



On CHRISTIAN ART

EDITH HEALY

ON  
CHINESE  
ART



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# On Christian Art.

BY

EDITH HEALY.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

RIGHT REV. J. L. SPALDING, D.D.,

*Bishop of Peoria.*

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## Introduction.

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IN God there is the fulness of truth, love and beauty. As infinite truth, He is the ideal of Science; as infinite love, He is the ideal of Conduct; and as infinite beauty, He is the ideal of Art. The more we know, the more we become like God, who knows all: the more we love, the more we become like Him, who loves all: the more we learn to understand and appreciate what is beautiful, the more we become like Him, who is the essential beauty of which all high thoughts and fair things are but the images and reflections. The direct and immediate aim and end of religion is goodness, holiness: "Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." Our Lord blesses the pure of heart, those who love peace and who hunger and thirst after righteousness. A really good man is a religious man, while a very learned man may be irreligious. Our thoughts do not seem



to be so much part of ourselves, as our deeds. What we do, rather than what we think, makes us what we are. Science concerns itself with what is, with facts; religion busies itself with what should be, and aims to bring about a more perfect harmony between the actual and the possible, the real and the ideal. Science consists in knowing; religion consists chiefly in doing. Hence religion rests on faith rather than on knowledge, because the infinite object of desire, which, whether they are conscious of it or not, lures all men on to act, is believed in rather than understood. The distinction which exists between science and religion, exists also between science and art. Art, like religion, looks not so much at what is, as at what should be. It draws its inspiration from a world of ideals, because it can discover nothing in the real world which is in complete harmony with its dream of beauty. Both religion and art accept nature, and rest upon it, but they both strive to rise above it. Religion teaches man that he is akin to God, and that all his efforts should tend to bring out within himself the divine likeness. Art recognizes that man's needs go infinitely beyond what is simply useful, and it seeks, as best it may, to give body to its vision of perfection and beauty. Thus the spirit of religion and the spirit of art are friendly, while the scientific spirit, which thrusts

aside faith and imagination, easily becomes indifferent to religion and art. A mere worldling can not understand the raptures of the Saint or the ecstasies of the poet. In the eyes of the practical man an artist is a dreamer; a lover of perfection, a mystic. But the men whom the human race has most loved, and by whom it has been most influenced, have been men of religion or men of art; and no people has made a lasting impress upon the world's history which has not had the genius of religion or the genius of art, or both. When all the energies of a people are devoted to the production of merely useful things, and when a narrow utilitarian spirit controls education, life fatally becomes hard and uninteresting. Wealth may be accumulated, but those who possess it will not know how to enjoy it; there may be great display, but there will be little refinement; great mental activity, but little intelligence. A sense for what is noble, beautiful, and sublime, is not less important than a sense for the practical realities of life, and the one needs cultivating quite as much as the other. Those who have acquired the faculty of seeing and loving what is beautiful in nature and art, have an inexhaustible source of delight and happiness. They have what money can not buy, what title and position can not confer. They are at home in God's fair world, and whatever they look upon is theirs. In a very



few this faculty is inborn; in the multitude it will be wanting, unless the sense of beauty is cultivated in the young.

In a school system from which religion is excluded, it is not surprising that no place should be found for art; but Catholics, who, in their own schools, neglect to train the imagination and to cultivate a taste for whatever is fair and noble, are untrue to the spirit of Catholic faith.

"All religions cherish art," said Napoleon to Canova, "but none so much as our own."

It is one of the glories of the Church that it has scorned no human gift, condemned no form of genius. Whatever individuals may have done to narrow the scope of its action and influence, its general spirit has been really catholic. It has ever looked upon the Christian revelation as the full manifestation of the divine reason, which by word and deed seeks to make itself prevail in the history of the race; not to thwart or cripple human activity, but to consecrate it and give it higher aims. It has always felt that in spite of apparent contradictions, there is harmony between Christian faith and science. Its appeal is to reason and conscience, not to force. It preserved the ancient literature; it founded schools; it protected and encouraged men of learning and genius. During the period known as the Renaissance, in which the

modern mind first awakened, Italy led the other nations, and in Italy the Popes were the chief promoters of the new culture. It refused to permit learning to become the appanage of a caste or an aristocracy, but fostered talent whether it was found in the prince or the peasant. It made ability and not birth the test of worth, choosing its rulers from the lowest class of society, if it discovered there the ablest men. It was in itself a people's university, whose teaching, open to all, assuming the capacity and equality of all, was a world-wide preparatory training for the modern assertion of popular rights and liberties. But it did more than set up in its cathedrals and churches the teacher's chair, around which the whole people were gathered, to listen to the utterance of the sublimest and most elevating truths: it sought to make the temple of religion a temple of art. It erected those vast and mysterious Gothic structures which are still the most interesting monuments of the old world. The very light which streams into them through those wonderful windows, not unworthy to be the portals of Paradise, reminds us of other worlds, while the music which floods the far-withdrawing aisles, deep and solemn as the voice of ocean, sounds like an echo from the infinite home of God, to which all souls belong. From the deep-glowing windows, and



from numberless niches, apostles, martyrs and virgins look out upon the worshipping multitude, who turn towards the altar of the real presence where burns the quenchless light. Or if we take a different style of architecture, it asks the mighty genius of Michael Angelo to lift the Pantheon and place it as a crown upon St. Peter's. It bids Fra Angelico paint bodies which seem to be spirits, so transfused are they by the light of the soul; it bids Leonardo da Vinci paint the Last Supper, "a labor worthy of eternal youth." The traveller who visits Dresden finds at least one sanctuary in the cold Saxon city. It is the little room which holds the Madonna of Raphael. At whatever hour one may enter, he finds there a throng, sitting and standing in silence, subdued, uplifted, purified by this work of genius, whose disappearance would make not that city alone, but all the world poorer.

Recall for a moment the ways in which men have worshipped the gods or God:—the human sacrifices of the Phenicians, Arabians, Romans, Greeks, and our own barbarous ancestors: the sight and scent of animal blood, never absent from the temples of Greece and Rome, or even from the temple of Jerusalem: the drunkenness and debauchery which formed part of the worship of so many peoples: and then turn to contemplate the radical and world-wide revolution wrought by the Chris-

tian religion in the ritual observance of mankind. What sweet and pleasant memories cluster around the day which is set aside for public worship—to think of it, is to think of bright Spring mornings, when the air is calm, when the blue heavens, with here and there a floating cloud, stoop closer to earth, when from amidst the wide-spreading green, the many-colored flowers look forth half-afraid, and the birds sing in gentler and more tender cadence. A sort of stillness steals over the earth—the very cattle are subdued. Through the quiet air the silvery peal of the bell is heard like a heavenly call to prayer. Then from innumerable homes reverent groups issue, and led by the sweet sound make their way to church. They are clothed with greater care and neatness and their faces are brighter than on other days. The peaceful soul illumines the countenance. The voice is more sympathetic, the manner more observant, the bond of love more consciously felt. Neighbors greet one another and enter into pleasant conversation: the shy children venture to speak, and in the hearts of youths and maidens there awakens a dream of the holy mystery of love. And then within the church before the altar, all are one family. The priest, whom they call father, is the symbol and representative of their Father in heaven. Their thoughts and hopes and loves



commingle as they ascend to God, as hearts are drawn together when they aspire. The old recall the days of their youth and remember those who have fallen asleep in the Lord. Thus there is not only a union of souls, but a communion of the living and the dead. Here the master and the servant, the sage and the child, the man and the woman are on a level. And in the observances themselves what pure and holy influences we discover. The vestments of the priest recall an age and a civilization which have passed away: the language of the ritual is that of a people which has ceased to exist. Thus a consciousness of the continuity of history, of the debt the present owes the past, is kept alive, and a sense of reverence and thankfulness is awakened. The prayers, whether of the priest or the people, are as sublime as they are simple and spiritual. In what glad jubilant tones "The glory to God in the highest" breaks forth from the organ-loft, while the whole congregation rises thrilled by a new hope and diviner faith. What heroic strength, what unconquerable energy, re-echoes in the deep rich music of the *credo*. Is there a higher wisdom to be learned in any school than that which falls from the lips of the priest? Are there more sacred or purer emotions than those which fill the hearts of the multitude, whose heads are bowed in adoration

while the host is raised? The elevation and charm of Christian worship was felt already by Constantine, who called the religion of Christ the most devout of religions. This noble worship is the expression of a rich and exuberant religious life, which unfolds itself in every direction, and modifies all the thoughts and feelings of men. It has subdued to its service the tenderest souls and the noblest hearts. The sublimest genius has felt its inspiration and has knelt as a servant in the temple of the Lord. The poet and the painter, the orator and the musician, the architect and the sculptor, like the kings of old, bring rich offerings to the Saviour of men. It is certainly well that our children should know something of all this, and if possible, feel the exaltation of mind, and the glow of imagination which a genuine love of art tends to produce: for the love of art is the love of perfection. They who feel it, will strive to do well whatever they do. They will not be easily satisfied with their own work or with that of others. Only what is excellent will have power to please them, and they will soon learn to understand that there is an artistic as there is a vulgar way of doing everything; and they will labor to speak, to write, to walk, to build, to paint, to think and love, even, after the manner of the more excellent and noble sort of men. This little book, written by the



daughter of one of the most gifted artists of America, will, I feel confident, help to cultivate a love of art, and to inspire at least a few of our young Americans with a desire to emulate the great men and women who have given us higher aims and diviner thoughts.

J. L. SPALDING.

PEORIA, Nov. 14, 1891.

## ON CHRISTIAN ART.

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**T**HIS little book is written to give the first idea of what is meant by "Christian Art." The word "art" is often seen and used without being quite understood, and as every word, half understood, ought to be explained, I will try to make this one clear.

All that is beautiful or elevating to the mind has to do with art. Many will tell you that it is useless, and that those who become artists are men and women who can do nothing useful. This is not true. It is useful to write beautiful and instructive books; to do that you must be an artist. It is useful to paint fine pictures, or to make superb statues; to do that you must be an artist. It is useful to compose music, and to do that you must be an artist.

To become a great painter or sculptor a natural gift from Heaven is necessary. It would therefore



be a waste of time for a child having no talent to spend his days drawing; but if he has taste and training, he can become an artist in a more humble way. He can copy works made by great men, who lived many years ago, models of which in plaster are to be found in all museums; these he can study to reproduce. Thus he can become a wood-carver and learn to make church stalls as well as angels and saints with which to ornament churches and chapels. He can become an iron-forgers and make communion rails; he can also learn to become an assistant architect and help to build beautiful churches, and thus he can become a good mechanic, which it is a pleasant and useful thing to be.

To show you what a great part religious inspiration has played in the world of art, let us for a moment suppress all religious art. Let us take down all pictures representing Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin, the martyrs, apostles, and saints—all religious sculpture and all religious architecture, in fact, all works inspired by faith and by the love of God, and see what a gap this would leave in the world of art.

Of course, there are many superb works of art which have not been inspired by religious fervor—but that branch of art must be left for a study apart. This little book, as its name indicates, treats especially of religious art.

What does the word "art" mean?

Is art useful?

Can any one become a painter or a sculptor?

What can a child with taste be taught to do?

Has Christian art played an important part in the world of art?

Is there any art outside of religious productions?