Picture Talk for Spring Term, 1924.

SIX PICTURES BY LEONARDO DA VINCI, 1452-1519

By E. C. Allen.

With Leonardo da Vinci (pronounced *Vinchy*) we come to the Golden Age of the Italian School. An indefatigable worker, he has left splendid examples for us of the many arts he studied and brought to such perfection. For he was not only a painter, but also a sculptor, engineer, naturalist and inventor. He invented the first flying machine, built aqueducts, and studied the courses of the stars. A wanderer, his long life was spent in work for different masters, from the Sultan of Egypt in Cairo, for whom he designed water-works on the Nile, to the Duke of Milan, Louis XII. and François I. A year or two ago there was much discussion over the discovery of a wax figure, said to be by him. But the case was not satisfactorily proved, which was disappointing, as none of his sculpture remains, and many of his pictures have disappeared. The most famous of his sacred pictures is "The Last Supper," a life-size fresco painted in oils on the wall of the Convent of S. Maria della Grazie, in Milan. But it has suffered terribly from time and restoration, and most of the grace and beauty has departed. We have a portrait of himself to begin with, painted for the Uffizzi Collection in Florence when he was comparatively old, which brings out the finely cut features and dignified appearance of the painter. He wears a long silvery beard, long hair, and a comfortable velvet hat. He looks out at the world steadily, almost piercingly, and there

is a firmness in the set of his lips that is not lessened by their beautiful shape.

Having looked at the Artist, let us begin the study of his work by taking the copy of one of our English possessions, "The Virgin and St. Anne." The original of this drawing is in the Diploma Gallery at Burlington House; a gallery not enough known and visited. It is a large drawing, about 5ft. high, evidently a study for a picture which does not seem to have ever been finished. Although so little known, it is one of the most beautiful things in London, and those who can and will make a pilgrimage up those long stairs to the gallery where this hangs, will feel amply rewarded. Here hangs also a facsimile reproduction of "The Last Supper," difficult to see because the gallery is long and narrow and one cannot get far enough away from it. But the Holy Family is quite easy and most satisfying. There is a distinct likeness between St. Anne and the Virgin, and the group is intimate and almost playful in conception. The two women seem to be discussing the children, and the Virgin, holding the very active Infant Jesus, appears to listen with a half smile to the castle in the air her mother builds for Him. The two children are much more serious than their elders. There is something very wistful about the little St. John. He is watching the Holy Child almost sadly. The latter has turned from His Mother, and is clinging to the arm of St. Anne, pulling Himself nearer to the other child. What symbol is there in that upraised finger? We can read many thoughts and meanings into it. The Virgin is the most highly finished figure. The pose of the head is exquisite, and the modelling of the bust, concealed by light drapery. All the lines are harmonious and flowing, and the balance of weight is wonderful. There is something Grecian about the knees of the women, reminding us of the noble figure of Niobe on the Parthenon frieze. Yet it all gives the impression of the group at a moment,—there is nothing stiff or formal about any of them—the Virgin has perched there on her mother's knee for a moment, resting most of her weight on the ground on her foot. But it is a perfect moment that will live in our hearts gratefully.

The next picture I should take would be La Gioconda (*gio* in Italian is pronounced *jo*). This wonderful portrait

Leonardo da Vinci *by E.C. Allen from* Parents' Review *Vol. 35, 1924. This article, plus an excerpt from PR Vol. 61, describes five of the six paintings in the Riverbend Press set. Only* The Annunciation *is not included.*

of a beautiful woman is already so familiar to most of us we have little that is fresh to say about it. The figure is life-size and the lady smiles out of the canvas her oft-quoted "sphinx-like" smile, as freshly and inscrutably as when she was first painted. Many are the stories connected with this portrait: That the artist had to provide music to keep the smile on his sitter's face; that he had to invent tales for her amusement, and so on. Her name was Mona Lisa, and she was the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, therefore the title of the picture is only the feminine of her husband's name—though perhaps aptly describing herself,—i.e., "The smiling one." Great was the consternation when it was stolen from the Louvre a few years ago; but it was too famous for the thief to benefit by his theft, so it was restored eventually, and now Mona Lisa smiles down on her admirers from her velvet-draped throne, as she has done for hundreds of years. She gives the impression of absolute repose. Her mind is entirely at rest. The rocks and streams behind her are not more constant than she is to the serenity of her outlook. Much has been written about the meaning of those rocks. But Leonardo was a geologist, and again and again used the circle of rocks and streams as a background for his figures. On either side of La Gioconda at the Louvre hang a St. John and an Apollo—so alike as to be brothers, one with a cross and one with a lyre, and these greenish mysterious rocks are behind each. Perhaps their meaning is symbolic. We speak of the bed-rock of human nature; here it seems to have been carved by the waters of Life.

We have them again in the next picture, "The Madonna of the Rocks," again from the Louvre, although we have another version of the same picture in the National Gallery, only ours is not quite so detailed. It is an absorbing picture, beautifully grouped and balanced. The Virgin, almost a child herself, puts a protecting hand on the bare shoulder of the little St. John, who kneels with clasped hands to adore the Infant Christ. She holds out her other hand over the head of her little Son, who lifts His tiny hand in gesture of benediction. A very beautiful young angel attendant completes the group. The scene is a rocky wilderness, with everywhere flowers and foliage

breaking through. Stalagmites rear dark shapes that fill the arches, and a group of heavy weather-worn stones make a sort of canopy. The sweetfaced young Madonna has dark rippling hair falling gently on each side of her face. All the light seems to come from above and fall directly on the figures. The flowers, ferns, and plants are exquisitely painted, a group of cyclamen beside the Child Christ, and moss and fern for the little St. John. In the original, which is about six feet high, their shapes and colours are most delicate, and so too is the subtle colour and reflections in the pool that forms the near foreground. It would be interesting for the children to take their picture to the National Gallery, and compare it with the version there.

What an interesting thing it would be to make a collection of portraits of young girls! When I was at school, each class-room owned an illuminated motto—I spent a year with "Be good, sweet maid," etc., and another with "Knowledge is now no more a fountain sealed," etc. And we had as well a portrait of a famous man in each room. So famous, that I do not remember either of them. In our peregrinations through the school for various divisional classes, we saw the mottoes and men of other forms. I also remember more than one Sir Galahad, and a head of G. F. Watts. The School picture, a very beautiful Good Shepherd, by Shields, and the School motto —"Whatsoever things," etc., hung in the great hall. I loved them both, and consider them as contributing very largely to the influence school life had on my "springing shoot."

But not the mottoes. They simply bored me. I could never read further than "Drink deep," the lines were too near together; and what was there noble about the tiresome French lesson we were having, or the frenzied answers we scribbled down in our "Viva voce," (so-called?) I wonder what educational effect a portrait of a beautiful woman, or girl, would have had on those twenty-odd girls who sat beneath her steady gaze for a year? What beauties could have been scattered through the school, what ideals of womanly grace, or promise, or achievement. And with an occasional reminder to keep the personality of the portrait alive, I think La Bella Simonetta, Elizabeth Fry, the

Duchess of Milan, Mrs. Siddons, Lady Hamilton, Millet's Shepherdess, and countless Madonnas, not only the Sistine, would have done as much good to our young minds as Kingsley's well-worn aphorism.

Consider this portrait of Beatrice d' Este. There is no splendid nullity about her profile. Her nose is rather long, determined, and sensitive. Her lips are full and generous, her young, rounded chin shows firmness. Her beautifully shaped head is well-carried on her slender neck. All a young girl's natural desire to deck her own beauty is shown in the pearls, ribbons and ornaments she wears. But there is more than vanity and youth in this face. There is character of no mean order. Brought up at the Court of her grandfather, the King of Naples, she married Ludovico, Duke of Milan, when only sixteen. She had received an excellent education and was passionately fond of all outdoor sport. We read of her attending a boar-hunt the first time she goes out after a severe illness; and her letters to her sister contain many descriptions of rides and hunts, masques, dances, and narrow escapes from a hardly-pressed quarry.

Leonardo spent many years working for the Duke in Milan, helping him to beautify his city, and it was during this time probably that this portrait was painted. As she grew older, Beatrice helped her husband in his diplomatic relations with other Italian princes and the emperor, and it was she who was his Ambassador to Venice, to the Doge and Signoria, being then only eighteen. Her speeches on that occasion are described as being very able, and full of courage and eloquence. Such a personality, gay, strong, active, intelligent, full of life and vitality, yet able to understand the high aims and ambitions of her husband, and ably to second them, could colour the dreams of many girls of her age to-day. When adverse fortune overtook them, it was she who arranged for the defence of the city and finally for the safety of her husband, and held parley with the enemy—one does not wonder he was broken-hearted at her death at the age of twenty-two. May I be forgiven for thinking that this beautiful picture of a young girl might well inspire other young girls who know her story, to imitate some of her virtues? It was during his service for the Duk

of Milan, that Leonardo painted his famous "Last Supper," in the refectory of the Dominican convent of Sta. Maria delle Grazie, in the church of which Beatrice caught the chill that caused her death. It is said that he was so long over the fresco—which is a huge one, the figures being almost life-size—that the friars complained to the Duke that the painter "wandered about, dreaming, instead of painting." When remonstrated with, he told the Prior he could not find a model for Judas nor for Christ,—the other heads being filled in, but offered to take the Prior's face for Judas if that would expedite matters. After that, he was left to work at his own pace. It seems strange that an artist of his ability should have chosen oils as a medium for a fresco. The result is that there is hardly anything left of the original picture, it has been so destroyed by time, damp, and restoration. The reproduction in the Diploma Gallery is very good, being taken before the last coat was added, and captures a little of the beauty of the original and its delicate colours and the movement of the figures. The head of Christ is most touching in its expression of grief and loneliness. The moment chosen is when Our Lord tells the disciples one of them shall betray Him, and each vehemently protests his innocence. It will be noted that Judas alone does not join in the outcry, but sits clutching the bag of money in one hand, while the other is stretched out in the act of taking a piece of the Passover Bread. The doorway in the lower part was cut some time after the picture was finished. Very good postcards of the head of Christ may be had from the Medici Society, which also publishes a large one of the same. This was really the first attempt to portray this great subject as it might have occurred—a meal in an upper room, the followers clustered round the Master. Great attention was paid to detail, the table-cloth, food, utensils, etc., being most carefully put in, but they do not ever usurp their place. The action and character of the speakers, their gesture, excitement, dismay, is what claims the attention of the spectator. Afterwards the accessories are noticed.

Since writing the above, a letter in the *Times* on 17th November, from Signor Venturi, gives an account of what he claims as the sole remaining authentic example of Leonardo's

work as a sculptor. It is a high relief model of the Virgin and Child, in the possession of Mr. G. B. Dibblee. An illustration accompanies the letter, which minutely describes the work. The Holy Child stands on a cushion supported by the Madonna, who carefully holds away the drapery of her cloak. One can see her beautifully modelled features, and the exquisite pose of her head and hands, and the tender smile that seems to play round her lips as she watches her Son. It would be worth while to show the children the photograph of this beautiful little group, of which an earlier account was given by Sir Theodore Cook in the *Times* of 13th October, 1922.

CHILDREN'S PORTFOLIO OF PAINTINGS.

RULES.

1. All drawings must be the sole work of the member, but advice and instruction may be freely given.

2. Members are divided into two groups, viz:—
   Seniors over twelve years old;
   Juniors under twelve years old.

3. Two subjects shall be chosen for each group. They may be in brush-work or pencil, unless expressly stated when set.

4. Drawings must not exceed 14×10 inches. They must be packed flat, and each member's drawings must be fastened together with a piece of blank paper, by a pin or clip.

5. The name, age, and address of the member must be written on the back of each drawing sent in.

6. All drawings for the current quarter must be sent to Miss Allen, Sea View, Crowborough, on or before 1st March, 1924.

Subscriptions, 3/- each member, for 1924, should be sent to Miss Allen, at Aldford, Chester, on or before 1st January, 1924.

Subjects for March, 1924.

Senior:

A.—"A Study in Yellow."

This must be in brush work. Flowers, fruit, out-of-door sketch, birds, figures, may be chosen; but the prevailing note must be the contrast and harmonies of yellow.

B.—An Easter Greeting.

Great attention to be given to lettering and spacing.

Juniors:

A.—A sketch of bare twigs against a spring sky.

To be done in brushwork from nature. If you cannot see a tree from the window, put some twigs in a jar on the window sill, and sit so that the light is on your left and you can see the colour of the twigs. Poplars would be nice, or willow.

B.—Make a pattern with rounds drawn round a penny. Colour them, very neatly, and say what the pattern is to be used for.

Excerpt from Leonardo da Vinci *by E.C. Allen from* Parents' Review *Vol. 61, 1950,* The Man in Armour *or* Profile of a Warrior in Helmet.

His father apprenticed him to the ancient painter Verrochio when he was ten. He remained in the old artist's studio till 1476. It was there he made the drawing of the first of our six examples, The Man in Armour. These were troublous times. City fights were of common occurrence and the armoured followers of rival families had frequent encounters in the narrow streets. I don't know, but I think the peak of the helmet would probably pull down to protect the face. But there were famous painters as well as warriors in Florence, and old Verrochio was so interested in the boy's drawings that he asked his father to apprentice him to his studio. There he worked for ten years. Then, when he was twenty, he was admitted to the Guild of Painters, and made this drawing, among many others. He liked painting strange creatures, snails, lizards, and fancies of his own, as well as realities.