

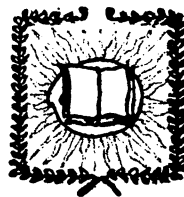
OLD ITALIAN MASTERS

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OLD ITALIAN MASTERS

ENGRAVED BY
TIMOTHY COLE

WITH HISTORICAL NOTES BY
W. J. STILLMAN
AND BRIEF COMMENTS BY THE ENGRAVER



LONDON
T. FISHER UNWIN
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PREFACE

IN the alternations of artistic tendency, or what is called fashion, which mark the progress of esthetic education, modern taste has returned to the appreciation of the great revival of painting and sculpture of the Italian Renaissance, and the understanding of its transcendent merits in all that concerns the supreme qualities of art. The decadence of Italian art, which coincided with the death of Titian, and to which Correggio was perhaps the chief stimulant and contributor, was hastened by the merely technical merits of the Bolognese Carracci, and continued in a senseless and fanciful exaggeration of the superficial qualities of art until, in the beginning of the present century, it had reached a depth of inanity and conventional insipidity which has been surpassed only by certain phases of Byzantine art. To resemble the "Old Masters" was the supreme attainment of the painter; Italy was the only school; to resemble Titian or Raphael the chief excellences of painting—the education which made Titian and Raphael what they became was utterly lost sight of, and the artist, by beginning where the old men finished, finished where the old men began, in pure conventionalism which was but the unintelligent repetition of formulas of which the meaning and origin had become utterly obscured. Painters followed the "grand style" as parrots follow speech, not knowing the motives which made it "grand," or understanding why it still commanded the recognition of the highest cultivation. The revival of natural science, aided more or less by the natural and inevitable reaction from the intellectual inanity into which art had descended, produced a revolt against the slavery of art-tradition, and this revolt, beginning in England with Hogarth and Constable, became a revolution.

Like all revolutions, this became proscriptive—the “Old Masters” became the derision of every aspirant, and naturalism the only art. This also was excess, and is followed by reaction. Nature will not teach art, and the exclusive pursuit of her indications can only lead to a simulacrum of art, in which the vital spirit of it can by no chance enter. Art is the expression of all the spiritual faculties of man, passion for beauty, aspiration of the imagination, the manifestation of the individual in his inmost nature. For this nature can only furnish an alphabet, types whose meaning only sympathy can unfold, and which become the language of art. The sense of the insufficiency of the so-called naturalistic art has brought those who craved the real art-influence to look back to the earlier schools, and the result has been that we have found again the springs of art and the true meaning of the desecrated word “Ideal,” the visible expression of which is the mission of art, *i. e.*, the individual conception of beauty taken in its largest sense, as what is most desirable and attractive in conceivable form—not to be confounded with the actual, and probably never existing in nature. The Italian Renaissance was in no wise a return to nature as model, but a reawakening of the spiritual activity of the race after a torpor of ages, and which demanded the means of expression of itself. As the religious passion was dominant in that phase of Italian development, the religious motive was that which caught the inspiration; but this was incidental—the essential fact was that the art was not an appeal to nature but a form of poetic speech, the telling of a spiritual truth, not the relation of a natural phenomenon or fact. It was the poet, not the scientist, that appeared.

The more we have studied the earlier schools of art, the farther back we have gone, until we find in the Italian painters of the fourteenth century the truest forms of the inspiration which is the life of art, the most direct and unsophisticated telling of the story to be told, the most unaffected representation of the ideal of the painter or the sculptor; and the more the student who enters into the real spirit of that time accustoms himself to the forms of