

Women in the fine arts, from the Seventh Century B.C. to the Twentieth Century A.D.

Clara Erskine Clement

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[Illustration: Alinari, Photo.

In the Bologna Gallery

THE INFANT CHRIST

ELISABETTA SIRANI]

WOMEN

IN THE FINE ARTS

FROM THE SEVENTH CENTURY B. C.

TO THE

TWENTIETH CENTURY A. D.

BY

CLARA ERSKINE CLEMENT

1904

PREFATORY NOTE

As a means of collecting material for this book I have sent to many artists in Great Britain and in various countries of Europe, as well as in the United States, a circular, asking where their studies were made, what honors they have received, the titles of their principal works, etc.

I take this opportunity to thank those who have cordially replied to my questions, many of whom have given me fuller information than I should have presumed to ask; thus assuring correctness in my statements, which newspaper and magazine notices of artists and their works sometimes fail to do.

I wish especially to acknowledge the courtesy of those who have given me photographs of their pictures and sculpture, to be used as illustrations.

CLARA ERSKINE CLEMENT.

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INTRODUCTION

In studying the subject of this book I have found the names of more than a thousand women whose attainments in the Fine Arts--in various countries and at different periods of time before the middle of the nineteenth century--entitle them to honorable mention as artists, and I doubt not that an exhaustive search would largely increase this number. The stories of many of these women have been written with more or less detail, while of others we know little more than their names and the titles of a few of their works; but even our scanty knowledge of them is of value.

Of the army of women artists of the last century it is not yet possible to speak with judgment and justice, although many have executed works of which all women may be proud.

We have some knowledge of women artists in ancient days. Few stories of that time are so authentic as that of Kora, who made the design for the first bas-relief, in the city of Sicyonia, in the seventh century B. C. We have the names of other Greek women artists of the centuries immediately preceding and following the Christian era, but we know little of their lives and works.

Calypso was famous for the excellence of her character pictures, a remarkable one being a portrait of Theodorus, the Juggler. A picture found at Pompeii, now at Naples, is attributed to this artist; but its authorship is so uncertain that little importance can be attached to it. Pliny praised Eirene, among whose pictures was one of "An Aged Man" and a portrait of "Alcisthenes, the Dancer."

In the annals of Roman Art we find few names of women. For this reason Laya, who lived about a century before the Christian era, is important. She is honored as the original painter of miniatures, and her works on ivory were greatly esteemed. Pliny says she did not marry, but pursued her art with absolute devotion; and he considered her pictures worthy of great praise.

A large picture in Naples is said to be the work of Laya, but, as in the case of Calypso, we have no assurance that it is genuine. It is also said that Laya's portraits commanded larger prices than those of Sopolis and Dyonisius, the most celebrated portrait painters of their time.

Our scanty knowledge of individual women artists of antiquity--mingled with fable as it doubtless is--serves the important purpose of proving that women, from very ancient times, were educated as artists and creditably followed their profession beside men of the same periods.

This knowledge also awakens imagination, and we wonder in what other ancient countries there were women artists. We know that in Egypt inheritances descended in the female line, as in the case of the Princess Karamat; and since we know of the great architectural works of Queen Hashop and her journey to the land of Punt, we may reasonably assume that the women of ancient Egypt had their share in all the interests of life. Were there not artists among them who decorated temples and tombs with their imperishable colors? Did not women paint those pictures of Isis--goddess of Sothis--that are like precursors of the pictures of the Immaculate Conception? Surely we may hope that a papyrus will be brought to light that will reveal to us the part that women had in the decoration of the monuments of ancient Egypt.

At present we have no reliable records of the lives and works of women artists before the time of the Renaissance in Italy.

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M. Taine's philosophy which regards the art of any people or period as the necessary result of the conditions of race, religion, civilization, and manners in the midst of which the art was produced--and esteems a knowledge of these conditions as sufficient to account for the character of the art, seems to me to exclude many complex and mysterious influences, especially in individual cases, which must affect the work of the artists. At the same time an intelligent study of the art of any nation or period demands a study of the conditions in which it was produced, and I shall endeavor in this resume of the history of women in Art--mere outline as it is--to give an idea of the atmosphere in which they lived and worked, and the influences which affected the results of their labor.

It has been claimed that everything of importance that originated in Italy from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century bore the distinctive mark of Fine Art. So high an authority as John Addington Symonds is in accord with this view, and the study of these four centuries is of absorbing interest.

Although the thirteenth century long preceded the practice of art by women, its influence was a factor in the artistic life into which they later came. In this century Andrea Tan, Guido da Siena, and other devoted souls were involved in the final struggles of Mediaeval Art, and at its close Cimabue and Duccio da Siena--the two masters whose Madonnas were borne in solemn procession through the streets of Florence and Siena, mid music and the pealing of bells--had given the new impulse to painting which brought them immortal fame. They were the heralds of the time when poetry of sentiment, beauty of color, animation and individuality of form should replace Mediaeval formality and ugliness; a time when the spirit of art should be revived with an impulse prophetic of its coming glory.

But neither this portentous period nor the fourteenth century is memorable in the annals of women artists. Not until the fifteenth, the century of the full Renaissance, have we a record of their share in the great rebirth.

It is important to remember that the art of the Renaissance had, in the beginning, a distinct office to fill in the service of the Church. Later, in historical and decorative painting, it served the State, and at length, in portrait and landscape painting, in pictures of genre subjects and still-life, abundant opportunity was afforded for all orders of talent, and the generous patronage of art by church, state, and men of rank and wealth, made Italy a veritable paradise for artists.

Gradually, with the revival of learning, artists were free to give greater importance to secular subjects, and an element of worldliness, and even of immorality, invaded the realm of art as it invaded the realms of life and literature.

This was an era of change in all departments of life. Chivalry, the great "poetic lie," died with feudalism, and the relations between men and women became more natural and reasonable than in the preceding centuries. Women were liberated from the narrow sphere to which they had been relegated in the minstrel's song and poet's rhapsody, but as yet neither time nor opportunity had been given them for the study and development which must precede noteworthy achievement.

Remarkable as was the fifteenth century for intellectual and artistic activity, it was not productive in its early decades of great genius in art or letters. Its marvellous importance was apparent only at its close and in the beginning of the sixteenth century, when the works of Leonardo, Michael Angelo, Raphael, Titian, and their followers emphasized the value of the progressive attainments of their predecessors.

The assertion and contradiction of ideas and theories, the rivalries of differing schools, the sweet devotion of Fra Angelico, the innovations of Masolino and Masaccio, the theory of perspective of Paolo Uccello, the varied works of Fabriano, Antonello da Messina, the Lippi, Botticelli, Ghirlandajo, the Bellini, and their contemporaries, culminated in the inimitable painting of the Cinquecento--in works still unsurpassed, ever challenging artists of later centuries to the task of equalling or excelling them.

The demands of the art of the Renaissance were so great, and so unlike those of earlier days, that it is not surprising that few women, in its beginning, attained to such excellence as to be remembered during five centuries. Especially would it seem that an insurmountable obstacle had been placed in the way of women, since the study of anatomy had become a necessity to an artist. This, and kindred hindrances, too patent to require enumeration, account for the fact that but two Italian women of this period became so famous as to merit notice--Caterina Vigri and Onorata Rodiana, whose stories are given in the biographical part of this book.

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In Flanders, late in the fourteenth and early in the fifteenth centuries, women were engaged in the study and practice of art. In Bruges, when the Van Eycks were inventing new methods in the preparation of colors, and painting their wonderful pictures, beside them, and scarcely inferior to them, was their sister, Margaretha, who sacrificed much of her artistic fame by painting portions of her brothers' pictures, unless the fact that they thought her worthy of thus assisting them establishes her reputation beyond question.

In the fifteenth century we have reason to believe that many women practised art in various departments, but so scanty and imperfect are the records of individual artists that little more than their names are known, and we have no absolute knowledge of the value of their works, or where, if still existing, they are to be seen.

The art of the Renaissance reached its greatest excellence during the last three decades of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century. This was a glorious period in the History of Art. The barbarism of the Middle Ages was essentially a thing of the past, but much barbaric splendor in the celebration of ceremonies and festivals still remained to satisfy the artistic sense, while every-day costumes and customs lent a picturesqueness to ordinary life. So much of the pagan spirit as endured was modified by the spirit of the Renaissance. The result was a new order of things especially favorable to painting.

An artist now felt himself as free to illustrate the pagan myths as to represent the events in the lives of the Saviour, the Virgin and the saints, and the actors in the sacred subjects were represented with the same beauty and grace of form as were given the heroes and heroines of

Hellenic legend. St. Sebastian was as beautiful as Apollo, and the imagination and senses were moved alike by pictures of Danae and the Magdalene--the two subjects being often the work of the same artist.

The human form was now esteemed as something more than the mere habitation of a soul; it was beautiful in itself and capable of awakening unnumbered emotions in the human heart. Nature, too, presented herself in a new aspect and inspired the artist with an ardor in her representation such as few of the older painters had experienced in their devotion to religious subjects.

This expansion of thought and purpose was inaugurating an art attractive to women, to which the increasing liberty of artistic theory and practice must logically make them welcome; a result which is a distinguishing feature of sixteenth-century painting.

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The sixteenth century was noteworthy for the generous patronage of art, especially in Florence, where the policy of its ruling house could not fail to produce marvellous results, and the history of the Medici discloses many reasons why the bud of the Renaissance perfected its bloom in Florence more rapidly and more gloriously than elsewhere.

For centuries Italy had been a treasure-house of Greek, Etruscan, and Byzantine Art. In no other country had a civilization like that of ancient Rome existed, and no other land had been so richly prepared to be the birthplace and to promote the development of the art of the Renaissance.

The intellectually progressive life of this period did much for the advancement of women. The fame of Vittoria Colonna, Tullia d'Aragona, Olympia Morata, and many others who merit association in this goodly company, proves the generous spirit of the age, when in the scholastic centres of Italy women were free to study all branches of learning.

The pursuit of art was equally open to them and women were pupils in all the schools and in the studios of many masters; even Titian instructed a woman, and all the advantages for study enjoyed by men were equally available for women. Many names of Italian women artists could be added to those of whom I have written in the biographical portion of this book, but too little is known of their lives and works to be of present interest. There is, however, little doubt that many pictures attributed to "the School of" various masters were painted by women.

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Art did not reach its perfection in Venice until later than in Florence, and its special contribution, its glorious color, imparted to it an attraction unequalled on the sensuous plane. This color surrounded the artists of that sumptuous city of luxurious life and wondrous pageants, and was so emphasized by the marvellous mingling of the semi-mist and the brilliancy of its atmosphere that no man who merited the name of artist could be insensible to its inspiration.

The old Venetian realism was followed, in the time of the Renaissance, by startling developments. In the works of Tintoretto and Veronese there is a combination of gorgeous draperies, splendid and often licentious costumes, brilliant metal accessories, and every possible device for

enhancing and contrasting colors, until one is bewildered and must adjust himself to these dazzling spectacles--religious subjects though they may be--before any serious thought or judgment can be brought to bear upon their artistic merit; these two great contemporaries lived and worked in the final decades of the sixteenth century.

We know that many women painted pictures in Venice before the seventeenth century, although we have accurate knowledge of but few, and of these an account is given later in this book.

We who go from Paris to London in a few hours, and cross the St. Gothard in a day, can scarcely realize the distance that separated these capitals from the centres of Italian art in the time of the Renaissance. We have, however, abundant proof that the sacred fire of the love of Art and Letters was smouldering in France, Germany, and England--and when the inspiring breath of the Renaissance was wafted beyond the Alps a flame burst forth which has burned clearer and brighter with succeeding centuries.

From the time of Vincent de Beauvais, who died in 1264, France had not been wanting in illustrious scholars, but it could not be said that a French school of art existed. Francois Clouet or Cloet, called Jehannet, was born in Tours about 1500. His portraits are seen in the Gallery of the Louvre, and have been likened to those of Holbein; but they lack the strength and spirit of that artist; in fact, the distinguishing feature of Clouet's work is the remarkable finish of draperies and accessories, while the profusion of jewels distracts attention from the heads of his subjects.

The first great French artists were of the seventeenth century, and although Clouet was painter to Francis I. and Henry II., the former, like his predecessors, imported artists from Italy, among whom were Leonardo da Vinci and Benvenuto Cellini.

In letters, however, there were French women of the sixteenth century who are still famous. Marguerite de Valois was as cultivated in mind as she was generous and noble in character. Her love of learning was not easily satisfied. She was proficient in Hebrew, the classics, and the usual branches of "profane letters," as well as an accomplished scholar in philosophy and theology. As an author--though her writings are somewhat voluminous and not without merit--she was comparatively unimportant; her great service to letters was the result of the sympathy and encouragement she gave to others.

Wherever she might be, she was the centre of a literary and religious circle, as well as of the society in which she moved. She was in full sympathy with her brother in making his "College" an institution in which greater liberty was accorded to the expression of individual opinion than had before been known in France, and by reason of her protection of liberty in thought and speech she suffered much in the esteem of the bigots of her day.

The beautiful Mlle. de Heilly--the Duchesse d'Etampes--whose influence over Francis I. was pre-eminent, while her character was totally unlike that of his sister, was described as "the fairest among the learned, and the most learned among the fair." When learning was thus in favor at Court, it naturally followed that all capacity for it was cultivated and ordinary intelligence made the most of; and the claim that the intellectual brilliancy of the women of the Court of Francis I. has

rarely been equalled is generally admitted. There were, however, no artists among them--they wielded the pen rather than the brush.

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In England, as in France, there was no native school of art in the sixteenth century, and Flemish, Dutch, and German artists crossed the channel when summoned to the English Court, as the Italians crossed the Alps to serve the kings of France.

English women of this century were far less scholarly than those of Italy and France. At the same time they might well be proud of a queen who "could quote Pindar and Homer in the original and read every morning a portion of Demosthenes, being also the royal mistress of eight languages." With our knowledge of the queen's scholarship in mind we might look to her for such patronage of art and literature as would rival that of Lorenzo the Magnificent; but Elizabeth lacked the generosity of the Medici and that of Marguerite de Valois. Hume tells us that "the queen's vanity lay more in shining by her own learning than in encouraging men of genius by her liberality."

Lady Jane Grey and the daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke are familiar examples of learned women, and many English titled and gentlewomen were well versed in Greek and Latin, as well as in Spanish, Italian, and French. Macaulay reminded his readers that if an Englishwoman of that day did not read the classics she could read little, since the then existing books--outside the Italian--would fill a shelf but scantily. Thus English girls read Plato, and doubtless English women excelled Englishmen in their proficiency in foreign languages, as they do at present.

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In Germany the relative position of Art and Letters was the opposite to that in France and England. The School of Cologne was a genuinely native school of art in the fourteenth century. Although the Niebelungen Lied and Gudrun, the Songs of Love and Volkslieder, as well as Mysteries and Passion Plays, existed from an early date, we can scarcely speak of a German Literature before the sixteenth century, when Albert Duerer and the younger Holbein painted their great pictures, while Luther, Melanchthon and their sympathizers disseminated the doctrines of advancing Protestantism.

At this period, in the countries we may speak of collectively as German, women artists were numerous. Many were miniaturists, some of whom were invited to the English Court and received with honor.

In 1521 Albert Duerer was astonished at the number of women artists in different parts of what, for conciseness, we may call Germany. This was also noticeable in Holland, and Duerer wrote in his diary, in the above-named year: "Master Gerard, of Antwerp, illuminist, has a daughter, eighteen years of age, named Susannah, who illuminated a little book which I purchased for a few guilders. It is wonderful that a woman could do so much!"

Antwerp became famous for its women artists, some of whom visited France, Italy, and Spain, and were honorably recognized for their talent and attainments, wherever they went.

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In the later years of the sixteenth century a difference of opinion and purpose arose among the artists of Italy, the effects of which were shown in the art of the seventeenth century. Two distinct schools were formed, one of which included the conservatives who desired to preserve and follow the manner of the masters of the Cinquecento, at the same time making a deeper study of Nature--thus the devotional feeling and many of the older traditions would be retained while each master could indulge his individuality more freely than heretofore. They aimed to unite such a style as Correggio's--who belonged to no school--with that of the severely mannered artists of the preceding centuries. These artists were called Eclectics, and the Bolognese school of the Carracci was the most important centre of the movement, while Domenichino, a native of Bologna--1581-1631--was the most distinguished painter of the school.

The original aims of the Eclectics are well summed up in a sonnet by Agostino Carracci, which has been translated as follows: "Let him who wishes to be a good painter acquire the design of Rome, Venetian action and Venetian management of shade, the dignified color of Lombardy--that is of Leonardo da Vinci--the terrible manner of Michael Angelo, Titian's truth and nature, the sovereign purity of Correggio's style and the just symmetry of a Raphael, the decorum and well-grounded study of Tibaldi, the invention of the learned Primaticcio, and a little of Parmigianino's grace; but without so much study and weary labor let him apply himself to imitate the works which our Niccolo--dell Abbate--left us here." Kugler calls this "a patchwork ideal," which puts the matter in a nut-shell.

At one period the Eclectics produced harmonious pictures in a manner attractive to women, many of whom studied under Domenichino, Giovanni Lanfranco, Guido Reni, the Campi, and others. Sofonisba Anguisciola, Elisabetta Sirani, and the numerous women artists of Bologna were of this school.

The greatest excellence of this art was of short duration; it declined as did the literature, and indeed, the sacred and political institutions of Italy in the seventeenth century. It should not, however, be forgotten, that the best works of Guercino, the later pictures of Annibale Carracci, and the important works of Domenichino and Salvator Rosa belong to this period.

The second school was that of the Naturalists, who professed to study Nature alone, representing with brutal realism her repulsive aspects. Naples was the centre of these painters, and the poisoning of Domenichino and many other dark and terrible deeds have been attributed to them. Few women were attracted to this school, and the only one whose association with the Naturalisti is recorded--Aniella di Rosa--paid for her temerity with her life.

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In Rome, Florence, Bologna, Venice, and other Italian cities, there were, in the seventeenth century, many women who made enviable reputations as artists, some of whom were also known for their literary and musical attainments. Anna Maria Ardoina, of Messina, made her studies in Rome. She was gifted as a poet and artist, and so excelled in music that she had the distinguished honor of being elected to the Academy of Arcadia.

Not a few gifted women of this time are remembered for their noble

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