RECONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM.

VENETIAN PAINTING IN AMERICA: The Fifteenth Century. By Bernard Berenson. (Frederic Fairchild Sherman; $4.)

Gathered and amplified into a book, Mr. Berenson's conclusions, known to us through his serial studies in "Art in America," have gained in persuasion and consequence. Mr. Berenson, finding an adequately representative sequence of Venetian paintings* in our collections, has grouped them historically; and adopting the discursive method of his avowed master Morelli, he has made them the pretext for discussion of almost all problems incident to their study. Far from merely being a commentary running with an interesting and important series of pictures, the book results in one of the most significant works of reconstructive criticism that have appeared in recent years on the subject of Italian painting. It teems with incidental criticism, æsthetic evaluations, and valuable hints of attribution, with all the secondary questions that irritate one's periods of patient and intensely critical study.

As one might expect, the central figure in the book is Giovanni Bellini, and the central problem, his chronology. Though much that is original, illuminating, and indeed invaluable is said about Cima, Carpaccio, Montagna, and the hosts that make a pale circle about him, what eminently interests Mr. Berenson is to adduce their work wherever possible for the establishment of Giovanni's chronology and his artistic personality. The 263 pages of text are abundantly illustrated with one hundred and ten reproductions and provided with two tables and two indexes. The first two chapters are by way of a historical introduction. The first reviews Giovanni's artistic antecedents in Venice, and the lingering of the older tradition within Venetian painting, that of the Muranese; the second deals with the only material foreign influence (excepting Mantegna's), from beyond Florence, in the person of Antonello.

We encounter at the beginning of our survey a signed triptych by Caterino (active from 1362), the earliest Venetian painter of any importance, in the Walters collection, Baltimore. We pass on through such a ghastly and interesting performance as the Giambono at the Metropolitan Museum to an important work of the early Muranese school, by the two severe, collaborating craftsmen, Giovanni d'Alemagna and Antonio Vivarini. After examining some rather indifferent school pictures, we are introduced to a series of works of rare quality by two of the most charming masters of decorative design.

We begin with Mr. Platt's Virgin, by Bartolomeo Vivarini, a work produced in all the reserved yet ecstatic freshness of creative youth; then come Mr. Morgan's "Epiphany," by Bartolomeo, of crisp and dainty handiwork; a grave and beautiful Virgin by the same hand, from the late Theodore Davis collection, now hanging in the Metropolitan Museum; and a number of Crivellis, of which Mr. Lehman's is the most distinguished bit of decoration, Mrs. Gardner's, a diminutive fairyland version of the Romance of St. George in exquisite pattern.

* It may be interesting to note that the bulk of Venetian pictures has gravitated to New York (31), Baltimore (28), Philadelphia (25), and Boston (15).

The chapter closes with the examination of an austere St. Jerome, belonging to Mr. Augustus Healy of Brooklyn, which Mr. Berenson attributes hesitatingly to Jacopo Bellini. The next chapter starts out with a brief discussion of two portraits, one grave, one gay, both ingenious syntheses of individuality, by the mighty Antonello da Messina, whose greatness, as indeed we emphatically feel in looking at these, "consisted in presenting objects more directly, more penetratingly, more connectedly and more completely than we could see them for ourselves." Of what immediately follows, the most interesting are the profound and intimate appreciation of Mr. Frick's Provençal Pietà, which had been going under Antonello's[1] name, and the identification[2] of the hand of a Palermitan follower of Antonello in the "St. Rosalie" of the Walters collection and a Virgin in the National Gallery.

This brings both author and reader to the desired haven: the great Venetian of the fifteenth century, and to the crux of his early chronology, which Mr. Berenson in some of the shrewdest reckoning fundamentally revolutionizes. He launches daringly into heterodoxy by announcing in his heading a new theory of Giovanni's development, and by pushing Mr. Johnson's Virgin, which has hitherto gone unchallenged as the earliest of his youthful works, two decades up the century.

The careful demonstration which follows centres in a significant similarity between the Holy Child in this picture and the little boy who nestles against his mother's knee in the "Circumcision" of Mantegna's triptych at the Uffizzi. This figure was taken over without material changes; only, in our picture, the Child has been reversed and the arrangement of the extremities made to chime with the whole system of design.

But the "peevish squirm," easily explained in Mantegna's picture, can be accounted for in Mr. Johnson's Madonna only on the assumption that the Christ was copied from Mantegna's boy. Now, as all the respected authorities are, on internal and external evidence, agreed that Mantegna's Uffizzi triptych was painted in 1464, we must regard the date as a chronological boundary before which the Johnson picture, for the reasons indicated, could by no means have been painted.

Having fixed 1464 as the earliest possible date for the painting of the Johnson Madonna, Mr. Berenson finds reasons, in its structural and stylistic resemblances to works executed by Bellini and his assistants between 1469 and 1476, for dating it "scarcely earlier than 1470." With the securing of this date, the works stylistically associated with it are subjected to the same fate, which means that what was formerly dated between 1450 and 1455 has now to be put fifteen years later.

To account for the vacuum he has created in Giovanni's early artistic activity, Mr. Berenson argues ingeniously that all of Bellini's extant works that may "plausibly be placed before 1470 could easily have been painted after 1465, and in point of style they resemble each other sufficiently to admit of being thus crowded together." Even if some of the panels are of earlier origin "they are at once too few . . . and too close to each other to be, if spread over so long a time, more than a confession of slow and feeble development." And Mr. Berenson finds it easier in view of Giovanni's rate of advance later in his career "to believe that not many years elapsed between any of the paintings of this, than to assume that Giovanni Bellini was something of a dullard in his early life."

There seems to be some explanation for this delayed development in the fact that Giovanni — like his brother Gentile — continued as assistant to his father until past his thirtieth year. This inference is conventionally made from the joint signature of Jacopo Bellini and his two sons, on the lost altarpiece painted for the Gattamelata chapel, Padua, in 1460. Moreover, Gentile's first dated work (1465) betrays a hand unaccustomed before then to work in total independence.

It was apparently the father, too, who, responsible for the retarded evolution of his sons, prevented Giovanni from following the inflexible manner of Mantegna, his brother-in-law since 1453. The Johnson Madonna is one of the first works in which Mr. Berenson sees the emancipated Giovanni imitate his relative. As that influence has hitherto been supposed to have palpably begun in Giovanni's formative period, it is another matter requiring revision; and in this connection one comes to wonder how Mr. Berenson would dismiss the accepted explanation of the affinities between Mantegna's "Agony" (1459) and Giovanni's representation of the same subject, hanging together in the National Gallery.

With the pretty Madonna belonging to Mr. Platt we enter into a period of greater creative expansion; and the air about our ears has

[1] This attribution was first corrected by Hulin, in "Catalogue Critique" of Bruges Exhibition, 1902.
[2] Published first in Gazette des Beaux Arts, March 1913.

cooled. The stately beauty of the Davis, Johnson, and Lehman Virgins, certainly the finest of Giovanni's first-known works, is followed by pictures — Madonnas, all but one — peopled by a richer humanity, and of a more vitally informing yet caressing chiaroscuro. None pass in date beyond 1488, and the reason may be that there is but a handful of works by Bellini, painted in the last three decades of his life, that has come down to us. They are each of a unique interest, some of a unique beauty. The Huntington Madonna (very soon after 1480) is but a reversed variant of Mantegna's Bergamo Virgin and the "latest work of Giambellino in which unmistakeable and even striking evidence of Mantegna's influence is to be discovered"; Mr. Salomon's, painted after 1485, is sensitive with a touch of mysticism. There is a deep note of solemn almost petulant exaltation in Mr. Willys's Madonna, who is wrapped in the shadow and atmosphere of the Frari triptych. This is the latest Bellini in America. The chapter closes with the sublime St. Francis belonging to Mr. Frick. There is an amplitude and sweep in this composition such as we find in other of Bellini's works of a profounder and more possessing beauty. But, rather than the humble voice of God's troubadour, we fancy we hear the ringing of the rhetoric of a Hebrew prophet addressing himself to the Unseen. Mr. Berenson rescues this picture from its former attribution to Basaiti and plausibly claims it for Giovanni in the period of his Naples "Transfiguration." As it was still unfinished in 1525, Mr. Berenson, basing his suggestion on the appearance of the trees in the middle distance, supposes it was directly afterward completed by Girolamo da Santacroce.

The remaining three chapters are devoted to scrupulously differentiated heads: chapter IV, the "Pictures from the Studio of Giovanni Bellini, and Contemporary Copies"; chapter V, "The Contemporaries of Giovanni Bellini"; chapter VI, "Giovanni Bellini's Pupils and Followers." In this section Mr. Berenson has carefully separated works of artists or groups according to their artistic relation to Giovanni. Though they are dealt with as artistic entities, it is this relation that is of primary interest, because, wherever found, it is made to yield another ray of light that may help to illuminate our still fragmentary knowledge of the master or his following.

Guided by a fund of slowly synthesized observation and study Mr. Berenson all but evokes for us the shapes or contours or design of some lost masterpiece by ingenious inferential reconstruction, from scattered scraps or from studio pictures. The Fogg and Layard Virgins, the Pourtalès, "Sacra Conversazione," in the Morgan collection, the "Christ at Emmaus" belonging to Mr. Walters, are interesting mainly in so far as they furnish us with clues as to the nature of the originals by Bellini.

We are grateful to find some attribution put right, some wrong reckoning corrected, some tangles unravelled; not because there is any absolute finality about Mr. Berenson's judgments, but because they are all suggestive and because in making them he has indicated the right direction in art-criticism.

The number of Cimas in American collections has furnished Mr. Berenson with occasion for a fine appreciation, and an excellent outline of his evolution. His Bellinesque Virgin in the Detroit Museum, the Tuck Madonna (1495) with its crystalline atmosphere,— reminiscent, I venture to suggest, of Bellini's "Virgin with Cherubs" (1485); Mr. Blumenthal's lunette; Mr. Morgan's "Sacra Conversazione"; Mr. Johnson's pagan-spirited Bacchus series, measure the scope and limitation of Cima's invention. Indeed I do not think a more suggestive discussion of Cima could well be found.

We are glad to find so much about Montagna, Carpaccio, Basaiti, Catena, and to follow our critic when he pleads for Gentile Bellini as Carpaccio's master against the claim for the anæmic Lazzaro Bastiani. But for the absence of examples of such sustained mastery as those discussed in the chapter on Giovanni Bellini, the parts that follow are as full of eminently interesting criticism, which, if personal, is the synthetic act of accumulated æsthetic emotions. It would be easy, and petty, to carp at a kind of criticism at once so daring and dogmatic. Its differences are perhaps differences of method. We shall find, naturally, also a tone of controversy, and now and again the irritation of expected disagreement. Yet, the stern, concentrated and advanced scholarship of Mr. Berenson has supplied students with a book of Venetian painting unique among its kind.

Mr. Berenson's contingent promise of a book on Bellini makes the student dream of a painter with his lost works reconstructed for us, all marshalled before us in their place, and the artistic personality thus evoked, standing up finally over against us like a living thing.

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