

Lazarus

17

The Frescoes

BY

BERN: PINTURICCHIO,

IN THE COLLEGIATE CHURCH OF S. MARIA MAGGIORE,
AT SPELLO.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2016



SPELLO.

THE ancient town of Spello rises upon the ruins of the Roman Hispellum, on a precipitous slope of the Apennines overhanging the rich valley of Foligno, and but a little apart from one of the great highways between Northern Italy and Rome. It still preserves, amidst the square brick towers of the middle ages, its arched gateway of the Imperial times.* At the end of the fifteenth century it was, with its dependent lands, by pontifical grant, a lordship of the Baglioni of Perugia.

One of the members of that noble family, Trojolo dei Baglioni, was then Prior of the "Collegiata," or collegiate church of Sta. Maria

* The woodcut represents the entrance to the town from the Roman road.

Maggiore. Wishing, according to the custom of the time, to adorn a chapel to the glory of the Virgin, and to employ an artist of repute to decorate it with frescoes, he invited to Spello Bernardino Pinturicchio, as one of the most renowned painters of the day.

Bernardino was the son of one Benedetto di Biagio, and was born at Perugia in the year 1454. He was called after his father, Di Betto or Betti (the familiar contraction of Benedetto); from the lowness of his stature, Pinturicchio, or Picturicchio (the little painter); and sometimes, from his deafness, "Il Sordiechio." He had probably been brought up in the "bottega," or workshop of Benedetto Bonfigli, a painter of considerable merit, who had founded a school in Perugia, in which the celebrated Pietro Vannucci, or Perugino, had also learnt his art.

Rosini* conjectures that he may have also studied under Vittore Pisanello, when that painter was employed upon the series of pictures still preserved in the church of S. Francesco at Perugia; and there is certainly much in Pinturicchio's elaborate architectural backgrounds, in his arabesques, in the action of his figures, and in the arrangement of his draperies, which might be traced to the influence of that celebrated Veronese artist. †

Pietro Perugino was but eight years older than Pinturicchio,

* "Storia della Pittura," vol. iii. p. 182. The earliest work attributed to Pinturicchio is a figure of S. Anzani in fresco in the chapel of Sta. Caterina at Assisi, the interior of which was painted by Matteo da Gualdo, under whom he may also have studied. The influence of Matteo may perhaps be traced in some of his works.

† It must, however, be observed that considerable doubt exists as to whether these pictures are really by Pisanello.

and they may have been apprenticed together. A close friendship existed between them, and when Sixtus IV. summoned the great Umbrian painter to Rome to decorate the Vatican and other buildings in his capital, Pinturicchio accompanied him as his assistant. They lived there together, and in company with Luca Signorelli, Bramante, and other distinguished artists of the time.* His abilities were soon recognised, and we find him at an early age engaged alone upon important works. Before he was thirty he had painted for the Cardinal della Rovere a part of his palace, and the fine frescoes in the church of Sta. Maria del Popolo.

He was subsequently invited to Orvieto to assist in completing the internal decoration of the cathedral,—that magnificent shrine of the arts of the fifteenth century. All the frescoes which he painted there have perished except eight figures of the evangelists and doctors of the church. From Orvieto he was called back to Rome by Alexander VI., and was engaged for four years, with occasional interruptions, in adorning with frescoes, still well preserved, the new halls in the Vatican, now known as the “Appartamento Borgia,” and numerous chambers in the Castle of S. Angelo, in which no traces of his paintings now exist. Partly as a reward for these labours he received a grant of land in the Perugian territory of Chiugi, for which he was to pay a yearly quit-rent of thirty measures of corn, afterwards commuted by order of the Pope, as too onerous a charge, to two pounds of white wax. He was engaged at Rome to the end of the century upon

* Gio. Battista Caporali, in his commentaries on Vitruvius, mentions a supper in the house of Bramante at which the three painters were present, but the date is uncertain.—Vermiglioli, *Vita di Pinturicchio*, p. 5.

many other works, and especially upon the frescoes in the Bufalini Chapel in the church of Sta. Maria in Araceli, which may be classed amongst his best productions.*

Having completed these undertakings, and being in the full maturity of his powers—for he was now in his forty-sixth year—Pinturicchio commenced the work confided to him by the Prior at Spello. The subjects selected to occupy the three sides of the chapel—the fourth being entirely open to the church—were the Annunciation, the Nativity, and Christ disputing with the Doctors. In the four compartments of the groined vault, and in the midst of graceful arabesques, he painted the four Sibyls foretelling the coming of the Saviour; thus connecting the ceiling with the walls, and uniting the whole in one story. These frescoes were commenced in the year 1500, and according to the date affixed by the painter to one of them, appear to have been completed in the following year, when his patron, the Prior, had been promoted to the dignity of Bishop of his native city of Perugia.

The frescoes of the Spello Chapel have been more fortunate than most works of the period in escaping restoration, but they have not been treated with less neglect and indifference. The rain having been long allowed to penetrate through the roof, and to trickle down the walls, the plaster loosened by the damp is peeling off, and the colours have lost their original brilliancy. The frescoes on the roof are fast disappearing altogether. As the chapel is

* The frescoes in the tribune of Sta. Croce in Gerusalemme, attributed to him, have either been so entirely repainted as to leave but few traces of his brush, or are the works of an indifferent imitator or scholar.

unlighted by windows, and almost blocked up by a modern altar, the paintings can only be well seen during two or three hours in the middle of a bright day. I have had opportunities of watching, during repeated visits, their rapid decay, and of noting the changes which are from year to year taking place in them.

A traveller rarely wanders from the main road to thread on foot the narrow and precipitous streets, inaccessible to a carriage, which lead to the Collegiata; and as the frescoes, although perhaps the best works of the painter, have not even been mentioned by Vasari, and have consequently not been described in books on art, they are known but to a few. This was precisely a case in which the Arundel Society could render good service to the arts, by having accurate copies made of these paintings before they had entirely perished.* Signor Mariannecci, who had copied the "Martyrdom of S. Sebastian" by Pietro Perugino, already published by the Society, was commissioned to make them. But nearly three years elapsed before the difficulties thrown in his way by the canons of the church could be overcome, and drawings of the three frescoes secured. This was only accomplished after reiterated orders from Rome, and through the kind intervention of Cardinal Antonelli. The priests, perceiving that foreigners took an interest in these works of art, were suddenly struck with the idea that they must be of some value, and were seized with the fear that to allow copies to be taken of them would be to detract from their pecuniary worth, by deterring travellers from visiting, and paying for the privilege of seeing, the originals.

* Some very bad engravings in outline, from drawings by one Mariani, have been published of them, but they are scarcely deserving of mention.

The first of the three subjects, the Annunciation, is to the left on entering the chapel. The Virgin, a most graceful figure with an exquisite expression of modest purity, stands before a high reading desk, and rests one hand upon an open book. The kneeling angel, holding in one hand a lily, and raising the other in the act of delivering his holy message, his golden hair floating in rich profusion upon his shoulders, and his limbs enveloped in flowing robes, is one of the noblest figures of this class that Pinturicchio ever painted. The Almighty, supported by cherubim, sends the mystic dove towards the Virgin. In the background is an arcade, the columns of which are ornamented with arabesques. Through the arches is seen a second colonnade, and a distant landscape with a walled city on a hill, probably intended for Spello. To the right, beneath a window, is represented, as suspended to the wall, the portrait of the painter with the inscription—BERNARDINVS PICTORICIVS PERVSINVS. On a column is inscribed the date of the execution of the work, 1501. The composition is very simple, the subject being treated somewhat in the conventional manner of the Umbrian school. But the story is clearly and naturally told, and the action, both of the Virgin and Angel, is full of truth and grace. The elaborate architectural background and the landscape are very characteristic of the master. The colour throughout is rich and harmonious.*

The second subject, on the wall facing the entrance, is the Nativity. The divine Infant is stretching out its hands to its mother, who is in an attitude of adoration before her son. Two angels kneel at its head, one raising the white cloth, embroidered with a

* A chromolith of this fresco will be included in a future publication of the Arundel Society.

cross, upon which it is lying. S. Joseph stands near the Virgin, and gazes in wonder upon the child. An ox and an ass are seen behind him. The stable is a ruined building of debased classic architecture, with pilasters adorned with arabesques. Three shepherds kneel before the Infant, and a fourth brings a ram as an offering. In the middle distance are the three Kings coming with their gifts, and attended by men on horse and foot, one bearing a shield with the Baglioni arms. On a hill behind this group the Angel is represented appearing to the Shepherds. In the distance is seen the city of Bethlehem, over which hangs the guiding star, and beyond is a sea or lake with a ship. In the sky is a group of angels singing from a roll of music.*

The composition of this subject is less conventional than that of the previous one. Like most works of the school and period, it wants unity of action. The principal group—that surrounding the Infant—is too scattered and formal. There is an attempt to give individuality of character, and natural expression and action, to the shepherds, which marks the position of Pinturicchio in the Umbrian school with reference to Pietro Perugino, and shows an advance upon his conventional style. The angels in the sky, however, are quite Peruginesque, and have all Pietro's grace.

The third fresco represents Christ disputing with the Doctors.† The child is surrounded by a crowd of listeners, some in Eastern costume, others in the dress of the fifteenth century. He places the joined fingers of the right hand upon the centre finger of the left

* This subject is included in the publications of the Arundel Society for the year 1858.

† Included in the publications of the Society for the year 1857.

—an action still commonly used by the Italians in argument, and frequently depicted by other painters when representing the same subject. The figure of the youthful Christ is simple and dignified. He is clothed in a tunic, and in ample drapery which falls to the ground. His hair clusters in ringlets about his neck. S. Joseph points to the child, and appears to wish to advance towards him, but is restrained by the Virgin, who, marvelling at the flow of divine wisdom, with a timid downcast look, places her hand upon her husband's girdle. On the pavement in the midst of the assembly are scattered in disorder the books of the old law, as if to mark the triumph of the new.

In the group of figures to the spectator's left, the painter has introduced his patron, the Prior Trojolo. He is dressed in the long black robe and cap of his office, as prothonotary of the Apostolic See. By his side is a second figure, also in priest's garb, probably his treasurer, for in one hand he carries a purse, evidently to denote that the paintings were executed at his master's expense. On the opposite side an old man, wearing a peculiar conical head-dress, holds a scroll inscribed with the painter's name, written PINTORICHO.

In the background is one of those domed polygonal buildings of so-called classic architecture which Bramante had brought into fashion about this period, and which were chosen by some of the principal painters of the day, his contemporaries and friends, as the most fit representation of the temple of Jerusalem—as by Pietro Perugino in his fresco in the Sistine chapel of “Christ's Charge to Peter,” and by Raphael in his “Marriage of the Virgin” in the Brera.

Pinturicchio has also introduced a similar building in other of his works, as in the "Death of S. Bernardino" in the church of the Araceli at Rome. On either side of this edifice, which occupies the centre of the background, is a landscape with trees, treated in the usual stiff conventional manner of the master.

The composition of this subject is more elaborate and ambitious than that of the other two, and very characteristic of the place which Pinturicchio holds in the Umbrian school, as the link between Pietro Perugino and Raphael. He can scarcely be called the pupil of the former, having been rather his fellow-labourer and assistant. But there can be no doubt that his style was influenced by Pietro's works, especially in his altar-pieces and easel-pictures, in which he frequently introduces angels and other figures almost copied from that master. On the other hand, the youthful Raphael appears to have assisted him in some of his later works, and if Vasari's statement is to be credited, to have been even employed by him in making designs for some of his principal compositions.* Pinturicchio stands as a painter between the two. He marks the transition between the Umbrian school, and the Roman founded by

* The editors of Lemonnier's edition of Vasari's Lives have shown that considerable doubt exists as to the extent of the assistance received by Pinturicchio from Raphael in the frescoes of the Piccolomini Library at Siena. In the contract for those works, still preserved, it is specially stipulated that both the cartoons, or original designs, and the heads in the frescoes themselves, should be by Pinturicchio's own hand. "*Item, sia tenuto fare tutti li disegni delle istorie di sua mano in cartoni e in muro, fare le teste de sua mano tutte in fresco et in secho ritocchare e finire infino a la perfectione sua.*" Sketches are preserved, one in the Gallery at Florence, the other in the Baldeschi collection at Perugia, of two of the subjects of these frescoes, and are attributed to Raphael—upon what evidence, except the authority of Vasari, I am ignorant. The proof afforded by their style is not, to my mind, conclusive. It is scarcely probable that Pinturicchio, a painter of great reputation and experience, should have employed Raphael, then but a mere youth, to make sketches for so important a work.

Raphael,* showing the first decay of that spiritualism which especially distinguishes the former. A less brilliant and subtle colorist than Pietro, less tender, and less deeply religious in sentiment, he displays greater dramatic vigour and dramatic unity in his works. He attempts to portray with truth, and with a more exact imitation of nature, the various emotions and feelings of the actors in the events he depicts, and endeavours to depart from a mere conventional treatment. He may consequently be considered as the first of the historical painters of the Umbrian school, being in this respect considerably in advance of Lo Spagna, l'Ingegno, and other pupils of Perugino. Thus, in the "Christ Disputing with the Doctors" at Spello, there is an endeavour to show in the countenances and action of those who surround the Saviour, the particular effect of his words upon each of them, and to give a natural variety to each expression. But in this attempt he is still far behind the great historical painters of the Tuscan school who had immediately preceded him, or were his contemporaries—Masolino, Masaccio, Benozzo Gozzoli, and Ghirlandajo. They were superior to him in the representation of true dignity and in elevated conception of character. Pinturicchio, in comparison with them, is frequently weak and even common-place, as well as inferior in variety of action; showing the influence of that conventional spirit of the Umbrian school, from which Raphael alone entirely freed himself.

In technical treatment, Pinturicchio holds the same relative place.

* As a proof of this transition of style, it may be mentioned that a picture in the Gallery of the Vatican, which was once attributed to Pinturicchio, is now attributed to Pietro, Pinturicchio, and Raphael together, and that the fresco of the Last Supper, recently discovered at Florence, is sometimes assigned to Raphael, and sometimes to Pinturicchio. It is certainly not by the former.

His draperies are usually broader and less mannered and affected than those of Pietro, and are frequently disposed with grace and truth. His coloring has much of the brilliancy, yet softness and harmony, of the Umbrian school, but is inferior to that of Pietro's best works. It is, however, sometimes exceedingly rich and powerful, as in the ease of his own portrait in the fresco of the Annunciation, which is almost Venetian in depth of tone. His drawing is generally careful and accurate. His outline is sometimes dry, but is often marked by great sweetness and tenderness; as in the figure of the Virgin in each of the Spello frescoes, and in the fresco over the altar of the Della Rovere chapel in the church of Sta. Maria del Popolo at Rome; and in the head of the Angel, of which an engraving in outline will be published by the Arundel Society. Like Pietro, he avoids the nude, and an undraped figure is of rare occurrence in his works. In his composition he occasionally betrays an evident imitation of the Florentine school, as in the fresco of the death of S. Bernardino in the church of the Araceli at Rome. Many of his heads are marked by great strength and originality of character, as that of the shepherd in the "Nativity," of which a traced outline is also published by the Society.

In the representation of suggestive scenery, he was inferior to Pietro Perugino, showing less true feeling for the beauties of nature, and less refined sentiment. There is a delightful calm and repose in Pietro's landscapes, which is rarely, if ever, seen in those of Pinturicchio. It was in rich architectural backgrounds that he excelled, and he rarely omits to introduce into his pictures some highly ornamented building or monument, although altogether inconsistent with the

subject. He was the first in Italy, says Vasari, to imitate the Flemish manner, in a series of landscapes and views of cities which he painted for Innocent VIII. in his palace of the Belvidere. Indeed in minuteness of detail, and in hard conventional treatment, he resembles to a certain extent the painters of the Flemish school. In the variety and richness of his arabesques he has scarcely been excelled, and even Raphael seems to have derived much from him in this branch of his art. Amongst the best specimens of his taste and skill in this style are the Piccolomini Library of Siena, the vault of the choir in the church of Sta. Maria del Popolo at Rome, and the ceiling of the chapel at Spello.

Pinturicchio was essentially a painter in fresco, and a decorator of architecture. Authentic easel-pictures by him are rare, although many worthless specimens of the Umbrian school pass under his name. His best are probably a large altar-piece now in the public gallery at Perugia, an Assumption at Naples, and a Holy Family and Saints in the Church of S. Francesco at Spello.

He painted in "buonfresco," or true fresco, and thoroughly understood the capabilities of the material. His works were, however, usually finished in tempera, according to the custom of many painters of the time. In the contract for the decoration of the library at Siena, he binds himself, indeed, to complete the heads "*in secho.*"* He was fond of introducing gold ornaments in high relief, bosses, and gilding into his pictures, a custom which Vasari condemns as "goffissimo." Although this practice is opposed to true art, it has frequently a rich and pleasing effect in architectural

* See *ante.* Note, p. 11.

decoration. The frescoes of Spello are, however, freer than most of his works from such ornamentation.

As a decorator of interior architecture Pinturicchio has scarcely had an equal. The celebrated library attached to the cathedral at Siena, and adorned with ten subjects from the life of Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Pope Pius II., and with a profusion of arabesques and architectural ornaments of the greatest variety and elegance, will probably ever remain the most perfect example of this style of decoration.

The great facility attained by Pinturicchio in fresco led him frequently, as has been the case with other artists, to paint carelessly and mechanically, some of his works almost justifying the contemptuous manner in which Vasari speaks of him.* Many of these were probably executed in great part by pupils or assistants. Of his scholars, none distinguished themselves. He founded no school, and exercised no real influence on art.

Like his fellow citizen Pietro Perugino, Pinturicchio was enrolled in 1501 among the decemvirs, or supreme magistrates of his native city. After the completion of his great work in the Piccolomini Library, he was released by the Balia, or magistracy of Siena, from the payment of all taxes and imposts, except those levied at the city gates. These marks of honourable distinction, his friendship with Raphael, and the esteem in which he was held by some of the most illustrious men of his time, ill agree with the character given of him by Vasari—always unfavourable to the Umbrian school, and especially hostile to Pinturicchio—that he was

* This is seen in some of the frescoes in the "Appartamento Borgia," in the Vatican.

one of the most fantastic, strange, and malicious men of whom there is record in the history of painting. Nor does there appear to be any truth in that biographer's account of the painter's death. According to him Pinturicchio, whilst employed upon an altar-piece for the friars of S. Francesco at Siena, perversely insisted upon the removal of an old chest from a room in their convent in which he worked. A part of it giving way, five hundred golden ducats rolled out on the floor. He was so envious of the good fortune of the poor monks at the discovery, through his means, of this treasure, that he took to his bed and died of grief and mortification. A more authentic and probable narrative of his death has, however, been preserved. He appears to have made, like Andrea del Sarto, an unfortunate marriage. Whilst he was suffering under a severe illness, his wife quitted the house with a lover, closed the door, and left the unhappy painter to die of neglect and starvation. He expired on the 11th of December, 1513, in the fifty-ninth year of his age, and was buried at Siena, in the church of SS. Vincenzio and Anastasio, now the oratory of the Contrada dell' Istrice.* No monument marked his grave until a lover of the fine arts, the Abate de Angelis, placed, a few years ago, an inscribed slab over his remains.

A. H. LAYARD.

* These particulars are found in an unpublished history of Siena by one Sigismondo Tisi, who was the priest of the parish in which Pinturicchio died, and who received the account of his death from some old women of the quarter who were present. Vermiglioli, *Vita di Pinturicchio*, p. 189.