

Thoughts on Art and Life

By

Leonardo da Vinci

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INTRODUCTION

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The long obscurity of the Dark Ages lifted over Italy, awakening to a national though a divided consciousness. Already two distinct tendencies were apparent. The practical and rational, on the one hand, was soon to be outwardly reflected in the burgher-life of Florence and the Lombard cities, while at Rome it had even then created the civil organization of the curia. The novella was its literary triumph. In art it expressed itself simply, directly and with vigour. Opposed to this was the other great undercurrent in Italian life, mystical, religious and speculative, which had run through the nation from the earliest times, and received fresh volume from mediaeval Christianity, encouraging ecstatic mysticism to drive to frenzy the population of its mountain cities. Umbrian painting is inspired by it, and the glowing words of Jacopone da Todi expressed in poetry the same religious fervour which the life of Florence and Perugia bore witness to in action.

Italy developed out of the relation and conflict of these two forces the rational with the mystical. Their later union in the greater men was to {x} form the art temperament of the Renaissance. The practical side gave it the firm foundation of rationalism and reality on which it rested; the mystical guided its endeavour to picture the unreal in

terms of ideal beauty.

The first offspring of this union was Leonardo. Since the decay of ancient art no painter had been able to fully express the human form, for imperfect mastery of technique still proved the barrier. Leonardo was the first completely to disengage his personality from its constraint, and make line express thought as none before him could do. Nor was this his only triumph, but rather the foundation on which further achievement rested. Remarkable as a thinker alone, he preferred to enlist thought in the service of art, and make art the handmaid of beauty. Leonardo saw the world not as it is, but as he himself was. He viewed it through the atmosphere of beauty which filled his mind, and tinged its shadows with the mystery of his nature. To all this, his birthright as a painter, a different element was added. A keen desire for knowledge, guiding his action in life, spurred him onward. Conscious of this dominant impulse, he has fancifully described himself in a Platonic allegory. He had passed beneath overhanging cliffs on his way to a great cavern. On bended knees, peering through its darkness, fear and desire had overwhelmed him,--fear for the menacing darkness of the cavern; and desire {xi} to ascertain if there were wonders therein.

From his earliest years, the elements of greatness were present in Leonardo. But the maturity of his genius came unaffected from without. He barely noticed the great forces of the age which in life he encountered. After the first promise of his boyhood in the Tuscan hills, his youth at Florence had been spent under Verrocchio as a

master, in company with those whose names were later to brighten the pages of Italian art. He must then have heard Savonarola's impassioned sermons, yet, unlike Botticelli, remained dumb to his entreaties. He must have seen Lorenzo the Magnificent. But there was little opening in the Medicean circle for the young painter, who had first to gain fame abroad. The splendour of Milan under Il Moro, then the most brilliant court in Europe, attracted him. He went there, proclaiming his ability, in a remarkable letter, to accomplish much, but desiring chiefly to erect a great monument to the glory of the Sforza. He spent years at that court, taken up by his different ventures,--painting, sculpture, engineering, even arranging festivities--but his greater project was doomed to failure, enmeshed in the downfall of Ludovico. Even to this he remained impassive. "Visconti dragged to prison, his son dead, ... the duke has lost his state, his possessions, his liberty, and has finished nothing he undertook," was his only comment on his patron's end, written on the {xii} margin of a manuscript. After the overthrow of the Duke of Milan, began his Italian wanderings. At one time he contemplated entering the service of an Oriental prince. Instead, he entered that of Caesar Borgia, as military engineer, and the greatest painter of the age became inspector of a despot's strongholds. But his restless nature did not leave him long at this. Returning to Florence he competed with Michelangelo; yet the service of even his native city could not retain him. His fame had attracted the attention of a new patron of the arts, prince of the state which had conquered his first master. In this his last venture, he forsook Italy, only to die three years later at Amboise, in the castle of the French king.

The inner nature of Leonardo remained as untouched by the men he encountered as by the events which were then stirring Europe. Alone, he influenced others, remaining the while a mystery to all. The most gifted of nations failed to understand the greatest of her sons.

Isabella d'Este, the first lady of her time, seeking vainly to obtain some product of his brush, was told that his life was changeful and uncertain, that he lived for the day, intent only on his art. His own thoughts reveal him in another light. "I wish to work miracles," he wrote. And elsewhere he exclaimed, "Thou, O God, sellest us all benefits, at the cost of our toil.... As a day well spent makes sleep {xiii} seem pleasant, so a life well employed makes death pleasant. A life well spent is long."

Leonardo's views of aesthetic are all important in his philosophy of life and art. The worker's thoughts on his craft are always of interest. They are doubly so when there is in them no trace of literary self-consciousness to blemish their expression. He recorded these thoughts at the instant of their birth, for a constant habit of observation and analysis had early developed with him into a second nature. His ideas were penned in the same fragmentary way as they presented themselves to his mind, perhaps with no intention of publishing them to the world. But his ideal of art depended intimately, none the less, on the system he had thrown out seemingly in so haphazard a manner. His method gives to his writings their only unity. It was more than a method: it was a permanent expression of his

own life, which aided him to construct a philosophy of beauty characteristic of the new age.

He had searched to find a scientific basis for art, and discovered it in the imitation of nature, based on rational experience. This idea was, in part, Aristotelian, imbued with the spirit of the time; though in the ordinary acceptance of the word Leonardo was no scholar, least of all a humanist. His own innovation in aesthetic was in requiring a rational and critical experience as a necessary {xiv} foundation, the acquisition of which was to result from the permanent condition of the mind. He had trained his own faculties to critically observe all natural phenomena: first try by experience, and then demonstrate why such experiment is forced to operate in the way it does, was his advice. The eye, he gave as an instance, had been defined as one thing; by experience, he had found it to be another.

But by imitation in art, Leonardo intended no slavish reproduction of nature. When he wrote that "the painter strives and competes with nature," he was on the track of a more Aristotelian idea. This he barely developed, using nature only partly in the Stagirite's sense, of inner force outwardly exemplified. The idea of imitation, in fact, as it presented itself to his mind, was two-fold. It was not merely the external reproduction of the image, which was easy enough to secure. The real difficulty of the artist lay in reflecting inner character and personality. It was Leonardo's firm conviction that each thought had some outward expression by which the trained observer was able to recognize it. Every man, he wrote, has as many movements of the body

as of varieties of ideas. Thought, moreover, expressed itself outwardly in proportion to its power over the individual and his time of life. By thus employing bodily gesture to represent feeling and idea, the painter could affect the spectator whom he {xv} placed in the presence of visible emotion. He maintained that art was of slight use unless able to show what its subject had in mind. Painting should aim, therefore, to reproduce the inner mental state by the attitude assumed. This was, in other words, a natural symbolism, in which the symbol was no mere convention, but the actual outward projection of the inner condition of the mind. Art here offered an equation of inward purpose and outward expression, neither complete without the other.

Further than this, influenced by Platonic thought, Leonardo's conception of painting was, as an intellectual state or condition, outwardly projected. The painter who practised his art without reasoning of its nature was like a mirror unconsciously reflecting what was before it. Although without a "manual act" painting could not be realized, its true problems--problems of light, of colour, pose and composition, of primitive and derivative shadow--had all to be grasped by the mind without bodily labour. Beyond this, the scientific foundation in art came through making it rest upon an accurate knowledge of nature. Even experience was only a step towards attaining this. "There is nothing in all nature without its reason," he wrote. "If you know the reason, you do not need the experience."

In the history of art, as well, he urged that nature had been the test of its excellence. A {xvi} natural phenomenon had brought art into

existence. The first picture in the world, he remarked in a happy epigram, had been "a line surrounding the shadow of a man, cast by the sun on the wall." He traced the history of painting in Italy during its stagnation after the decay of ancient art, when each painter copied only his predecessor, which lasted until Giotto, born among barren mountains, drew the movements of the goats he tended, and thus advanced farther than all the earlier masters. But his successors only copied him, and painting sank again until Masaccio once more took nature as his guide.

A quite different and combative side to Leonardo's aesthetic, which forced him to state the broad principles of art, appears in his attacks on poetry and music as inferior to painting. In that age of humanistic triumph, literature had lorded it over the other arts in a manner not free from arrogance. There was still another cause for his onslaught on poetry. Leonardo resented the fact that painters, who were rarely men of education, had not defended themselves against the slurs cast on their art. His counter attack may have been intended to hide his own small scholarship. It served another end as well. His conception of the universal principles of beauty was made clear by this defence. His first principle stated broadly that the most useful art was the one which could most easily be communicated. {xvii} Painting was communicable to all since its appeal was made to the eye. While the painter proceeded at once to the imitation of nature, the poet's instruments were words which varied in every land. He took the Platonic view of poetry as a lying imitation, removed from truth. He called the poet a collector of other men's wares, who decked himself in

their plumage. Where poetry presented only a shadow to the imagination, painting offered a real image to the eye; and the eye, as the window of the soul through which all earthly beauty was revealed, the sight, he exclaimed, which had discovered navigation, which had impelled men to seek the West, was the noblest of all the senses. Painting spoke only by what it accomplished, poetry ended in the very words with which it sang its own praises. If, then, poets called painting dumb poetry, he could retort by dubbing poetry blind painting. In common with his successors, Leonardo could not escape from this fallacy, which, in overlooking all save descriptive verse, was destined to burden aesthetic until demolished by Lessing.

It was the opinion of Leonardo that the temporary nature of music caused its inferiority to painting. Although durability was in itself no absolute test,--else the work of coppersmiths would be the highest art,--yet in any final scale, permanence could not altogether be disregarded. Music perished in the very act of its creation, {xviii} while painting preserved the beautiful from the hand of time. "Helen of Troy, gazing in a mirror, in her old age, wondered how she had twice been ravished." Mortal beauty would thus vanish, if it were not rescued by art from destroying age and death.

Leonardo contrasted painting with sculpture, for he had practised both, and thought himself peculiarly qualified to judge their merit. He considered the former the nobler art of the two, for sculpture involved bodily toil and fatigue, while by its very nature it lacked perspective and atmosphere, colour, and the feeling of space. Painting, on the

other hand, caused by an illusion, was in itself the result of deeper thought. An even broader test served to convince him of its final superiority. That art was of highest excellence, he wrote, which possessed most elements of variety and universality. Painting contained and reproduced all forms of nature; it made its appeal by the harmonious balance of parts which gratified all the senses. By its very duality it fulfilled the highest purpose. The painter was able to visualize the beauty which enchanted him, to bring to reality the fancy of his dreams, and give outward expression to the ideal within.

The genius of Leonardo as a painter came through unfolding the mystery of life. Like Miranda, he had gazed with wonder at the beauty of the world. "Look at the grace and sweetness {xix} of men and women in the street," he wrote. The most ordinary functions of life and nature amazed him most. He observed of the eye how in its form and colour, and the entire universe it reflected, were reduced to a single point.

"Wonderful law of nature, which forced all effects to participate with their cause in the mind of man. These are the true miracles!"

Elsewhere he wrote again: "Nature is full of infinite reasons which have not yet passed into experience." He conceived it to be the painter's duty not only to comment on natural phenomena as restrained by law, but to merge his very mind into that of nature by interpreting its relation with art. Resting securely on the reality of experienced truth, he felt the deeper presence of the unreal on every side. In the same way that he visualized the inner workings of the mind, his keen imagination aided him to make outward trifles serve his desire to find mysterious beauty everywhere. Oftentimes, in gazing on some ancient,

time-stained wall, he describes how he would trace thereon landscapes, with mountains, rivers and valleys. The whole world was full of a mystery to him, which his work reflected. The smile of consciousness, pregnant of that which is beyond, illumines the expression of Mona Lisa. So, too, in the strange glance of Ann, of John the Baptist, and of the Virgin of the Rocks, one realizes that their thoughts dwell in another world.

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Leonardo had found a refuge in art from the pettiness of material environment. Like his own creations, he, too, had learned the secret of the inner life. The painter, he wrote, could create a world of his own, and take refuge in this new realm. But it must not be one of shadows only. The very mystery he felt so keenly had yet to rest on a real foundation; to treat it otherwise would be to plunge into mere vapouring. Although attempting to bridge the gulf which separated the real from the unreal, he refused to treat the latter supernaturally. That mystery which lesser minds found in the occult, he saw in nature all about him. He denied the existence of spirits, just as he urged the foolishness of the will-o'-the-wisps of former ages,--alchemy and the black art. In one sentence he destroyed the pretensions of palmistry. "You will see," he wrote, "great armies slaughtered in an hour's time, where in each individual the signs of the hands are different."

His art took, thus, its guidance in realism, its purpose in

spirituality. The search for truth and the desire for beauty were the twin ideals he strove to attain. The keenness of this pursuit saved him from the blemish of egoism which aloofness from his surroundings would otherwise have forced upon him. For his character presented the anomaly, peculiar to the Renaissance, of a lofty idealism coupled in action with {xxi} irresponsibility of duty. He stood on a higher plane, his attitude toward life recognizing no claims on the part of his fellowmen. In his desire to surpass himself, fostered by this isolation of spirit and spurred on by the eager wish to attain universal knowledge, he has been compared to Faust; but the likeness is only half correct. He was not blind to the limitations which encompassed him, his very genius making him realize their bounds. Of the ancients he said that in attempting to define the nature of the soul, they sought the impossible. He wrote elsewhere, "It is the infinite alone that cannot be attained, for if it could it would become finite."

In Leonardo's personality was reflected both the strength and weakness of Renaissance Italy. So, to know him, it is necessary to understand the Italy of that age. Its brilliancy, its universality, its desire for beauty, are but one side of the medal. On its reverse, Italy lacked the solid vigour of a national purpose. The discord of political disunion, reacting on art, laid bare great weakness in the want of any constructive direction, toward which the strength of the Renaissance could aim. The energy was there, whether finding an outlet in statecraft or in discovery, in art or in letters. But it laboured for no common end; there was internal unity of force and method, but

external divergence of purpose. The tyranny of petty despots could provide no adequate ideal toward {xxii} which to aim. No ruler, and no city save Venice, could long symbolize the nation's patriotism. Venetian painters alone glorified the state in their work, and thus felt the living force of a national ambition which raised them above themselves. But elsewhere there was little to inspire that devotion for a common country necessary as a background to sustain the greatest work. Hence Italian art, so living within certain limits, remained stunted beyond these. The conviction that art existed in order to express ideal beauty, that its main purpose was to please the eye and the senses in spite of the result attained, proved inadequate compensation for all that had been withdrawn. The art ideal tended more and more to become a conscience and a purpose in itself, an inward impulse for action and an outward goal.

The artist's real greatness will depend at all times on his qualities as a representative. His true merit will arise from giving expression in ideal terms to his nation and to his age. In so far as he has been able to do this and the spirit of his country is reflected in his work, in so far as he has represented what is best therein and most enduring, he will have achieved greatness. Not that this is always, or even often, a conscious expression. It is unfair reading to search for deep thought in the work of either painter or poet. Neither art {xxiii} offers the best medium to convey the abstractions of the mind, since each has its own method of expression, independent of pure reason. But painter and poet, in the degree they attain greatness, express more

than themselves. Ariosto, intent only to amuse, reflects with playful wit and skepticism the splendid luxury and joy of living in Renaissance court life. The care with which he chiselled each line proves that his real seriousness and conscience lay in his artistic purpose. Without Ariosto's wit, Paolo Veronese depicted a similar side in painting, though his Venetian birthright made him celebrate the glory of the Republic. Poet and painter alike expressed far more than either could know. If such a test be applied to the artists of the Renaissance, each in turn will respond to it,--just as the weakness of the later Bolognese as a school is that, beyond a certain technical merit, they meant and represented so little. But the noblest painters,--Michelangelo and Raphael, Titian and Leonardo,--in addition to possessing the solid grasp of technical mastery, reflected some aspect of their nation's life and civilization. In Michelangelo was realized the grandeur of Italy struggling vainly against crushing oppression. He expressed that which was highest in it, reflecting the loftiest side of its idealism mingled with deep pessimism in his survey over life; for, wrapped in austerity, he saw mankind in heroic terms of sadness. Raphael, on the {xxiv} other hand, found only beautiful sweetness everywhere. The tragedies of life failed to touch the young painter, who blotted from view all struggle and sorrow, and, in spite of the misery which had befallen his nation, could still rejoice in the sensuous beauty of the world. There was another side to the Renaissance, dependent neither on beauty nor heroic grandeur, yet sharing in both through qualities of its own. Titian, who painted the living man of action, the man of parts, susceptible alike to the appreciation of ideal beauty and heroic impulse, but guided withal by

expediency, reflected this more practical aspect of life. In his portraiture he expressed the statecraft for which Italians found opportunity beyond the Alps, since in Italy it was denied them; and Titian found even Venice too narrow for the scope of his art.

But before Titian, before Raphael, before Michelangelo, Leonardo reflected the rationalism and the mystery, the subtlety and the philosophical speculation, of the age. To find in his work only the individual thought of genius would be to mistake, perhaps, its most important side; for the expression of his mind, both by its brilliancy and its limitations, is typical of the spirit of his time. The Italian Renaissance was reflected in him as rarely a period has been expressed in the life-work of a single man. He represented its union of practice and theory, of thought placed in the {xxv} service of action. He summed up its different aspects in his own individuality.

Intellectually, he represented its many-sidedness attained through penetration of thought, and a keenness of observation, profiting from experience, extended into every sphere. As an artist he possessed a vigour of imagination from which sprang his power of creating beauty. But, in spite of his practical nature, he remained a dreamer in an age which had in it more of stern reality than of golden dreams. His very limitations, his excess of individualism, his want of long-continued concentration, his lack of patriotism, his feeling of the superiority of art to nationality, are all characteristic of Renaissance Italy.

The union in Leonardo of reality to mystery has often been shared by genius in other fields. His own peculiar greatness sprang from