

SIX PICTURES BY VAN EYCK

(Artist for the Summer Term)

By E. C. ALLEN

Hubert van Eyck was born in the small town of Maasedyck in the old duchy of Limburg, in the year 1365. He had a younger brother, also talented, but of his parents and upbringing we know nothing. Much of what his home had been we can deduce from his pictures. We know that it was orderly, comfortable and dignified. There was beauty in it, and love. We know he had a younger brother, twenty years younger, and that his parents were anxious that their sons should have as good an education as possible, and that no expense or trouble was spared to let them take full advantage of the culture and knowledge of their generation. Travel was early recognised as essential, and if

Hubert was to be an artist, it was necessary that he should visit all the great continental schools of art, and learn from them enough to qualify himself as a master, in what was considered then more a craft than an art. So the young man set out, serious, intelligent, and sensitive to all the new ideas that were to influence his whole career. How wide his travels were, his pictures tell us. That wonderful altarpiece in St. Biron in Ghent tells us more than it pretends to of his travels. Remember this would be about 1380. Europe, and England, were not then as they are now. Old St. Paul's had a square tower. Cologne Cathedral was not built. Carpaccio had made much of Venice beautiful. Portraits were fashionable, and well paid for when done by recognised Masters. But Hubert did not want to paint portraits. He wanted to see the beauty of the world he lived in, and record it, putting down something of himself, his own faith and love of all created things, and his work, as Dürer said, led him each year nearer to that perfection he desired.

Let us now look carefully, first as a whole, then breaking off as it were, parts that seem perfection in themselves as well as parts of a whole, at one of the famous pictures of the world.

We go to the ancient, beautiful city of Ghent. We need not stop to read about the 'good news'—it concerned Aix, not Ghent. At once we know it as an old town. The streets are painfully cobbled even for this sensibly shod age. The gables of the houses are beautiful, their warm sun-soaked red helping to brighten each twisting street. The big church does not compare with our abbeys or cathedrals, but we must remember we are in a country where space was—and is—very limited. We are looking for a great altarpiece—but it is not over what was once the high altar. We must go into a tiny chapel on the south side, and there stand still, and feel hushed, and awed.

The young man who painted this so many years ago, had finished his tour of Europe, had visited England, had discovered the use of oil with colour, and had determined to give expression to what he had learnt in a great altarpiece that would tell his countrymen what he had learnt and how he had learnt it. By this time his brother John—or Jan—had joined him, and although twenty years younger, was ready to help, lead or follow him wherever perseverance led. Hubert had seen the work of Italian Masters perishing on frescoed walls, and was determined to find some medium for his own use that would make his work live longer than himself. Together the brothers worked and experimented until at last a method of using oil with freshly ground colour was arrived at. The work was carefully planned, and begun. But before it was finished, war swept through Holland and Flanders, and those who had commissioned the artist left the city. It was to be an expression of the 'Articles of the Christian Faith,' set out in a series of figures, yet each one only a symbol, and all joining in the Adoration of the 'Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world.'

The shape is peculiar; a rectangle oblong holds the central subject. Attached to it are wings, each carrying on the same idea. Above is an attempt to symbolise the human race, in a series of figures. God the Father enthroned, in the centre, with the Blessed Virgin and St.

John the Baptist on either side. The enclosing wings hold St. Cecilia and singing figures with Adam and Eve at the extreme left and right. The side wings were meant to fold over and completely conceal the centre and are painted also, with the Annunciation above, and four figures, of which John the Baptist is one, below. It is difficult to describe this wonderful piece of work—a series of pictures, carefully arranged. Teachers are recommended to make a little paper model, showing how the sides fold over to conceal the principal theme within.

The 'Adoration of the Lamb' is the title given to the centre picture. 'All the company of Heaven' join in this act. On the left are kings and priests, statesmen, kings and saints. On the right, monks and priests, with mitres and missals, each a portrait, each an individual. From the distant woodland come two companies. On the left, the Church Triumphant, on the right the holy women. In the distant landscape there is the Tower of St. Martin's at Utrecht, with a view of Cologne, and among the knights one can find St. Martin himself with a banner in his hand, bearing the arms of the town. On the right, advancing to adore, are the holy women, and on the left the holy martyrs and bishops of the Church.

Each man has an individuality and appeal of his own. The same applies to the two groups of singers on the two side panels. Someone said one could even tell whether they were sopranos or contraltos from their faces and expressions. The carving of their reading desk is finished with the same care. A St. George and the dragon below, and two small figures above on the ends. On the right a mitred bishop, on the left a turbaned heathen, symbolising the mission of the Church to the world. When the shutters are closed, we have the quieter, but still wonderful series of four kneeling figures at the bottom. The donor and his wife—Judcus Vijt and Isabelle Borlunt, are the two outer panels. Between them are St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. Above, the Annunciation with a charming little view of the old city through the window, and above four figures with scrolls, but I cannot be certain who they are. One, I think, is the Magdalen.

We have an enlarged reproduction of the kings, with a lovely group of towers beyond them. All must be portraits, but I have not been able to find out of whom.

We have one more beautiful example of the patient genius of van Eyck. The St. Barbara. She is the patron saint of travellers, and also the protector of those caught in a thunderstorm. There is an ironic touch about that, as according to her legend, her father shut her up in a tower because she refused to marry a rich heathen lord he had chosen for her. The tower is not quite finished so she sits outside it, with her Bible and her palm of martyrdom. The business of the masons in their lean-to shelter is an amusing touch. The carved faces of the tower are very beautiful. One feels van Eyck must have brought home many sketch books full of pictures of the buildings he saw on his travels. He died of the plague before he had finished the 'Adoration,' but his brother took on the task, and one cannot say now who did which.

I feel I have dealt very inadequately with this wonderful genius. But if I have made him at all real to those of you who go to Ghent, or

go to the National Gallery to look at Arnolfini and his wife, it will be enough. At the National Gallery you will find the portraits of Arnolfini and his wife. The little dog is a symbol of fidelity. The mirror at the back reflects the pair, but also reflects the painter and his apprentice.

The ten small medallions are exquisite miniatures of scenes from the Passion of Our Lord, too small to be distinguished in our reproduction, but quite easy in the real thing, which I hope as many children as possible will see. The little brush hanging on the foot of the bed is a 'dusting brush.' Remember how clean and tidy the Dutch were, and what a lot of dusting that elaborate candelabra would take!

(To be continued)

SIX PICTURES BY VAN EYCK

By E. C. ALLEN

(Concluded)

The travelling altar-piece of Charles V is the central panel of a triptych. The sense of distance, almost of aloofness, is expressed in the receding pillars that seem to be the central enclosure of a three-sided temple. The pillars are differently coloured marble and on each stands a small figure. If we could get nearer, it would be easy to identify them, but they are not meant to detract from the beautiful young Madonna in her lovely embroidered crimson cloak, who so sweetly dreams as she holds the Infant Jesus. Behind her the tall green-draped back to her throne throws up the crimson of her robe. At her feet is one of the favourite patterned rugs. The Child Christ is rather thin, but smiling and cheerful. This altar-piece of Charles V would be taken with him on his travels through his wide dominions and set up in his room for the daily Mass. We do not have the two side pieces which would cover it. The longer one looks, the more one sees. Two knights stand on each side, where the arms of the throne join the back. These are probably St. George and St. Michael, warriors come to protect their Lord. One feels amazed at the almost photographic exactitude of this wonderful picture.

Now we go on to Chancellor Rolin adoring Our Lady and the Holy Child. What a strong face he has! And how wonderful is the balance of colour in the whole picture! The drapery of his prie-dieu, the gown of the angel, and the pale blue sky, all three tones of blue. Through the arches one sees what is thought to be the River Maas, one of the slow, broad rivers of the country, meandering quietly into the distance. Let the children laugh at those two squat funny little figures who stand looking down what I think is a flight of steps. It is not very easy to see what the Holy Child is holding, but it is a jewelled orb with a cross above it, symbolic of the conquest of the world by the Cross. To me, the crown the angel brings to the Queen of Heaven seems much too big for her small head, but doubtless the angel will continue to hold it. The little flower garden down below will please everyone, and, as usual, the more one looks the more there is to see.

I don't want to *describe* the pictures my readers may be looking at. That would only be an irritation. My aim is perhaps to draw attention to something which might be overlooked and to explain what might be difficult. We have still one more portrait of Arnolfini; let us hope it was done to please his wife, or perhaps for some civic occasion. This was painted four years after the one with his wife, and is, one feels, a better portrait. There is humour in the mouth as well as keen business ability: he would not betray anything by speaking too soon or by interruption. I think that is a deed of some sort he holds in his hand. It looks like those we have seen in other pictures of the same date.

The folds of his headdress are almost sculptured. One wonders if the head was shaved to be able to wear the headdress, or the headdress worn because there was no hair!

I hope you will all see 'The Adoration of the Lamb' soon, and enjoy it and the other pictures as much as I have.