

KNIGHTS OF THE ART

BY

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About This Book.....	3
Giotto	5
Fra Angelico.....	12
Masaccio	16
Fra Filippo Lippi	18
Sandro Botticelli	34
Domenico Ghirlandaio.....	40
Filippino Lippi	45
Pietro Perugino.....	48
Leonardo Da Vinci.....	57
Raphael	67
Michelangelo.....	71
Andrea Del Sarto.....	76
The Bellini	82
Vittore Carpaccio	86
Giorgione	89
Titian.....	93
Tintoretto.....	95
Paul Veronese	99

About This Book

What would we do without our picture-books, I wonder? Before we knew how to read, before even we could speak, we had learned to love them. We shouted with pleasure when we turned the pages and saw the spotted cow standing in the daisy-sprinkled meadow, the foolish-looking old sheep with her gambolling lambs, the wise dog with his friendly eyes. They were all real friends to us.

Then a little later on, when we began to ask for stories about the pictures, how we loved them more and more. There was the little girl in the red cloak talking to the great grey wolf with the wicked eyes; the cottage with the bright pink roses climbing round the lattice-window, out of which jumped a little maid with golden hair, followed by the great big bear, the middle-sized bear, and the tiny bear. Truly those stories were a great joy to us, but we would never have loved them quite so much if we had not known their pictured faces as well.

Do you ever wonder how all these pictures came to be made? They had a beginning, just as everything else had, but the beginning goes so far back that we can scarcely trace it.

Children have not always had picture-books to look at. In the long-ago days such things were not known. Thousands of years ago, far away in Assyria, the Assyrian people learned to make pictures and to carve them out in stone. In Egypt, too, the Egyptians traced pictures upon the walls of their temples and upon the painted mummy-cases of the dead. Then the Greeks made still more beautiful statues and pictures in marble, and called them gods and goddesses, for all this was at a time when the true God was forgotten.

Afterwards, when Christ had come and the people had learned that the pictured gods were not real, they began to think it wicked to make beautiful pictures or carve marble statues. The few pictures that were made were stiff and ugly, the figures were not like real men and women, the animals and trees were very strange-looking things. And instead of making the sky blue as it really was, they made it a chequered pattern of gold. After a time it seemed as if the art of making pictures was going to die out altogether.

Then came the time which is called 'The Renaissance,' a word which means being born again, or a new awakening, when men began to draw real pictures of real things and fill the world with images of beauty.

Now it is the stories of the men of that time, who put new life into Art, that I am going to tell you-- men who learned, step by step, to paint the most beautiful pictures that the world possesses.

In telling these stories I have been helped by an old book called *The Lives of the Painters*, by Giorgio Vasari, who was himself a painter. He took great delight in gathering together all the stories about these artists and writing them down with loving care, so that he shows us real living men, and not merely great names by which the famous pictures are known.

It did not make much difference to us when we were little children whether our pictures were good or bad, as long as the colours were bright and we knew what they meant. But as we grow older and wiser our eyes grow wiser too, and we learn to know what is good and what is poor. Only, just as our tongues must be trained to speak, our hands to work, and our ears to love good music, so our eyes must be taught to see what is beautiful, or we may perhaps pass it carelessly by, and lose a great joy which might be ours.

So now if you learn something about these great artists and their wonderful pictures, it will help your eyes to grow wise. And some day should you visit sunny Italy, where these men lived and worked, you will feel that they are quite old friends. Their pictures will not only be a delight to your eyes, but will teach your heart something deeper and more wonderful than any words can explain.

AMY STEEDMAN

Giotto

It was more than six hundred years ago that a little peasant baby was born in the small village of Vespignano, not far from the beautiful city of Florence, in Italy. The baby's father, an honest, hard-working countryman, was called Bondone, and the name he gave to his little son was Giotto.

Life was rough and hard in that country home, but the peasant baby grew into a strong, hardy boy, learning early what cold and hunger meant. The hills which surrounded the village were grey and bare, save where the silver of the olive-trees shone in the sunlight, or the tender green of the shooting corn made the valley beautiful in early spring. In summer there was little shade from the blazing sun as it rode high in the blue sky, and the grass which grew among the grey rocks was often burnt and brown. But, nevertheless, it was here that the sheep of the village would be turned out to find what food they could, tended and watched by one of the village boys.

So it happened that when Giotto was ten years old his father sent him to take care of the sheep upon the hillside. Country boys had then no schools to go to or lessons to learn, and Giotto spent long happy days, in sunshine and rain, as he followed the sheep from place to place, wherever they could find grass enough to feed on. But Giotto did something else besides watching his sheep. Indeed, he sometimes forgot all about them, and many a search he had to gather them all together again. For there was one thing he loved doing better than all beside, and that was to try to draw pictures of all the things he saw around him.

It was no easy matter for the little shepherd lad. He had no pencils or paper, and he had never, perhaps, seen a picture in all his life. But all this mattered little to him. Out there, under the blue sky, his eyes made pictures for him out of the fleecy white clouds as they slowly changed from one form to another. He learned to know exactly the shape of every flower and how it grew; he noticed how the olive-trees laid their silver leaves against the blue background of the sky that peeped in between, and how his sheep looked as they stooped to eat, or lay down in the shadow of a rock.

Nothing escaped his keen, watchful eyes, and then with eager hands he would sharpen a piece of stone, choose out the smoothest rock, and try to draw on its flat surface all those wonderful shapes which had filled his eyes with their beauty. Olive-trees, flowers, birds and beasts were there, but especially his sheep, for they were his friends and companions who were always near him, and he could draw them in a different way each time they moved.

Now it fell out that one day a great master painter from Florence came riding through the valley and over the hills where Giotto was feeding his sheep. The name of the great master was Cimabue, and he was the most wonderful artist in the world, so men said. He had painted a picture which had made all Florence rejoice. The Florentines had never seen anything like it before, and yet it was but a strange-looking portrait of the Madonna

and Child, scarcely like a real woman or a real baby at all. Still, it seemed to them a perfect wonder, and Cimabue was honoured as one of the city's greatest men.

The road was lonely as it wound along. There was nothing to be seen but waves of grey hills on every side, so the stranger rode on, scarcely lifting his eyes as he went. Then suddenly he came upon a flock of sheep nibbling the scanty sunburnt grass, and a little brown-faced shepherd-boy gave him a cheerful 'Good-day, master.'

There was something so bright and merry in the boy's smile that the great man stopped and began to talk to him. Then his eye fell upon the smooth flat rock over which the boy had been bending, and he started with surprise.

'Who did that?' he asked quickly, and he pointed to the outline of a sheep scratched upon the stone.

'It is the picture of one of my sheep there,' answered the boy, hanging his head with a shame-faced look. 'I drew it with this,' and he held out towards the stranger the sharp stone he had been using.

'Who taught you to do this?' asked the master as he looked more carefully at the lines drawn on the rock.

The boy opened his eyes wide with astonishment 'Nobody taught me, master,' he said. 'I only try to draw the things that my eyes see.'

'How would you like to come with me to Florence and learn to be a painter?' asked Cimabue, for he saw that the boy had a wonderful power in his little rough hands.

Giotto's cheeks flushed, and his eyes shone with joy.

'Indeed, master, I would come most willingly,' he cried, 'if only my father will allow it.'

So back they went together to the village, but not before Giotto had carefully put his sheep into the fold, for he was never one to leave his work half done.

Bondone was amazed to see his boy in company with such a grand stranger, but he was still more surprised when he heard of the stranger's offer. It seemed a golden chance, and he gladly gave his consent.

Why, of course, the boy should go to Florence if the gracious master would take him and teach him to become a painter. The home would be lonely without the boy who was so full of fun and as bright as a sunbeam. But such chances were not to be met with every day, and he was more than willing to let him go.

So the master set out, and the boy Giotto went with him to Florence to begin his training.

The studio where Cimabue worked was not at all like those artists' rooms which we now call studios. It was much more like a workshop, and the boys who went there to learn how to draw and paint were taught first how to grind and prepare the colours and then to mix them. They were not allowed to touch a brush or pencil for a long time, but only to watch their master at work, and learn all that they could from what they saw him do.

So there the boy Giotto worked and watched, but when his turn came to use the brush, to the amazement of all, his pictures were quite unlike anything which had ever been painted before in the workshop. Instead of copying the stiff, unreal figures, he drew real people, real animals, and all the things which he had learned to know so well on the grey hillside, when he watched his father's sheep. Other artists had painted the Madonna and Infant Christ, but Giotto painted a mother and a baby.

And before long this worked such a wonderful change that it seemed indeed as if the art of making pictures had been born again. To us his work still looks stiff and strange, but in it was the beginning of all the beautiful pictures that belong to us now.

Giotto did not only paint pictures, he worked in marble as well. To-day, if you walk through Florence, the City of Flowers, you will still see its fairest flower of all, the tall white campanile or bell-tower, 'Giotto's tower' as it is called. There it stands in all its grace and loveliness like a tall white lily against the blue sky, pointing ever upward, in the grand old faith of the shepherd-boy. Day after day it calls to prayer and to good works, as it has done all these hundreds of years since Giotto designed and helped to build it.

Some people call his pictures stiff and ugly, for not every one has wise eyes to see their beauty, but the loveliness of this tower can easily be seen by all. There the white doves circle round and round, and rest in the sheltering niches of the delicately carved arches; there at the call of its bell the black-robed Brothers of Pity hurry past to their works of mercy. There too the little children play, and sometimes stop to stare at the marble pictures, set in the first story of the tower, low enough to be seen from the street. Their special favourite is perhaps the picture of the shepherd sitting under his tent, with the sheep in front, and with the funniest little dog keeping watch at the side.

Giotto always had a great love for animals, and whenever it was possible he would squeeze one into a corner of his pictures. He was sixty years old when he designed this wonderful tower and cut some of the marble pictures with his own hand, but you can see that the memory of those old days when he ran barefoot about the hills and tended his sheep was with him still. Just such another little puppy must have often played with him in those long-ago days before he became a great painter and was still only a merry, brown-faced boy, making pictures with a sharp stone upon the smooth rocks.

Up and down the narrow streets of Florence now, the great painter would walk and watch the faces of the people as they passed. And his eyes would still make pictures of them and their busy life, just as they used to do with the olive-trees, the sheep, and the clouds.

In those days nobody cared to have pictures in their houses, and only the walls of the churches were painted. So the pictures, or frescoes, as they were called, were of course all about sacred subjects, either stories out of the Bible or of the lives of the saints. And as there were few books, and the poor people did not know how to read, these frescoed walls were the only story-books they had.

What a joy those pictures of Giotto's must have been, then, to those poor folk! They looked at the little Baby Jesus sitting on His mother's knee, wrapped in swaddling bands, just like one of their own little ones, and it made Him seem a very real baby. The wise men who talked together and pointed to the shining star overhead looked just like any of the great nobles of Florence. And there at the back were the two horses looking on with wise interested eyes, just as any of their own horses might have done.

It seemed to make the story of Christmas a thing which had really happened, instead of a far-away tale which had little meaning for them. Heaven and the Madonna were not so far off after all. And it comforted them to think that the Madonna had been a real woman like themselves, and that the Jesu Bambino would stoop to bless them still, just as He leaned forward to bless the wise men in the picture.

How real too would seem the old story of the meeting of Anna and Joachim at the Golden Gate, when they could gaze upon the two homely figures under the narrow gateway. No visionary saints these, but just a simple husband and wife, meeting each other with joy after a sad separation, and yet with the touch of heavenly meaning shown by the angel who hovers above and places a hand upon each head.

It was not only in Florence that Giotto did his work. His fame spread far and wide, and he went from town to town eagerly welcomed by all. We can trace his footsteps as he went, by those wonderful old pictures which he spread with loving care over the bare walls of the churches, lifting, as it were, the curtain that hides Heaven from our view and bringing some of its joys to earth.

Then, at Assisi, he covered the walls and ceiling of the church with the wonderful frescoes of the life of St. Francis; and the little round commonplace Arena Chapel of Padua is made exquisite inside by his pictures of the life of our Lord.

In the days when Giotto lived the towns of Italy were continually quarrelling with one another, and there was always fighting going on somewhere. The cities were built with a wall all round them, and the gates were shut each night to keep out their enemies. But often the fighting was between different families inside the city, and the grim old palaces in the narrow streets were built tall and strong that they might be the more easily defended.

In the midst of all this war and quarrelling Giotto lived his quiet, peaceful life, the friend of every one and the enemy of none. Rival towns sent for him to paint their churches with his heavenly pictures, and the people who hated Florence forgot that he was a Florentine. He was just Giotto, and he belonged to them all. His brush was the white flag of truce which made men forget their strife and angry passions, and turned their thoughts to holier things.

Even the great poet Dante did not scorn to be a friend of the peasant painter, and we still have the portrait which Giotto painted of him in an old fresco at Florence. Later on, when the great poet was a poor unhappy exile, Giotto met him again at Padua and helped to cheer some of those sad grey days, made so bitter by strife and injustice.

Now when Giotto was beginning to grow famous, it happened that the Pope was anxious to have the walls of the great Cathedral of St. Peter at Rome decorated. So he sent messengers all over Italy to find out who were the best painters, that he might invite them to come and do the work.

The messengers went from town to town and asked every artist for a specimen of his painting. This was gladly given, for it was counted a great honour to help to make St. Peter's beautiful.

By and by the messengers came to Giotto and told him their errand. The Pope, they said, wished to see one of his drawings to judge if he was fit for the great work. Giotto, who was always most courteous, 'took a sheet of paper and a pencil dipped in a red colour, then, resting his elbow on his side, with one turn of the hand, he drew a circle so perfect and exact that it was a marvel to behold.' 'Here is your drawing,' he said to the messenger, with a smile, handing him the drawing.

'Am I to have nothing more than this?' asked the man, staring at the red circle in astonishment and disgust.

'That is enough and to spare,' answered Giotto. 'Send it with the rest.'

The messengers thought this must all be a joke.

'How foolish we shall look if we take only a round O to show his Holiness,' they said.

But they could get nothing else from Giotto, so they were obliged to be content and to send it with the other drawings, taking care to explain just how it was done.

The Pope and his advisers looked carefully over all the drawings, and, when they came to that round O, they knew that only a master-hand could have made such a perfect circle without the help of a compass. Without a moment's hesitation they decided that Giotto was the man they wanted, and they at once invited him to come to Rome to decorate the cathedral walls. So when the story was known the people became prouder than ever of

their great painter, and the round O of Giotto has become a proverb to this day in Tuscany.

`Round as the O of Giotto, d' ye see;
Which means as well done as a thing can be.'

Later on, when Giotto was at Naples, he was painting in the palace chapel one very hot day, when the king came in to watch him at his work. It really was almost too hot to move, and yet Giotto painted away busily.

`Giotto,' said the king, `if I were in thy place I would give up painting for a while and take my rest, now that it is so hot.'

`And, indeed, so I would most certainly do,' answered Giotto, `if I were in your place, your Majesty.'

It was these quick answers and his merry smile that charmed every one, and made the painter a favourite with rich and poor alike.

There are a great many stories told of him, and they all show what a sunny-tempered, kindly man he was.

It is said that one day he was standing in one of the narrow streets of Florence talking very earnestly to a friend, when a pig came running down the road in a great hurry. It did not stop to look where it was going, but ran right between the painter's legs and knocked him flat on his back, putting an end to his learned talk.

Giotto scrambled to his feet with a rueful smile, and shook his finger at the pig which was fast disappearing in the distance.

`Ah, well!' he said, `I suppose thou hadst as much right to the road as I had. Besides, how many gold pieces I have earned by the help of thy bristles, and never have I given any of thy family even a drop of soup in payment.'

Another time he went riding with a very learned lawyer into the country to look after his property. For when Bondone died, he left all his fields and his farm to his painter son. Very soon a storm came on, and the rain poured down as if it never meant to stop.

`Let us seek shelter in this farmhouse and borrow a cloak,' suggested Giotto.

So they went in and borrowed two old cloaks from the farmer, and wrapped themselves up from head to foot. Then they mounted their horses and rode back together to Florence.

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