

FRENCH RENAISSANCE ART

OF those who scan this page there are few, if any who have not gone to pay homage to the great medieval churches of France. And surely numerous pilgrims, at Chartres of the world-famous sculptures, or other Gothic fanes of coeval raising, have found themselves asking big questions. If the French school of artists, say from the twelfth century to the fifteenth, were authors of a wealth of fine religious work, did there come from them no fair things in the sphere, after the Middle Ages had passed away, giving place to the Renaissance Period? Or must it be owned, reluctantly, that the ecclesiastical fabrics in the pointed formula, with the carven figures which adorn them, and the embellished sacred manuscripts which were wrought by men who were linked with those halls of orisons, were the ultimate rare exploit of France, in the sacerdotal realm?

In offering tribute to those very few French artists who fashioned beautiful things definable as art of the Renaissance, it is desirable to spend a moment on recalling the character of that great movement. If it is often described as the advent of a new spirit of enquiry, this description is inadequate; for the affair might also be called a deliberate harking back to the Classic or Antique styles in art. Out of the new spirit of enquiry there came in Holland, in the fourteenth century, the inauguration of the printing press, and in Flanders, at the outset of the fifteenth, the inception of oil painting. Meanwhile, in Italy, the novel worship of Greek and Roman antiquities had resulted in the espousal by architects of the Classic mode, instead of the Gothic, as the orthodox one for churches. And the refinement and grace which are so prominent

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in the sacred pictures and statuary of the Italians in the fourteen hundreds, are essentially the reflection of the new discipleship of the Antique.

Crowned in 1461, Louis XI has often been entitled the maker of modern France. If the name is not inappropriate, for this monarch greatly strengthened the central government of the country, on the other hand the French of his day were still without knowledge of Renaissance art. His son and successor, Charles VIII, made war on Italy and was driven thence. But this disastrous foray in the South had big moment for France, since the officers of the defeated Charles came home filled with admiration for Italian works in the revived Antique style. In 1515 the French throne was assumed by Francis I, who is chiefly remembered as an enthusiastic connoisseur, and he had a great effect on the intellectual life of his compatriots. Keenly fostering the printing press in his domain, he extended favour towards the Flemish portraitist, Clouet the elder, who settled in France. And since this son of Flanders employed the new medium, oils, the vehicle acquired use with French painters. Perhaps because Francis had heard the captains of the defeated Charles expatiating on the splendours of Renaissance art in Italy, Francis invited numerous Italian artists to his realm. Certain of these immigrants were charged by him to decorate his favourite mansion, Fontainebleau; and thus Italian influence soon grew strong in French architecture and sculpture.

The story of the exquisite sacred works wrought in France in the sixteenth century is but the tale of an anomaly. In those years which witnessed the secular architects, under the spell of Italy, pass to the employment of the Classic style for homes, the French churches continued to be mostly raised in the medieval form, Gothic. Whereas in Flanders the decline in

the craft of the Book of Hours, through the invention of printing, had proved itself the signal for a superb pouring forth of large religious pictures in oils, the French painters in the fifteen-hundreds used the new medium almost exclusively for portraiture. Cousin and Goujon were the two men of France who would appear to have had the dream of leading their countrymen to create a glorious harvest of sacerdotal art, as in Flanders on the North, or in Italy on the South. In this effort those two Frenchmen were associated with Bullant, de l'Orme and Lescot, each of which trio is said to have been born in that year, 1515, marked by the accession of Francis the connoisseur.

Jean Cousin is first heard of at Sens. It is known that he became a burghess of Paris in 1548, and he seems to have died in 1583. In his time engraving had hardly begun yet in France, nor was it till late in the sixteen-hundreds that the French accomplished notable things in that field, these works being portraits. Whence it is doubly remarkable that Cousin should be author of at least two sacred prints, 'The Conversion of St. Paul' and 'The Brazen Serpent.' His painting in oils, 'The Last Judgment,' hangs to-day in the Louvre, but it can scarcely be doubted that the picture occupied, originally, a place within a church. Jean Goujon apparently gained considerable repute by his secular statuary, and he was active by the date when Cousin became a Parisian citizen. It is easy to conceive Goujon speaking in critical way about the homely and wonderfully vital sculpture of medieval France, for nothing could well be sharper than the dissimilarity of his own work from that of the Chartres school. And indeed Goujon's output, with its grace and refinement, is so close in temper to the glyptic art of Italy in the heyday of the Renaissance, that hesitation need not be felt in maintaining that an Italian journey was made by the French sculptor.

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The château of Anet, not far from Dreux, was built for Henry II, who was son and successor of Francis I. And the building was designed by Philibert de l'Orme, who held the post of Architect to the Crown. A native of Lyons, Philibert was author of a book on architecture, and he studied the art for a while in Italy. His chapel at Anet is not only Classic but is probably, if not beyond all possible question, the earliest French fabric with a dome. Cousin devised for the fane three pictorial windows with religious themes and Goujon executed sixteen figures of angels, eight being on the spandrils of the arches, the others on the vaults of these last. If the sixteen works were done in relief, figures in the round of the Twelve Apostles were placed within niches; and these statues were also in likelihood, though not certainly, wrought by Goujon. Undergoing something of demolition about the end of the eighteenth century, the château of Anet was partially restored in the nineteenth, the rehabilitation of the chapel being directed by an architect named Caristie. But the Apostolic sculptures in the building to-day are merely casts, the originals having been installed in the Carnavalet Museum, Paris. There is fascination of the deepest in assuming that the mutual doings of Cousin and Goujon at Anet brought a personal meeting between the two men. For may it not be accepted as sure that the painter and the sculptor found in each other great sympathy?

When it was decided that the Church of S. Germain l'Auxerrois, Paris, ought to have a new rood-screen, the task was assigned to Pierre Lescot. This name means Peter the Scotsman, and tradition holds that the Lescot family had come from Scotland. When it is remembered that across a long time in the Middle Ages, there was a Scottish Guard in France, it seems reasonable to assume that some ancestor of the architect had served in that regiment and then settled on

French soil. In his ardour for the incoming Classicism, Pierre chose the revived Antique mode for his screen, although the Parisian church involved was in Gothic, and Goujon was called on for the glyptic decorations. It is a matter for deep regret that, inasmuch as Lescot's work was taken down in the eighteenth century, Goujon's things can no longer be seen with the architectural setting for which they were designed. Conserved now in the Renaissance Room in the Louvre, they consist in reliefs depicting the Four Evangelists, along with a larger relief, an Entombment. This is by far the finest of Jean Goujon's religious creations for, while it reflects his customary grace and refinement, it is fashioned with a power much beyond his wont. A subject of lofty character demands lofty handling, and such was amply called forth in this case, in the French artist. Alone among the sculptures from his hand, this representation of the dead Christ has a majesty recalling the art of Michelangelo.

On the death of Philibert de l'Orme, his post as Architect to the Crown was acquired by Jean Bullant. Like his predecessor in office, he was the writer of a book on architecture, and, again like Philibert, he studied the building craft for a while in Italy. If there is much debate as to which edifices were built by Bullant, it is agreed that his fame in his own day was principally due to his extensive remodelling of Ecouen, and his additions to that mansion. Situated close to Paris, it was, in the architect's time, the home of the Constable of Montmorency. The chapel of this residence is not a Renaissance work, the windows being of the pointed variety with traceries. But Lescot's action in putting a Classic screen in a Parisian church in Gothic was echoed, as it were, by Bullant, in the little fane of Ecouen. For here the re-animated Antique formula was selected for the altar,

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adorned as it is by columns, pilasters and consoles. The sculptures on it, by Goujon, are in relief, the chief or central one delineating the Sacrifice of Abraham. And the minor, or encircling things have as topics the Four Evangelists, also Justice, Charity, and Religion. This chapel at Eçouen is still in a good state of repair outwardly, but the altar, with its glyptic decorations, has been placed in the Condé Museum, Chantilly.

Even as the date of Jean Goujon's birth is unchronicled so, too, does history fail to tell in what year he laid aside, for the last time, the materials which he had employed so finely in the service of religious art. If his co-worker, Jean Cousin, did indeed have consciously the aspiration of founding in France a grand school of sacerdotal painters who should rival those of Italy or Flanders, then Cousin must have known bitter disappointment. But conversely it is not difficult to conceive Goujon expressing keen admiration for those few French sculptors of his time who engaged, as he did, in the making of hieratic works in the Classic mode, derived from the Italian spell. Some in relief, and some in the round, these creations are seemingly without exception anonymous, and are preserved now in various public art collections. Presumably the storms of the French Revolution were at least largely the factor which swept through the auction room into museums these sculptures, carved as they must have been originally, for churches or for oratories in homes. If it would be impossible to find among the things any which have the grandeur of Goujon's own masterpiece, 'The Entombment,' the grace and refinement which he so lavishly attained were copiously achieved also by the little band of his compatriots in his day who sought to tread his path.

It is not easy to tell why the fine French art of the Renaissance Period should have been almost purely secular. Was this owing to a want of religious feel-

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ings with the monarchy, or to that same lack with the baronage? But the very fewness of those fair things accomplished in France in the hieratic sphere subsequent to the passing away of the Middle Ages renders doubly precious those works by Goujon and the gifted nameless artists who rallied round him. Alas, it was as though some shy little buds of lilies peeped forth, and went swiftly to their withering, through absence of sunshine and dew.

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