

# BERENSON



THE ITALIAN PAINTERS  
OF THE RENAISSANCE  
WITH 400 ILLUSTRATIONS

PHAIDON



PISANELLO: *Madonna and Child with two Saints*. National Gallery, London

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## XVIII

While all these advances were being made, the art of portraiture had not stood still. Its popularity had only increased as the years went on. Titian was too busy with commissions for foreign princes to supply the great demand there was in Venice alone. Tintoretto painted portraits not only with much of the air of good breeding of Titian's likenesses, but with even greater splendour, and with an astonishing rapidity of execution. The Venetian portrait, it will be remembered, was expected to be more than a likeness. It was expected to give pleasure to the eye, and to stimulate the emotions. Tintoretto was ready to give ample satisfaction to all such expectations. His portraits, although they are not so individualized as Lotto's, nor such close studies of character as Titian's, always render the man at his best, in glowing health, full of life and determination. They give us the sensuous pleasure we get from jewels, and at the same time they make us look back with amazement to a State where the human plant was in such vigour as to produce old men of the kind represented in most of Tintoretto's portraits.

Tintoretto's  
portraits

Pls. 75-7

With Tintoretto ends the universal interest the Venetian school arouses; for although painting does not deteriorate in a day any more

than it grows to maturity in the same brief moment, the story of the decay has none of the fascination of the growth. But several artists remain to be considered who were not of the Venetian school in the strict sense of the term, yet have always been included within it.



75. TINTORETTO: *Portrait of Jacopo Soranzo*. Academy, Venice



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76. TINTORETTO: *Portrait of a Gentlewoman*. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

77. TINTORETTO: *Portrait of Vincenzo Morosini*. National Gallery, London

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Let it not be believed that I have chosen the one and only instance in which Duccio is a great composer. There is scarcely a painting of his which does not betray a sense little less delicate, if at all, for mass and line and enclosure. Want of space, and the fear of vexing the reader with descriptions which, to be exact, should be couched in the jangling vocabulary of geometry, restrain me from giving many further examples. But let me refer to one with which we already are familiar, the 'Betrayal of Judas'. What compactness and dignity are given to the mass in which we find Christ, by the two tufted trees that

surmount it! Without them, the group would look dwarfed and heavy. Note that the most important figure here, that of Christ, stands directly under one of these trees, which occupies the middle of the whole composition. See how this tree serves, not only to converge all the lines upon His head, but helps, by being in continuous upward movement with Him, to heighten His figure. And what a glamour of beauty is lent to the scene by the lances and torches of the soldiers—lines that are and are not parallel—an effect so easily attained, yet counting for so much, not only here, but in numerous compositions ranging through art, from the Pompeian 'Battle of Alexander' to the 'Lancers' of Velazquez!

If Duccio was so sublime in his conceptions, so deep in feeling, so skilful in transcribing them in adequate forms; if, in addition to all these merits as an Illustrator, he can win us with the material splendour of his surfaces; if he composes as few but Raphael, and can even make us realize space, why have we heard of him so seldom? Why is he not as renowned as Giotto? Why is he not ranked with the greatest painters? Giotto was but little younger, and there could have been a scarcely perceptible difference between the public of the one and the public of the other. Most of Giotto's paintings now existing were, in fact, executed rather earlier than Duccio's reredos. Is the illustrative part of Giotto's work greater? On the whole, it certainly is not; at times it is decidedly inferior, seldom having Duccio's manifold expressiveness and delicately shaded feeling. If Giotto, then, was no greater an Illustrator than Duccio, and if his illustrations, as illustrations, correspond no more than Duccio's to topics we crave nowadays to see interpreted in visual form, and if, as interpretation, they are equally remote from our own conception and feeling; if, in short, one is no more than the other a writer of pictorial leaders on the entrancing interests of the hour, why is the one still a living force, while the other has faded to the shadow of a name? There must exist surely a *viaticum* which bears its possessor to our own hearts, across the wastes of time—some secret that Giotto possessed and Duccio had never learned.

What is this mysterious life-conserving virtue—in what does it consist? The answer is brief—in *life itself*. If the artist can cunningly seize upon the spirit of life and imprison it in his paintings, his works, barring material accidents, will live for ever. If he contrives to give range to this spirit, to make it leap out, to mingle with and increase the life in our veins, then, for as long as we remain humanized beings, he will hold us in his thrall.



The essential  
in painting

I have attempted elsewhere in this volume to explain what is this *viaticum*, this quality so essential to the figure arts that, for want of it, when scarcely born, they dwindle away; and to Book II, *Florentine Painters* (pp. 40-43), wherein the question is discussed, I must refer the reader. Here I shall limit myself to saying that, by means of their more subtle Decorative elements, the arts must be life-enhancing—not by their material charm alone, still less by their attractiveness as Illustrations. This particular life-communicating quality is in the figure arts to be attained by the rendering of form and movement. I prefer to the word 'form' to use the expression 'tactile values', for form in the figure arts gives us pleasure because it has extracted and presented to us the corporeal and structural significance of objects more quickly and more completely than we—unless, indeed, we also be great artists, or see as they see—could have grasped them by ourselves. This intimate realization of an object comes to us only when we unconsciously translate our retinal impressions of it into ideated sensations of touch, pressure, and grasp—hence the phrase 'tactile values'. Correct drawing, fine modelling, subtle light and shade, are not final goods. In themselves they have no value whatever, and it does not in the least explain the excellence of a picture to say it is well modelled, well lighted, and well drawn. We esteem these qualities because with them the artist succeeds in conveying tactile values and movement; but to suppose that we love pictures merely because they are well painted, is as if we said that we like a dinner because it is well cooked, whereas, in fact, we like it only because it *tastes* good. To speak of the drawing, the modelling, the chiaroscuro, as to speak of cookery in the instance of a dinner, is the business of the persons who paint and cook; but we whose privilege it is to enjoy what has been cooked or painted for us—we, I say, must either talk of it in terms of enjoyment and the psychology thereof, or—talk nonsense!

Tactile values  
and move-  
ment

Tactile values and movement, then, are the essential qualities in the figure arts, and no figure-painting is real—has a value of its own apart from the story it has to tell, the ideal it has to present—unless it conveys ideated sensations of touch and movement. If I may be pardoned a very childish parable, it is like someone who comes to us with a message. He tells us something we are very eager to know. No matter how we have been rejoiced by his news, no matter how attractive he seems, if he is merely a messenger, it is only of his message that we think. But let him be a man of character and a gentleman, let him be sympathetic, and his message will have been but the happy accident that has initiated a lifelong friendship. And so with a picture;

long after, years after we have exhausted its message, if it have tactile values and movement, we are more in love with it than ever, because these qualities, like the attractions in a friend, have the power of directly enhancing life.

And now to return to Duccio. His paintings do not possess these virtues, and therefore have been nearly forgotten, while Giotto's works contain them to a degree so remarkable that even today the real lover of art prefers them to all but a very few masterpieces. For Duccio, the human figure was in the first place important as a person in a drama, then as a member in a composition, and only at the last, if at all, as an object whereby to stimulate our ideated feelings of touch and movement. The result is that we admire him profoundly as a pictorial dramatist, as a Christian Sophocles, somewhat astray in the realm of painting; we enjoy his material splendour and his exquisite composition, but rarely if ever do we find him directly life-communicating.

A few instances will prove my point, and I choose them among subjects which not only lend themselves to specifically pictorial treatment, but even seem to suggest such treatment on Duccio's part. Let us turn again to the now familiar 'Incredulity of Thomas'. That it appeals to our hearts and minds we were more than convinced when we studied it as Illustration; that it causes the optic muscles and the mental activities directly dependent on them to function delightfully, we found while admiring it as Composition; but there we stop. The figures have not even the effectiveness for evoking sensations of touch and movement that things bodily present possess, and yet art should be *more* evocative than actuality. Look at Thomas. As long as you regard him as a mere shape in a given attitude and with a given action, he probably corresponds to reality more than do your visual images, and you find him pleasant. But once look for something within this shape, and you will be surprised, for you will find, not, it is true, a complete lack of tactile values, but only just enough to make the figure pass as a familiar shape and no more. Thomas is draped in the very best way for enabling one to realize his corporeal and functional significance, but unfortunately—although he is perhaps the best modelled figure in Duccio's entire works—there is not enough under his robe even to persuade one of reality, not to speak of stimulating one's own internal activities; and as for the action, it is scarcely indicated at all. He certainly seems to move, yet the legs have not the slightest existence under the drapery, admirably arranged as it is to indicate the action of the limbs it ought to cover; and the feet, while sufficiently

Pl. 249

- resembling feet, have almost no weight and certainly do not press down on the ground. As a consequence we get none of those ideated sensations of movement and pressure in our own legs and feet—sensations which, when we feel them, not only convince us of the reality of the object that has stimulated them, but give us much of the pleasure of activity with none of its drawbacks and fatigues. If we look at the Christ in this same composition, we find that He does not stand at all; and it is almost as bad with another figure which, for mere shape and attitude, has all the qualities of the ‘Sophocles’ of the Lateran. In Pl. 248 the panel which represents the ‘Denial of Peter’, we found the story told with the familiarity of *genre*, and even with a touch of humour; yet here again, except for their heads and hands, the figures seem manufactured of tissue-paper. None of the bodies suggests resistance to push, they have no weight, they do not settle or press down as they sit, although the artist reproduces well the mere shapes of people in the attitude of sitting and stretching to warm themselves. In Pl. 246 ‘Washing of the Feet’ we see one of the younger disciples half kneeling, half sitting, with his arms stretched down to take off his sandals. Here, again, the shape and attitude are well reproduced, and they happen to be such as a great artist would have chosen for the splendid opportunity they afford to render tactile values and movement. But alas! tissue-paper clothes are all we get. Look at the ‘Miraculous Draught’. Three of the disciples have to perfection the facial expression and the attitudes and gestures of people pulling up a heavy weight, but nothing could be flatter and emptier than the figure of just that disciple who is making the greatest effort. Even the net is scarcely given any weight, and the fish inside neither struggle nor sprawl—are not yet aware that they are in its meshes.

It is a thankless task demonstrating the failings of a great man, and one instance more shall suffice. Again it is a subject which affords unsurpassable opportunities for rendering tactile values and movement—the ‘Deposition from the Cross’. A more pathetic, a more felt, a more dignified version of this theme does not exist, and Duccio has arranged it as if to go even farther. An elderly disciple, with his foot firmly planted on the ladder, and one arm hooked over the beam of the cross, supports with the other arm the body of Jesus as it falls forward lifeless into His Mother’s embrace. Meanwhile, another disciple, kneeling, draws out the nails from Christ’s feet while still they are fixed to the cross, and yet another disciple clasps the body about the waist to prevent its falling forward too far. As mere shape, Christ’s body is a much finer nude than any Giotto ever painted;



246. DUCCIO DI BUONINSEGNA: *The Washing of Feet*.  
Museo dell'Opera, Siena



247. DUCCIO DI BUONINSEGNA: *The Betrayal of Judas*.  
Museo dell'Opera, Siena



248. DUCCIO DI BUONINSEGNA: *Peter denying Christ*.  
Museo dell'Opera, Siena



249. DUCCIO DI BUONINSEGNA: *Doubting Thomas*.  
Museo dell'Opera, Siena



250. DUCCIO DI BUONINSEGNA: *The Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew*.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington (Kress Collection)

## PREFACE

MANY see pictures without knowing what to look at. They are asked to admire works of pretended art and they do not know enough to say, like the child in Andersen's tale, 'Look, the Emperor has nothing on'.

Vaguely the public feels that it is not being fed, perhaps taken in, possibly made fun of.

It is as if suddenly they were cut off from familiar food and told to eat dishes utterly unknown, with queer tastes, foreboding perhaps that they were poisonous.

In a long experience humanity has learnt what beasts of the field, what fowl of the air, what creeping things, what fishes, what vegetables and fruits it can feed on. In the course of thousands of years it has learnt how to cook them so as to appeal to smell, palate and teeth, to be toothsome.

In the same way some few of us have learnt in the course of ages what works of art, what paintings, what sculpture, what architecture feed the spirit.

Not many feel as convinced of what they are seeing as of what they are eating.

Just as all of us have learnt what is best as food, some of us think we have learnt what is best as art.

A person with convictions about his normal workaday food may enjoy highly savoured cookery for a change, or out of curiosity, but he will always return to the dishes he grew up on—as we Americans say, to 'mother's cooking'.

Art lacks the urgency of food, and little children are not taught what to look at as they are taught what to eat. And unless they are brought up in families of taste as well as of means, they are not likely to develop unconsciously a feeling for visual art, as they do, let us say, for language. Words and speech they pick up before they know what instruments they are learning to use. Later at school they are taught to practise and enjoy language as an art, as communicative speech and writing, chiefly through the reading of graduated passages from the best authors and through being taught how to understand and appreciate and enjoy them. In that way habits of liking and disliking are lodged in the mind. They guide us through life in encountering the not yet classified, the not yet consecrated, and in recognizing what is and what is not valuable and enjoyable or worth making the effort to

understand and enjoy. They end by giving us a sense of antecedent probability towards literature.

Why should we not try to implant such habits in a child's mind also for the visual arts?

Unhappily pictures cannot as yet be printed (so to speak) exactly as they are painted, in the way a writer's manuscript can be, without losing the quality of the original. The reproduction of a picture is still a makeshift, and may remain so for a long time, even if accurate and satisfactory colour reproductions should become available. The size of a composition has a certain effect on its quality, and colour clings to what is behind it. Thus a colour will, of course, not be the same on wood as on slate or marble or copper, and will vary from textile to textile on which it is applied, as for instance rough or ordinary canvas or fine linen.

On the whole therefore (despite the childish hanker today for colour reproductions, no matter how crude) the black and white, made from a photo that preserves tones and values, give the most satisfactory image of the original.

With that conviction in mind and with the idea of furnishing examples on which to educate the eye and the faculties that use the eye as an instrument, the present edition of *Italian Painters of the Renaissance* offers 400 illustrations representing all phases of Italian pictorial art during the three hundred years that begin a little before 1300 and end short of 1600.

For example: the Byzantine phase is represented by the greatest and completest master of that style anywhere in the world, namely, Duccio. The sturdy, severely tactile Romanesque mode by Giotto, its most creative and most accomplished master, and by his best followers, Andrea Orcagna and Nardo di Cione.

Then comes the fifteenth century and the struggle started by Masolino and Masaccio to emancipate painting from degenerate calligraphic Gothic affectation. Masaccio was a resurrected Giotto, with even increased power of communicating dignity, responsibility, spirituality by means of appropriate shapes, attitudes and grouping of figures. After his early death, Florentine painting, profiting by the great sculptors Donatello and Ghiberti and developed by artists like Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi, Pollaiuolo, Botticelli and Leonardo, culminated in Michelangelo, Andrea del Sarto and their immediate followers Pontormo and Bronzino. By that time the Florentines not only had recovered the indispensable mastery of the nude that the

Greeks cherished, but in the painting of landscape went beyond them, thanks to their better understanding of light and shade and perspective.

They handed on these achievements to Venice and to the rest of Italy, but to Venice particularly and later to France and Spain.

Venice and Umbria were sufficiently gifted to take advantage of what Florence could give them. They could throw away the scaffolding that the Florentines were too pious or too proud to cast off and produce painters like Perugino and Raphael at their most radiant best, and Giorgione, Titian and Tintoretto, with all their magic and colour, splendour of form and delight in placing the human figure in lordly surroundings and romantic scenery.

Excepting Paolo Veronese (who came, it is true, from Verona, but ended in Venice and was as Venetian as his only equals, namely, Titian and Tintoretto), the north of Italy produced only one artist of the highest mark, Andrea Mantegna of Padua. Milan to be sure had Foppa, Borgognone and Luini, the last valued by Ruskin as Italy's most communicative and convincing religious painter. Nowadays we care more for the energy and vehemence and fancy of the Ferrarese, Tura, Cossa and Ercole Roberti. They put to good use what they took from Donatello, Fra Filippo, Andrea Mantegna, as well as from Piero della Francesca.

Southern Italy during the centuries we are dealing with had no painter worth considering. Sicily had but one, Antonello da Messina, who never would have been the artist we admire without coming in touch first with Petrus Christus and then with Giovanni Bellini, the most creative, the most fascinating of fifteenth-century Venetians.

Visual language changes as much as spoken language. It takes deliberate training to understand the Saxon spoken by our ancestors till toward 1300. In painting that phase corresponds in Italy to Cimabue and Duccio and their close followers.

It takes a serious effort to learn to understand them. By the end of the fourteenth century there was Chaucer, and we can follow him with less difficulty as we can Giotto and Simone Martini and their successors well into the fifteenth century. In that, and in the next century, our ancestors, under various Latin impulses, were struggling towards a speech which approaches our own, and in the course of the struggle produced Marlowe, Shakespeare and Sidney, Milton, Donne, Herbert and Herrick, and a galaxy of minor poets, just as Italy in the same phase had Fra Angelico, Domenico Veneziano, Masaccio, Fra Filippo, Pollaiuolo, Mantegna and the Bellinis, Botticelli,



Leonardo and Michelangelo. With Dryden and Addison and Pope we come to current English and to their visual equivalents Titian and Veronese, Lotto and Tintoretto.

Happily visual language is easier to acquire than spoken language. One can learn to understand Giotto and Cimabue with less effort and in shorter time than Anglo-Saxon or even Middle English writers.

We therefore do not ask too much of the reader if we expect him to begin with looking at what is remotest from him instead of what is nearest, as would be the case with literature.

I am not an assiduous reader of my own writings. Decades have passed without my perusing the text of the *Italian Painters of the Renaissance* from cover to cover. In glancing through its pages now, I have tried to approach it as I would any other book that treated the same subject.

On the whole, it still seems to fulfil its purpose. It does not attempt to give an account of the painters' domestic lives or even of their specific techniques, but of what their pictures mean to us today as works of art, of what they can do for us as ever contemporary life-enhancing actualities. The text may help the reader to understand what the reproductions tell him, and may make him ask what he feels when he looks at them and try to account for his reactions while enjoying a work of visual art—in this instance, the paintings of the Italian Renaissance.

The quality of art remains the same, regardless of time and place and artist. Nevertheless, our feeling for it is conditioned by time and place and the personality of the artist. Acquaintance with these limitations is necessary for the enjoyment and understanding of the work of art. We are so made that we cannot help asking whence and whither, and we appreciate an object more when we know not only what it is intrinsically on its own merits, but also where it came from and what it led to.

Yet too much time should not be wasted in reading about pictures instead of looking at them. Reading will help little towards the enjoyment and appreciation and understanding of the work of art. It is enough to know when and where an artist was born and what older artist shaped and inspired him, rarely, as it happens, the master or teacher who first put pen, pencil and brush into his hands. Least profit is to be got from the writings of the metaphysical and psycho-analytical kind. If read one must, let it be the literature and history of the time and place to which the paintings belong.

We must look and look and look till we live the painting and for a fleeting moment become identified with it. If we do not succeed in loving what through the ages has been loved, it is useless to lie ourselves into believing that we do. A good rough test is whether we feel that it is reconciling us with life.

No artifact is a work of art if it does not help to humanize us. Without art, visual, verbal and musical, our world would have remained a jungle.

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I Tatti, Settignano, Florence

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