of Honorius III; Honorius examining the rule of St. Dominic; and lastly his confirmation of the Order. The Frate's work cannot, it is true, be rated as highly as the master's but it has real artistic value. His figures are somewhat crowded; but this is due to the fact that the Fathers of the period wished

to group as many if not all the incidents in the life of their holy Founder around his tomb. Father Marchese ably defends the work of the pupil in a very few words: "There is no one who knows anything of the state of Italian sculpture in the middle of the thirteenth century, who will deny that Fra Guglielmo, if he did not equal his master, far excelled all his contemporaries—Ornolfo and Giovanni Pisano excepted." Niccola Pisano and Fra Guglielmo left the Ark uncompleted; why, we know not; and in this state it remained for more than two hundred years.

The famous Jacopo della Quercia who had worked in Bologna about the year 1325 had among his pupils one worthy to be the successor of Niccola and his pupil Fra Guglielmo. He, too, was named Niccola though at that time more familiarly known as Niccola of Bari. A marble cover was placed by this artist over the Ark on which may be found his tribute to the great Dominic. This tribute comprises the statues of St. Dominic, St. Francis, St. John the Baptist, SS. Proculus, Florian, Vitalis and Agricola. This second Niccola began the statue of St. Petronius, which was not completed until the most famous artist of his time, Michael Angelo, added the drapery to the figure. Furthermore, Niccola of Bari carved the angels bearing festoons of fruits and flowers, beneath which lie the dolphins; the angels, standing and kneeling, and the cherubim, beneath the cornice. It is not surprising for us to hear that after the completion of his work on the Ark, Niccola was known as Nicholas of the Ark; and today his memory is cherished under that familiar title. This we think is sufficient appreciation of the work of the great artist who died in 1494.

In that same year Michael Angelo finished the statue of Petronius and added the adoring angel on the cornice of the cover of the Ark. Father Marchese's judgment will give some idea of the beauty of this figure. He says: "So beauteous is his countenance—so radiant with devotion—that one might mistake it for a denizen of heaven worshiping on earth."

Girolomo Coltellini (1508-1545) gave to this memorial at least one of the statues—that of St. John. Another Niccola, Niccola Tribolo (1500-1550) lent a willing hand to help in the completion of the tomb. Admirers of sculpture are unanimous in saying that this admirable statue establishes the Florentine artist's reputation as a sculptor of rare ability. On November 20, 1532, Alfonso Lombardi, called also Citadella, a native of

Lucca, contracted, through the efforts of the pious Leandro Alberti, a Bolognese and a Dominican, to execute the Adoration of the Magi; scenes picturing the infancy of the Saint; and the passage of Dominic's soul, accompanied by angels, to heaven. Referring to the sculptor's work Cicognara says "everything in them, except the dimensions is grand." Two centuries passed without further work on the tomb. In the eighteenth century the Dominicans anxiously longed for the completion of the monument that contained the remains of the ideal of the lives of the brethren. Accordingly they enlisted the aid of such geniuses as Mauro Tesi, the designer, Carlo Bianconi, Alessandro Salvolini, and Boudard. Mauro Tesi designed and Carlo Bianconi carved the subject representing the burial of St. Dominic. Salvolini carved the heads of the cherubim on the frieze, and Boudard, court sculptor at Parma, ornamented various portions of the Ark. The sculptors of this period had not the "healthy religious feeling of the men of the thirteenth century nor even those of the sixteenth." However, the Dominicans chose the best of which the period could boast.

Truly this sacred treasure is something of which the whole Order has reason to be proud. The care of the monument has been given to the Dominicans of Bologna; but its ownership is the rightful heritage of all Dominicans. Art, too, has its claim on the tomb, and this claim redounds to the glory of our Holy Father and his Order. We, of the American Provinces, cannot be present at the tomb for the celebration of the seventh centenary of his death that will take place this year; but we will be there in spirit, and we wish the Fathers of that Province glorious success in their plans for the coming centenary.

—Bro. Mannes Delevingne, O. P.