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ARTICLE VI.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE APOCALYPSE ON CHRISTIAN ART.

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THERE was a long period in the history of Christendom during which the æsthetic and the religious elements in the minds of men were intimately united. The artistic product of this time can with peculiar propriety be called Christian. Hence to this period, known as the Middle Ages, we shall confine our view.

Following close upon the complete permeation of the Roman world by Christianity, came the ages of ignorance. No sooner had a Christian learning and culture begun to grow, than there fell upon all learning and culture a killing frost. The sack of Rome by Alaric came in the lifetime of Augustine. But in the winter of barbarism by which all culture was blasted, Christianity survived. And while this winter was passing away, and the movement of intellectual life was beginning to show itself again, Christianity stood at a great advantage over all rival influences. The only plant surviving from the ancient world, it soon spread and filled all the fields of human thought and imagination. So it came about that the church furnished not only the religion of the new Europe, but also the law and the science, the art and the poetry. While the imagination had only the legends of

archy, the virgin mother, and the multitude of saints furnished at once objects of worship and a field for the imagination to work in.

Thus arose the sacred art of the Middle Ages. Primarily it was the expression of pious feeling. Symbolic pictures, like those in the catacombs, were intended purely as means of edification. So, at first, were those of Bible scenes, of Jesus and his apostles and his mother, of famous martyrs and holy men and women, worked in mosaic or painted in fresco in the churches. But the creative faculty and the sense of the beautiful grew and demanded expression, and the demand was granted in the field of religious art. There was no objection to making angels and Marys beautiful. The love of beauty gradually grew beyond religious feeling. At the same time, men began to be educated beyond the simplicity of a faith which built upon imagination. The study of pre-Christian antiquity and a general intellectual awakening brought in a flood of ideas from outside the church, and the æsthetic sense broke away entirely from religion. This was the Renaissance. A Christian art, in the full sense, was after this impossible.

In an age when artists had only the Bible and the legends of the saints to go to for material and inspiration, it is to be expected that the book of Revelation would have great influence. It is a book of pictures from beginning to end. The makers of illuminated manuscripts of the Bible, when they came to this book, had a rich abundance of material with which to embellish their pages. The imagery of the Apocalypse possesses a quality which made it especially valuable to the artists, whose work had to be self-interpreting, namely, its significance. Dante, who was himself an artist, recommended the book to his friend Giotto as furnishing fit subjects for artistic representation. Augustine says that if the Apocalypse, "like Æschylus and Dante, had found a Flaxman, we should be astonished at the richness

and magnificence of the artistic material to be drawn from it." [1] We shall see whether this richness and magnificence is not actually exhibited by the use of this book in the work of many artists; and whether at least one great artist did not receive from it the inspiration of his most characteristic work,—in short, whether it did not find its Flaxman.

I.

It is in the symbolism of art that we find the earliest traces of the influence on art of the Apocalypse. This book expresses ideas as the artist must express them, by symbols. It promises reward and denounces retribution, gives consolation and warning, in purely descriptive language. It must thus have had great influence in showing the early Christian artists how they were to express these ideas without the use of words at all.

Taking its origin doubtless in the pictures in the catacombs, the symbolism of art grew in the Middle Ages to be a complete system of hieroglyphics,—almost a language. Pictures were the books of the mass of the people, and only a very few scholars had the key to books, the mystery of letters. Charlemagne learned to read after he became restorer of the Roman Empire. But all understood the language of symbolism. In sculptured griffin, lion and eagle combined, they read the twofold nature of Christ. They knew the meaning of the cross, the aureole, the olive branch of peace, the anchor of hope. Each of the colors had a recognized significance. Each principal character repre-

The influence of the Apocalypse in the development of this symbolism is evidenced by the number of symbols whose origin is plainly traceable to this book.

One of these is the palm to indicate martyrdom.[1] The company of martyrs which John sees in heaven stand before the throne of God "with palms in their hands,"[2] thus proclaiming their victory. So they were figured in pictures of the heavenly scene; and from being an accessory though significant circumstance in this picture, the palm in the hand became the common attribute of the martyr everywhere. This usage is still further extended, and the palm is figured on the tombs of early martyrs, while in pictures of martyrdoms an angel is shown descending with the palm.

The crown was also a symbol of martyrdom,[3] the source of which very plainly appears in the promise of him who "was dead and lived again" in John's vision, "Be thou faithful unto [the martyr's] death, and I will give thee the crown of life."[4] This symbolism Keble follows in his poetic picture of "The Holy Innocents,"—

> "Their *palms* and *garlands* telling plain,
> That they are of the glorious martyr-train."

The group of attributes most frequently met in art, those which marked the four evangelists,[5] owes its origin to a figure in Revelation as explained, with its prototype in Ezekiel, according to the fancy of early interpreters of the Bible. The four mysterious creatures of the first chapter of Ezekiel had each of them four faces, that of a man, a lion, an eagle, and an ox. Jerome in his commentary on Ezekiel says that these four faces upon one creature signify the four harmonious Gospels, and assigns the man's face as symbolizing Matthew; the lion's, Mark; the ox's, Luke; and the eagle's, John. But the use of these symbols in art is

[1] See Mrs. Jameson, Sacred and Legendary Art, p. 31. [2] Rev. vii. 9.
[3] Sacred and Legendary Art, p. 29. [4] Rev. ii. 10.
[5] Sacred and Legendary Art, p. 133.

due rather to the influence of the "four living creatures" of Revelation, which were explained in the same way; for in works of art the four faces belong to separate creatures, as in the vision of the apostle. Sometimes the evangelists were themselves figured with the heads of the animals by which they were symbolized; sometimes they were merely accompanied in various ways by the animals. In one or other of these ways we find them represented in the mosaics of old Italian churches, in the sculpture and stained glass of Gothic cathedrals, and everywhere throughout Christian art.

A symbol drawn from the Apocalypse which was scarcely less common is one of the many by which the Virgin Mary was known. In that representation of her which was called the "Queen of Heaven," she was pictured as the "woman arrayed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars." [1] The "Queen of Heaven" was either given all these attributes or some one or two of them; a crescent moon under the feet was the most common. [2] The great value which the artists attached to this description given them in the Apocalypse of the Blessed Virgin is attested by the way in which St. John was frequently pictured in chapels dedicated to him. [3] He is seated on the rocky island of Patmos, with his eagle beside him, writing down what he saw and heard, while above in the sky we see, just as John saw it, the "great sign in heaven," the woman crowned with stars and standing on a crescent moon.

The symbolism of the Apocalypse may fairly be supposed also to have led to the use of dragons and monsters to suggest the various powers of evil. It is, indeed, natural for the human imagination to picture dreadful and mys-

see later, often represented in works of art, the pictures of these monsters must have further stimulated the imagination to run wild in gargoyles and all sorts of grotesque shapes to symbolize evil.

II.

In all that has been described the influence of the Apocalypse is seen in helping the artists to express ideas by means of images. The view of that book as a book of symbols is the more just one, and does appear, as we have seen, in Christian art. But this view seems to have been gradually replaced by the belief in John's visions as actual revelations from the unseen world, in the reality of which the people of the "Dark Ages" had entire confidence. The "celestial hierarchy" of the pseudo-Dionysius is at once an indication and a cause of this implicit faith in the objective reality of the unseen world, and in its knowableness in all its details. [1] A curious illustration of this characteristic of the thought of the time is furnished by an occurrence in Florence in 1304,—a theatrical representation of the torments of hell. [2] This consciousness of the unseen world is embodied in the only great poem of the Middle Ages, Dante's "Divine Comedy."

While the fabric of the celestial hierarchy, the complete and vivid notions of the last judgment, of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, were mosaics made up of material from all parts of the Bible, put together and eked out by men's own imagination; yet the confidence in the knowableness of the invisible, which made all this possible, rested mainly on what John saw in heaven. Though Paul was caught up into the third heaven, he tells nothing of what he saw there; John describes vividly and at length all he saw. Men saw in the great dragon the real enemy with whom all good men have

[1] See Milman, Latin Christianity, Book xiv. chap. ii. end.

[2] See Symonds, Italian Renaissance, Art, p. 198.

to contend; in the smoke from the bottomless pit a real torment to be shunned; in the joys of new Jerusalem a real consolation for the saints now afflicted with the woes of the world. When we put ourselves at their point of view we can realize what a mighty religious inspiration was furnished to the artists by the book in which these scenes are described.

The realm of spirits was constantly represented in works of art. Scenes in heaven, as the coronation of Christ or the Virgin, present not only the innumerable multitude John saw, but all the ranks of angels Dionysius describes, "Thrones, Dominations, Powers," and even the persons of the Trinity. The Apocalypse is to be credited with a large share of influence in the production of these, since it fostered the faith in the unseen world which inspired them. But it will be enough for us to trace out the work in which its imagery is somewhat closely followed.

The angels of the Apocalypse have a character of their own, a peculiar grandeur and might. When represented in works of art, they not infrequently have distinct marks by which we may know that John's angels have been intended. When just seven angels are introduced, or where seven out of a larger number have pre-eminent dignity, we may know they are meant for the "seven angels which stand before God."[1] These appear in the Last Judgment ascribed to Orcagna[2] in the Campo Santo at Pisa, where the seven angels are entirely different from the others, being arrayed in rich armor, and having a different office to perform. The seven angels with the seven trumpets are placed over the arch of the choir in the old church of San Michele at Ravenna. So the "four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds,"[3] are sometimes repre-

[1] Rev. viii. 2.

[2] Or, by Symonds, to the Lorenzetti brothers; see his Italian Renaissance, Art, p. 200.

[3] Rev. vii. 1.

sented separately. These are thought of when four angels are placed in four prominent architectural positions, as the corners about an arch.[1]

But with no subject is the influence of the Apocalypse on mediæval art so plainly seen, as with the great archangel of the Apocalypse, as he is also the great archangel of mediæval fancy, "Michael, of celestial armies prince." His character as the mighty warrior among the angels seems to have strongly moved the imagination. He was worshipped as a saint, and became one of the most popular saints of Christendom. Many churches were dedicated to him, beginning with the St. Michael's built by Constantine at his new capital. His name became so common a Christian name in some countries that in at least two, Ireland and Bavaria, it is still the typical peasant's name. The reason for his great popularity seems to be the character given him in the Apocalypse. Men's warlike instincts demanded among the multitude of peaceful and submissive saints, a Mars or a Thor. Who could meet this demand better than the leader of God's warlike angels? No words could give a sublimer picture of matchless prowess than the brief and simple description of John's vision of "war in heaven; Michael and his angel going forth to war with the dragon. . . . . And the great dragon . . . . was cast down to the earth, and his angels were cast down with him." [2] Here is a spectacle of all the glory of triumph without any of its cruelty, for the foe is the dragon, the symbol of evil, for whom we can feel no pity. When this passage from the Apocalypse was read in the churches on the festival of St. Michael and All Angels (Sept. 29) it must have stirred the hearts of men with the impulses which produced the Crusades and chivalry. And it stirred their imaginations, too, until the result was seen in some of the noblest works of art; as the same great conception after-

[1] Sacred and Legendary Art, p. 92. [2] Rev. xii. 7 ff.

ward entered as an essential part into Milton's "great argument."

Such works of art are several pictures of Michael Conquering the Dragon. In these the moment is represented when the angel has gained the victory, and stands over the dragon with spear in hand, ready to finish the contest. So he is represented in Raphael's painting in the Louvre, painted for Francis I.[1] The archangel's calm and beautiful face expresses boundless prowess entirely free from passion. In Milton's description of Michael, the face and form, the brilliant armor and mantle, so correspond with Raphael's picture, that Mrs. Jameson thinks Milton must have seen it.

> "Over his lucid arms
> A military vest of purple flowed;
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . Iris had dipt the woof:
> His starry helm unbuckled showed him prime
> In manhood where youth ended; by his side,
> As in a glist'ring zodiac, hung the sword,
> Satan's dire dread; and in his hand the spear."

This warlike angel of the Apocalypse must also have strongly influenced the artistic conceptions of the other warrior saints who figure so largely in the art of the Middle Ages, as St. Romain, St. Maurice, and especially St. George.

Connected with those warlike saints are the incarnations of the powers of evil for the portrayal of which Christian art found suggestion in the Apocalypse. Here the other parts of the Bible furnish little material, and the dragons and monsters of art seem to be either simply those of John's vision, with such additions and changes as the fancy of the artist suggested, or the outgrowth of these. Generally the dragon of art differs in some features from that of the Apocalypse, but agrees closely enough to show plainly its origin. In Raphael's picture spoken of above, the dragon

[1] Sacred and Legendary Art, p. 105 f.

is almost human in form, but red in color. In Spinello's fresco at Arezzo,[1] the seven heads are represented. Sometimes John's description of the unearthly horses furnishes a suggestion for the dragon, and its tail ends in another little head, which is being pierced by a smaller angel.

These pictures of the dragon and other monsters gave rise, in their turn, to a large share of the symbolism of mediæval hagiology as expressed in art. Evil powers contended with and conquered by the good are so typified in the legends of more than one saint. Not only St. George, like St. Michael, overcomes a dragon; St. Romain repeats on the banks of the Seine the achievement of St. George; and helpless innocence in the person of St. Margaret is victorious over the same incarnation of evil. All these legends so often given form in art, are but echoes of the great red dragon whom Michael conquered. If it is said that dragons and evil monsters were common in classic mythology, and that the story of Perseus and his encounter with a sea-monster may have suggested the legend of St. George, we must remember that the people among whom Christian art grew up knew far more about the Bible than they did about classic mythology. When we follow out the impulse which the hideous shapes of the Apocalypse may fairly be held to have given to the inventive imagination in the production of all the gargoyles and griffins and grotesque shapes of which mediæval art is so full, we see that this book of grotesque imagery is one of the most fruitful influences whose effects can be traced in Christian art.

It is remarkable, and suggestive of the way in which a knowledge of the Bible reached the people of that time, that those apocalyptic scenes which have impressed themselves most strongly on art are described in passages found in the pericopes for great festivals. This use of the account of the "war in heaven" has already been referred to. Another

[1] Sacred and Legendary Art, p. 108.

instance is the scene described in the lesson taken from the Apocalypse for the great festival which is still preserved in name in Protestant lands, All Saints' Day. On that day the people heard about the "great multitude which no man could number, ... standing before the throne, and before the Lamb, arrayed in white robes, and palms in their hands."[1] This marvellous picture of the beatitude of the saints in heaven impressed itself deeply upon the popular imagination, and this impression is reflected in art. In the subject called a "Paradiso," which is plainly intended to represent the scenes several times pictured in the Apocalypse of the multitude of the redeemed, the whole company of angels and martyrs and saints of all degrees is shown surrounding the throne of God. There are found in art, pictures of several other scenes in heaven, which, while not representing anything described in the book of Revelation, are plainly suggested by the "Paradiso." Such are the Coronation of Christ, and of the Virgin.

In these pictures of celestial scenes the architectural position is made to heighten the effect.[1] They are painted in the choir, and this part of the church was thought of as symbolic of heaven. As often as the earthly congregation gathered about the altar, they had presented before their eyes the blessedness of the heavenly congregation. Thus was the comfort of John's revelation translated into a language which the people could understand. In another of John's blessed visions the architectural position is made to help in a wonderful manner. The effect of light shining through colored windows is made to show forth the glory of the New Jerusalem,—the foundations of precious stones, the gates of pearl, and the streets of transparent gold being given their appropriate colors in stained glass.

this scene is vividly described in Matthew, as well as in the Apocalypse, yet John portrays[1] in such a picturesque manner the "great white throne" and the opening of the books in the presence of the assembled concourse of "the dead, the great and the small," as to affect the imagination even more powerfully than do the words of Christ. John's description may therefore be considered as the main source of the subject of the Last Judgment in Christian art.

III.

We have not been able hitherto to deal with separate artists. No individual artist seems to have been especially influenced in his work by the Apocalypse. Indeed we might suppose from the subjects chosen and from the treatment of them that the artists themselves had never read the book. The scenes are generally represented in the same way; or the variations according to the artist's individual conception are not of such a character as to indicate a careful study of the book itself. The pictures are hardly ever true in detail to John's account. Michael is in the act of slaying the dragon instead of casting him out of heaven. Features of different creatures are combined. Those scenes which are described in passages read in the churches on great days are those most frequently pictured. All this is in accord with the character of the age, when the Bible itself was little read, while much knowledge of Bible scenes existed as a kind of traditional lore, handed down from one artist to another, and familiar to the people through works of art.

This was the case in Italy, where mediæval art had its highest development, and where law was given to the art of Europe. But in Germany, just before the Reformation, there existed a different state of things in regard to the knowledge and use of the Bible. This better acquaintance with the Bible led, for other than artistic reasons, to a deeper

[1] Rev. xx. 11 f.

impress of the book of Revelation on art here than appears anywhere else. It also made it possible for the book to affect individual artists; hence we here find a great artist in whom the influence of the Apocalypse on art is localized.

The movement which here made this book especially prominent was that which followed the sense of the corruption of the church and the longing for reform felt by all good men in Germany in the latter half of the fifteenth century. The ferment which brought on an explosion in the Reformation was working in men's mind for years before. The Apocalypse has always been a favorite book with reformers. When men felt the evils of the time become too great for endurance, they sought relief in assuring themselves of terrible judgments to come, and in hoping for the end of the world or the coming of Christ's millennial kingdom.[1] The prophetic spirits—the voices crying in the wilderness—even from the days of Joachin of Floris and his "everlasting gospel," have found congenial reading in the pages of the seer of Patmos.

This turning to the Apocalypse in dark times appears in German art just before the Reformation. Already the old Prague masters show this tendency in the troubled period which preceded the outbreak of the Hussite movement.[2] But the influence of apocalyptic study appears most strongly in the old German wood engravings, that form of art which led to the downfall of the supremacy of art by leading to the invention of printing. Engraving is the most popular form of art, and its first work was to stir the people of Germany to rebellion against Rome, largely through the use of John's Revelation. Perhaps the first German block-

ings, printed in the earlier half of the fifteenth century. In a list of early German block-books,[1] of which the "Apocalypsis" just mentioned stands at the head, is found another entitled "The Antichrist," still another, "The Fifteen Signs of the Last Judgment."

This phase of art was glorified by genius. The greatest German artist, or at least one of the two greatest, was Albert Dürer; and the work by which Dürer is best known and which, perhaps, best represents him, is his series of sixteen wood engravings illustrating the Apocalypse. They were issued in 1498, when the great artist was twenty-five years old. Dürer's master, Wolgemut, had made, two years before, the most daring attack on Rome yet made in art. He issued an engraving of a hideous female form with the combined features of many of the monsters of Revelation, and others of his own inventing, and inscribed it with the words, ROMA CAPUT MUNDI. This became exceedingly common in Germany, and was called the "Papstesel." Dürer's atttack was more serious. His purpose and spirit may be learned from the fourteenth engraving in the series, which appears, from sketches made in 1495, to have been the first designed. It is of the woman called "Babylon the Great." Before a woman clad in showy finery appear a crowd of men of various ranks of life, all of whom give evidence by significant gestures that they are aware of her real character. Only a monk prostrates himself before her in adoration. The text attached to this picture is that terrible call for vengeance, "Render unto her as she hath rendered, and double unto her the double according to her work."[2] In the other pictures the great purpose of expressing indignation against Rome appears wherever the subject will permit. Among those who "hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains," and call on the mountains and the rocks to

[1] See Encyclopædia Britannica, *s. v.* "Printing." [2] Rev. xvii. 6.

fall on them and hide them from the wrath of the Lamb,[1] appear a wailing pope, a cardinal, a bishop, and a cowled monk; while in the same picture a woman seated by her child cries out in righteous triumph over the fallen hierarchy. The spirit of these pictures is that of the Apocalypse itself, a demand for righteous judgment against the oppressors of God's saints. No lines of human drawing ever expressed this idea of the judgment of God in furious destruction, with such vigor as do the two most celebrated of these engravings of Dürer's Apocalypse, the Four Horsemen, who came forth in answer to the voices of the four living creatures,[2] and the Unloosing of the Angels of the Euphrates, "which had been prepared for the hour and the day and the month and the year, that they should kill the third part of men."[3] In the one of these, four horses with fell-visaged riders gallop abreast, trampling underfoot men of all conditions, not omitting cowled heads. In the other, the destroying angels are fierce, gigantic figures, laying about them with their swords in a perfect whirlwind of destruction. Here, too, church dignitaries are prominent among the objects of divine vengeance.

Perhaps the most daring act of rebellion against the church which Dürer as an artist could have committed was in his treatment of the "woman arrayed with the sun." He did not make a Madonna of her, but by giving her the eagle's wings mentioned in John's descriptions, showed that he did not intend the conventional Queen of Heaven. The worship of the Virgin doubtless had upon him a doubly strong hold from its artistic associations; and this violent breaking away from it seems to have produced a recoil, for in a vignette which he added to a later edition, he makes John write, according to the conception of the older artists, at the inspiration of the Virgin, who appears standing on the crescent

[1] Rev. vi. 15 f. [2] Rev. vii. 1–8. [3] Rev. ix. 14 f.

moon, clothed with the sun, and with a crown of twelve stars on her head, as Queen of Heaven.

With this instance of the influence of the Apocalypse upon Christian art, our study must cease, for now Christian art itself soon ceased. From this time art gradually lost both its religious character, and its supremacy as a means of expressing popular thought. The union of the æsthetic and religious feeling became dissolved. The love of the beautiful in form continued to find expression in art influenced by pagan antiquity, and later by admiration of the beauties of inanimate nature. The religious feelings, as well as the intellectual awakening, found expression in the newly invented art of printing. The religious reform movement which, in its earliest impulse, found expression in pictures, was carried on through books.

A shadow, indeed, of the old Christian art lingered in the illustrated Bibles which were long so common in Protestant lands. Here, as might be expected, subjects from the Apocalypse had great prominence, as they had in the first illustrated Bible, even before the time of Dürer, like that of Roburger, published in 1483. As long as hatred and fear of Rome were strong in the popular mind, the common interpretation made that book a favorite one for illustration. A Bible published as late as 1824, in London, "embellished by the most eminent British artists," is remarkable for the large proportionate number of illustrations which the book of Revelation receives. But these illustrated Bibles are only a faint reminder of the ancient glory of Christian art; for in them pictures are merely accessory, and letters have taken their place as a means in the leadership of popular thought.