

SIX PICTURES BY FRA ANGELICO.

BY E. C. ALLEN.

ON a day of brilliant winter sunshine, when the gutter on the shady side of the road was covered with thick ice, and the sunny side was like an English June, I walked through the streets of the City of Surprises until I came to the square of the Four Wonders. I should like to write about them all, but am forbidden. Instead, I may only say that being filled with ecstasy untranscribable, I stood at last on one side of the square, pulling an antique bell-handle that hung beside a plain wooden door set in a length of white-washed wall. When that door opened. I entered into the companionship of one of the most beautiful minds of the Middle Ages, and led by him, set forth upon a pilgrimage through the scenes of the Holy Life and Glorious Death of our Lord Jesus Christ. For my guide was Il Beato Fra Angelico, whose powerful hand and worshiping spirit have made the walls of San Marco glow to-day with a beauty that is scarcely dimmer than it was when he first laid the colours on, often on his knees in tears, nearly six hundred years ago. Let us try to capture some of his love and his devotion in our Picture Study lessons with the children this term. We want them to realise some of his care and his skill in clothing the rough walls of the monastery with a series of glowing pictures. I think it will be worth some effort on our part to procure, if even as a brief loan, some coloured example that will reproduce the genius for colour the artist possessed better than our small prints can. The artist worked with a jeweller's attention to minutiae, with a restrained lavishness, and a generous care that never made the part to dominate the whole nor let design wait on ornament. Instance after instance occurs to us of gemmed robes, of wings glittering with sparks of coloured

light, of landscape foreground starred with flowers. It seemed to me, as I wandered in and out of the cold austerities of San Marco that winter's day, that the Blessed Brother turned for comfort and relaxation to warm his spirit at the fires of his imagination, when he laid aside the large brushes which he had used for his big pictures of The Sorrows, and took up the small miniature work on panel or triptych to draw those dancing, singing angels which are so intensely characteristic.

So I thought we might begin the term's work with an example that has something of each manner—and also reflects the painter's own environment.

In the Annunciation, we have cloisters and garden, white-wash and flowers. Each feather in the Angel's wing is starred with gems; the hem of his robe is intricately embroidered. Flowers are in the grass and on the trees beyond. In contrast to this richness of ornament is the severe simplicity of the Virgin's robe; the humility of her pose, the meekness of her crossed hands. The Angel has alighted softly, with gentle dignity. He salutes the Virgin. It seems to me there is so much to think about and so little to say in all Fra Angelico's pictures. One cannot catalogue their charms. It is to paint the lily to heap up adjectives. Each delicate corinthian capital, each fold of softly falling drapery, is an act of worship. We cannot dogmatise about it. The children will like to know that the colours in the Angel's wings are shades of pink and purple, and that the Madonna's robe is blue. And that the Cloister is the wonderful warm cream colour that old marble becomes. This picture has suffered less than the others we have from the hands of the restorer.

Several paragraphs were extracted from this article as they cover paintings not in our set.

We end on a note of joy. I do not think I exaggerate when I assert that Fra Angelico painted hundreds of Angels. Dainty, delicate, sexless creatures who sing and play musical instruments, and wear gracefully beautiful robes, heavily embroidered, and wonderful feathered wings often studded with jewels. Sometimes they frame a picture, on a background of pure gold. Sometimes they look on at a tragedy, sometimes they praise a miracle or proclaim the occasion of a feast. There is no great intellectuality about them, only a dainty, childish freshness. I believe this one is from a series that go round the frame of a large picture; the halo of the one below is discernible at the foot. We here enjoy some of the most exquisitely finished detail. I always like the ways the folds at the foot of an embroidered gown go, the pattern broken but never destroyed; as if the painter loved to play an ingenious game of hide and seek with his own draughtsmanship, and go on multiplying difficulties for the pleasure of overcoming them.

And so we say good-bye to this painter of tender love and great gentleness, having turned back many times to look at one thing more, and having learnt that the Way of Sorrows leads to the Kingdom of Joy.

Extract from Vasari's "Life":—

"This truly angelic father spent his whole life in the service of God and his fellow-creatures. He was a man of simple habits, and most saintly in all his ways. He kept himself free from all worldliness, and was so good a friend to the poor that I think his soul must be already in heaven. He worked continually in his art, but would never paint anything excepting sacred subjects. He might have been a wealthy man, but he did not care

for money, and used to say that true riches consist in being content with little. He might have enjoyed high dignities, both in his convent and in the world, but he cared nothing for these things, saying that he who would practise painting has need of quiet, and should be free from worldly cares, and that he who would do the work of Christ must live continually with Him. He was never known to be impatient with the brothers—a thing to me almost incredible! and when people asked him for a picture, replied that with the Prior's approval he would try and satisfy their wishes. He never corrected or re-touched his works, but left them as he first painted them, saying that such was the will of God. He never took his pencil up without a prayer, and could not paint a Crucifixion without the tears running down his cheeks. And the saints which he painted are more like saints in face and expression than those of any other master. And since it seemed that saints and angels of beauty so divine could only be painted by the hand of an angel, he was always called Fra Angelico."

Excerpt from *Fra Angelico*, by Rosemary Wilkinson, PR 70, 1959, pp 175-6

On ascending the stairway at San Marco the visitor comes to a wide passage, its parquet floor worn by countless feet, beams and rafters overhead. Wedges of light gleam from open doorways. These are the friar's cells. On the wall beside the door of the cell once occupied by the Prior is the wonderful fresco of the Annunciation, symbolic of purity and peace. Mary, very youthful, very demure, sits on a stool in an arched loggia, head inclined, arms crossed, listening humbly to the disclosure of the angelic figure facing her. With bended knee and bowed head the angel seems to have just alighted; his gorgeous variegated wings, delicately tapered, are not yet folded. Pillars with elaborate Corinthian capitals, support a series of intersecting arches. The detailed herbage in the little enclosed garden contrasts with the severe lines of the portico. A homely touch is added by the fence with its regular palisade of posts, nailed so evenly. There is a wonderful purity of line in this composition; the faultless curves and sweeping outlines emphasize the dignity and simplicity of the subject. There is a dreamlike quality, a spiritual aloofness about the scene that inspires a feeling of infinite peace. The colouring after all those years has scarcely faded; the delicate pastel pink is offset by the deeper shades of blue and red.

FRA ANGELICO, 1387—1455 *

By E. C. ALLEN

Not many people know that the real name of this great saint and artist was Guido and that when he entered the Dominican Order at the age of twenty he took the name of Giovanni, and as Fra Giovanni the painter, decorated the convent at Cortona, and made several altar pieces for neighbouring churches. Many are now in ruins, even those in the old convent at Fiesole, to which the Brotherhood returned in 1418. But the Predella of Christ in Glory attached to a restored Madonna in that church, is to-day in our National Gallery, and I hope all who can will go to see it. All the subjects of our six pictures are from the Convent of San Marco in Florence, now a museum. The name 'Angelico' was given to him by his fellow monks as an affectionate soubriquet, as well as a comment on the angels he loved to paint. Vasari wrote his 'life,' and I hope all teachers who can, will read it. As a contemporary, he shows the influence this holy man had on the art of his age, as well as the thought of his day, and gives us a wonderful picture of a life spent in selfless devotion, to his God, his art and his fellows. 'He never took up his pencil without a prayer, and never painted a Crucifixion without tears.' His was a happy nature. He loved flowers and colour and the simple joys of daily life:—little children, birds, gay dresses and lovely flowing lines. Some of his early work was stiff and unreal, but his figure drawing greatly improved as time went on, and he went up and down Italy, and saw the work that was being done by other artists, especially in figure drawing. Even his Crucifixions had to have flowers round the three crosses, and beautiful backgrounds of hills and plains, seraphs in the air, brilliant sunset skies, and the towers of Florence in the distance.

But now let us begin this term's work with a visit to the Musée San Marco—putting out of our minds the fact that it is a museum and not a monastery, and remembering that we are going to visit the place where Fra Angelico lived and worked and walked and talked, and saw his visions, and loved the life he had chosen. We leave the Duomo, on the north side, and go straight along the wide beautiful Via Cavour for about five minutes, till we come to another quite small piazza—or square, we should call it. There is a plain long blank wall on one side, painted pink—or was when I saw it last—and facing us is a smallish ordinary-looking door. I think there is a little tinkling bell that rings

* Picture Study for Spring Term, 1948.

as we push the door open. As it swings to behind us, we are in another world, another century. We go slowly down a straight flagged path, and find ourselves in a garden. Here it is, in our first picture (The Annunciation). Here are the graceful arches with their Corinthian capitals, the smooth tiled floor, and the brilliant flowery grass. Let the children notice for themselves that the three further columns have no foliated capitals, but are plain. With what loving care has the angel's dress been embroidered, and the lining of the Blessed Virgin's cloak. Gabriel has only just alighted, and his wings are not yet folded down but spread out in row upon row of brilliant colour. Originally, I suppose, the shrubs behind the fence were green, the tall cypresses very dark—but remember that was nearly five hundred years ago.

When the Brotherhood was really settled into their new quarters, Fra Angelico painted wherever a surface appeared to need it. Corridors, walls, lunettes, a separate subject for each, and a picture in each brother's little cell. Many of these are too faded to be deciphered and some have been hopelessly restored. Such, I think, must have been the fate of the Flight into Egypt, which might come next. The contours of the hills are harsh and stiff, but the ass is a sturdy noble beast, pacing steadily and needing neither bridle nor staff. The little Bambino is exquisitely drawn. Remember the painter had only seen Italian babies, decorously swaddled into stiff little dolls as this one is. Probably the building is meant for the Inn at Bethlehem. Let the children find the three crosses. A magnifying glass will help to show the flowers all over the grass. Remember this is years before Botticelli painted his 'Spring,' and this is supposed to be a Flight by Night, so the colours cannot shine as they did for the Angel Gabriel.

Several paragraphs were extracted from this article. This opening section was included because it provides interesting insight into Fra Angelico's life.

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FILIPPINO LIPPI (1457—1504).*

By E. C. ALLEN.

The artist chosen for this term in the Parents' Union School is Filippino Lippi, the gifted son of that lovable old Friar, Lippo Lippi. Filippino was also a monk, but cast in a gentler mould. But notwithstanding the difference in their characters, the son admired his father more than any other master, and although the old man died when his son was only twelve years old, the influence he exerted was paramount, and that of his other masters only secondary. Most of his work was done in Florence, and some of it shows the effect of Botticelli. There is not the warm humanity that delights us in Lippo Lippi's work, nor the touch of humour, but there is a gentle stateliness and a deep sincerity that often make his pictures almost as prayerful as those of Fra Angelico.

He must have travelled a little, painting altar-pieces and portraits, but most of his short life was spent in Florence, so to Florence let us go to look at the first of our reproductions—that called the 'Holy Family with Angels.' There are two great

* Picture Study for Spring Term, 1942.

palaces in Florence—frowning fortresses from the outside, but inside glowing with perhaps the finest collection of pictures in the world. The Uffizi is the oldest and holds the older treasures. The Pitti is close to it, but slighter, not so crowded, and more modern in tone.

This large altar-piece hangs in a good light, is beautifully framed, and as we study it we find it emphasizes many of Filippino's most characteristic touches. He delighted in the pure lines and dignified ornament of classic sculpture, and you will notice the wreaths round the marble seat. He loved painting flowers, and here is an abundance. The landscapes he put in his pictures were nearly all gentle, peaceful scenes. So here we have a very peaceful scene, with rather disproportionate oxen occupying a field and a shepherd and his flock on the hill-top. But it is the child-angels that will fill us with pleasure as we study them, and the little St. John with his furry tunic. The children will like the birds and the lizard and the chain of roses. The combination of straight lines and curves in the composition was one Filippino often used. You will notice an echo of it in the tree trunks and curves of the hills in the upper part of the picture. Notice the individuality of each of the faces, and the grace of the gesture of the angel whose hand is stretched out to touch the Child's little foot. But many teachers know the picture better than I do, after living with it for two years, and will be able to tell of the delight of colour, in robes and feathers and flowers, emerald-green grass, pale marble and bright red roses.

Another Florentine picture is the 'Vision of St. Bernard,' from the Badia Palace. The legend is that as St. Bernard was writing his 'Homilies on the Song of Solomon' in praise of the Virgin, she appeared before him and laid her hand on the page. He was sent out to found a new monastery, with twelve other Benedictine monks. There they are in the upper part of the picture, and I think they are bidding farewell to their Abbot as they set out on their journey. Not much of a study for the holy writer, nor a very secure-looking desk; but the monk's ascetic face is very beautiful, and so too are the faces of the devout little band of attendant angels. Of one of them we have a larger

reprint. The half-figure on the right, with praying hands, is the donor—that is, the man who paid for the picture—and here he is inserted asking his patron saint, St. Bernard, to pray for the repose of his soul. It seems as if it were a clever portrait.

We have not many examples of Filippino's work in England, but our National Gallery picture is a very fine one—'Virgin and Child with SS. Jerome and Dominic.' This is a very favourite one of mine. The Holy Mother is more cheerful than usual, and I like the two halves of the landscape, so different for each saint. Jerome has his rocks and cave and tree; a real tree, not a clipped bush, but a tree with birds in it. He clasps his stone and gazes in rapture on the vision that is lighting up his wilderness. Let the children find the lion themselves—such a comfortable beast! But St. Dominic seems too immersed in his study to look at the radiant vision. He holds the Annunciation lily, and that is his pen case hanging at his side. His landscape has meandering paths and a gently trotting ass, or mule. It is a stern, intellectual face, really rather like the portrait of him by Giovanni Bellini which we have, and which very possibly may have been seen by Filippino at some time.

Now we have only two left, one very crowded and one refreshingly simple. 'The Adoration of the Magi' is a large picture full of incident. It shows, more than any other of the artist's works, the influence of Botticelli, and there are many details that will seem to have been directly inspired by him. Many of the figures are portraits of prominent Florentines. The three kings are members of the noble Medici family, and the two figures on the right belong to another princely house. There is a certain amount of humour in the grouping. Notice the shouting female with the twisted hair, and the very urbane gentleman who doubtless calls her 'My good woman,' and points calmly at the centre group. What a contrast to the piety of the poor beggar behind him! On the left, the youth burdened by so many garments seems to be having his curls arranged by a servant.¹ One hopes that was not the custom among the Florentine noblesse. There is a strong, ascetic face on the extreme left, refreshing in its clear-cut lines. A dear little Madonna,

¹ He is being crowned.

very young and girlish, and a charming Bambino, who shrinks from the homage of the bearded prince in a very natural and pretty gesture. In the upper half of the picture, the cavalcades of the three kings arrive from three points to worship the new King. Notice the peculiar animals in the middle group, and the impatient horses on the left. Get a magnifying-glass and study each face in the groups. You will find them all living personalities—'nought concealed and nought set down in malice.' And if some are more revealing than was agreeable to the originals, remember the thunders of that enemy of worldly humbug, Savonarola, were rolling from the pulpit of the Duomo, and the faithful knew well that the rich clutched their gold plate and jewels in vain. Not so could the mercy of God be bought.

It is almost a relief to turn from this wealth of bewildering detail to the exquisite 'Adoring Angel' that is our last picture. Probably it was the side of a triptych in some altar-piece.² This figure is all we have of it, and must be familiar to many of us in 'Children's Corners' and other places. Such a calm, beautiful face, not very tidy, not very noticeable, but just rapt in a mystic adoration that lifts us outside ourselves to adore. Such an angel might guard the Christmas Crib in many churches, and bless the dreams of happy children.

On this note of tranquil beauty let us leave this gentle artist, whose great gifts were used so quietly to bring joy and peace to many, both humble and great. ² The picture was burnt.

Excerpt from *Filippino Lippi*, by E.C. Allen, PR 41, 1930, pp 54-5

The Chapel of the Carmine was being decorated by Masaccio, who died before it was finished, and the work of completion was left to the young Filippino. It is quite a small chapel, and at the east end are panels illustrating scenes from the life of St. Peter and St. Paul. The one we have shows the angel leading St. Peter out of prison. The sleeping warder is rather wonderful. Notice how the spear takes his weight. I think there must be some sort of a ledge behind him for him to rest on. Notice his three weapons, dagger, sword and spear. St. Peter wears a loose woollen robe, and is evidently taking his escape very calmly. Notice the characteristic knot in the angel's girdle. You will see it again and again in this painter's work. Notice also the clever way a small, narrow space holds much, by the introduction of the corner. The picture has perished somewhat, and suffered from restoration—but not enough to spoil its beauty. See how lightly the angel treads, no weight on his foot at all. The two figures seem to stand close together, and yet are not crowded.