

## ART IN GREECE.—THE CONVENTS OF MOUNT ATHOS.

MOUNT ATHOS lies to the south of Macedonia, between the gulfs of Contessa and Monte Santo, at the extremity of a peninsula connected with the continent by an isthmus about a mile and a half long. It is a round and almost conical mass, rising to a height of about three thousand feet above the level of the sea, and casting an immense shadow in the setting sun almost across the Archipelago. Little mention is made of it in the works of Grecian historians beyond the record of two facts—the one, that Xerxes caused a canal to be cut across the isthmus to give a passage to his fleet; and the other, that a Greek sculptor, Dinocrates, proposed to Alexander the Great to cut the mountain into the form of a statue with outstretched arm, and holding in its hand a town containing ten thousand inhabitants.

The hill is called at the present day by many of the Greeks Hagion Oros, or the Holy Mountain, and it is rendered remarkable by the fact, that its population now consists of about six thousand monks, forming a separate and almost independent community, and inhabiting several convents built along the slopes. These convents were the cradle of Byzantine art fourteen hundred years ago, and now, after a thousand storms of war, and change, and revolution have rolled over Greece, they form its last refuge.

Concerning the origin of this religious community, we have no certain information. In the persecutions with which the Christians were pursued in the first centuries of the Christian era, many faced martyrdom without hesitation, and even with joy; others, less confident in their own strength of nerve, sought security in desert fastnesses, and adopted the life of anchorites. It was thus that the seeds of Christianity were scattered over the solitudes of Nubia and Syria. Many more fled to Mount Athos, and took up their abode along its sides, hoping that the seclusion of the place, and the difficulty of access, would afford them safety, however precarious, from the rage of their enemies. When Constantine removed the seat of the empire to Constantinople, and avowed his adherence to the new faith, the population of Mount Athos rapidly increased, and convents were built, such, in all probability, as we now see them. It is right to mention, however, that this is mainly conjecture; history is entirely silent regarding this retired but interesting corner of the Byzantine empire. We have said that these convents are the last refuge of Greek art; we may add, that they contain some interesting relics of old Byzantine civilisation, and manners, and forms of faith, and are by no means an uninteresting subject of study for those who seek to lift up the pall which for four centuries has shrouded the remains of Greek greatness. They number in all twenty-three, lying around the mountain, none of them at any great distance from the sea. The most ancient to which our attention will principally be directed, are the *Aghia Labra*, or holy monastery, Vatopedi, Ivirôn, and Xilandari. The first, which at present contains about four hundred monks, was founded by St. Athanasius about the beginning of the fourth century, and to this circumstance owes its pre-eminence over all the others. While they are simply dedicated to some saint, it is entitled the holy monastery *par excellence*. Vatopedi was the one to which John Contocuzine, whose romantic story has been so well told by Gibbon, retired to spend the remaining years of his life, when, disgusted with power, he abdicated the imperial throne.

On the highest point of the mountain rises the little Church of the Transfiguration, and scattered around are a town and some little villages; and in the centre of the peninsula lies the *protalon* or metropolis of Mount Athos, Karies—all inhabited by a shifting population of monks, whose sole occupation is the importation of provisions and other necessaries from Salomen for their brethren in the convent. The monks are divided into two classes, brothers and fathers, or *papas*, and are made up of an indiscriminate mixture of Slaves, Greeks, Wallachians, and Armenians, all reduced to the same state of torpor, both physical and mental, under the rigidity of

the monastic rule. The convent buildings present for the most part great uniformity of appearance, generally an irregular and confused mass, with no evidence of unity of design in the arrangement of the different parts. A single door, which is always fastened at twilight, gives entrance to a square court-yard, around which the cells of the inmates are ranged in one or more stories; additions being made, upon a plan apparently dictated solely by caprice, when any increase took place in their number. In the centre stands the church, surrounded by a crowd of small chapels, but all built of brick, and so imperfectly, that frequent repairs have effaced all traces of the primitive style. On all the walls appear stiff, sad-looking, and austere pictures, which form a singular contrast to the easy, indolent, and *insouciant* appearance of the monks.

Mount Athos was in the earlier days of Christianity the great seat of intellectual activity—the hot-bed of theological and metaphysical discussion; but the state of listless indolence in which its inhabitants are now plunged is a strange satire upon its former glory. All the convents contain libraries of greater or less extent, filled with manuscripts and rare and valuable relics of the literature of antiquity; but the monks, far from studying them, suffer them to be lost or injured through carelessness, in utter and complete ignorance of the treasures of which they are the guardians. They read nothing but their offices, write but rarely, and are for the most part plunged in complete ignorance, not only of everything that is passing in the outer world—but of the very rudiments of literature and science. There is hardly a doubt that a diligent search by competent persons would bring to light many valuable works of classical authors hitherto supposed to be lost, or known to the western world only in a mutilated state. Some of the monks who visit Salomen to transact business for the convents, take advantage of their stay, to pick up a smattering knowledge of medicine and the Turkish language, but this is the only effort towards self-improvement that is ever made. The rude daubs by which Byzantine art is now represented amongst them, furnish additional proof of their mental degradation when we remember that, during the first two centuries after the establishment of the convents on Mount Athos, they were the chief seats of religious art in the world, and students resorted thither from all parts of Europe to receive instruction from the inmates.

In these times such names as those of St. Athanasius and Peter the Athonite figured in their annals, in no very striking contrast with many others of scarce inferior zeal and learning. The church of Aghia Labra, founded by Athanasius in the early part of the fourth century, was endowed richly A.D. 965 by the emperor Nicephorus. The gates, which probably belong to that period, are composed of wrought copper, and display great beauty of execution. They remind one of those of the church of Ravello near Amalfi, as well as of many other religious monuments of Apulia. The portico is covered with Turkish ornaments. The general arrangement is that of the church of St. Mark at Venice. The altar is covered with a great deal of rich gilding, as also most parts of the ceiling, which is covered with carved and fretted work, and encaustic paintings in great abundance; and the body of the church contains desks, pulpits, and other articles of a similar nature of great richness. The monks have substituted these for the massive pulpits of the ancient Latin church. Nearly all are the gifts of the Russian government.

The Byzantine school, which was a school of transition from ancient art, that sought the beautiful merely for the form itself, to Christian art, which uses the form only to veil an idea, devoted itself from the very first to preparing for the transformation which inevitably followed the adoption of this new aim by the cultivators of art. In this point of view the Byzantine artists were successful in arriving at a unity such as has never been attained by those of the Renaissance, and from which they are still very far indeed. The Italian mosaics, executed by Italian artists, can alone give us a right idea of the laborious changes which Byzantine art underwent before it assumed its definitive form from the teachings of the

great masters of the school. At a later period, to preserve the established forms from the influences of time or caprice or fashion, a monk named Denys collected the acknowledged and established principles of the school, and compiled them in a code. His manuscript was distributed through the various convents and carefully copied, and thenceforward became the text-book of the painters; and so powerful has been its influence, that it is impossible to fix the date of a Byzantine painting by its style. So closely have its rules been attended to, through a long lapse of time, so intimate, too, has been the connexion between Greek painting and the Greek worship, that the former has everywhere followed in the march of the priests, and we find it prevailing almost to the exclusion of every other in Russia, in Greece, in Asia Minor, and in the regions bordering on Mount Sinai, where Greek convents are numerous. The church, Aghia Labra, contains the best specimens of it extant. The cupola is entirely occupied by a colossal figure of Christ, with that air of purity and dignity which the painters of the Renaissance have adopted. The complexion is *straw-coloured*, as the monks there express; one hand is extended towards St. John, as if in the act of instructing, and the other is laid on his heart. The hair is fair, but the beard is black, as also the eyebrows, which give the half-closed eyes an air of mingled simplicity, sweetness, and firmness. The Byzantine artists indicated the importance of the personage they painted by the size of the figure. The saints increase in height as they increase in holiness, while Christ is taller than them all by the head and shoulders.

At the base of the cupola stand a row of archangels in shining robes, holding huge sceptres in their hands, surmounted by images of the Redeemer. The brilliant colours of their garments stand in dazzling contrast to the sombre black of the ground, and in their faces and attitudes there is an air of lofty, calm majesty. Over their heads an innumerable multitude of cherubs flutter round Christ as a centre, and as if typifying the spirits of the blest, they seem to grow more and more ethereal the nearer they approach him. There is nothing human in their figures except the head. The rest is composed of a great number of wings, pointing in every direction, and looking like stars in the deep blue firmament of the vault above; while on a golden ground, and on a grand scale, the image of Christ looks down from the midst of them all, so that in whatever part of the building the worshipper kneels, he seems to have his eye upon him.

The pendentives represent the four evangelists writing at the dictation of an apostle, and the walls of the rest of the church are covered with subjects drawn from the Old or New Testament. On the two arms of the cross we see the saints of the church militant, who shook off the dust of the schools, and defended their faith on the fields of force, standing upright upon a black ground, in an attitude of vigilant repose. The churches of the other convents present precisely the same aspect, though on a more diminutive and less perfect scale, in accordance with the Medo-Persian laws of the Byzantine school, which treated all subjects in the same manner, with the same figures, in the same attitudes. Towards the end of the principal nave, to the left, appears a painting with an inscription, now illegible, evidently representing one of the Latin chiefs of the Crusades, who fixed their abode in Greece on their return from the Holy Land. His head-dress is that of the Merovingian kings, and his robe, as well as his crown, is sprinkled with *fleurs-de-lis*, and in his hands he holds a model representation of the façade of a church, probably of one which owed its existence to his pious munificence; in front of him appears his son, wearing the same costume.

Under the external portico we find figures of the ancient *asceti*, or anchorites, in an attitude of prayer, who, in imitation of the fathers of the desert, lived in grottoes and caverns in the mountain side. They appear to have been reduced to the last extremity of hunger, and are clothed in a simple and primitive garment of leaves, while their beard descends almost to their knees. Beside them an inscription informs us, "Such was the life of these anchorites." These ascetics themselves travelled from convent to convent, painting those vivid repre-

sentations of their own unhappy lives, and also sculptured numerous little crucifixes in wood, many of which are still preserved.

The monks attribute the paintings which adorn the church of Aghia Labra to a brother of their order, named Manuel Panselinos (*the moon in all its splendour*), but they are unable to say at what period he lived. The figures are executed in fresco, in very low relief, which disappears at the distance of the floor; the tone is very light, and certainly betrays no attempt at imitation, and the whole is rather coloured than painted. Fresco-painting is very ancient, and is not due to the Byzantine school, but to a Roman artist, named Ludius, who, in the reign of Augustus, substituted it for the encaustic.

The only means of arriving at a near estimate of the date of these works, is by comparing them with others of the same character in Italy, the date of which is known. They may be safely referred in chronological order, we should think, to the mosaics of Santa Pudentiana, executed at Rome in the second century of the Christian era, in which the artist, with his pagan notions still running in his head, has given Christ the features of Jupiter; and those of St. Paul outside the walls of St. John of Lateran, in the fourth century, a period in which the Byzantine art shared in the complete triumph of Christianity. The parallel might be followed out in several instances of a still later date, did our space permit.

Compared with the Italian mosaics, the Byzantine art resembles them in the amplitude of outline of those which certainly belong to the earlier periods of the Christian era, when Greek art was still in its prime. This amplitude disappeared totally after the ninth century, and was not seen again till the period of the Renaissance, and the return to antique forms was plainly due to Michael Angelo. So that we must either attribute these Byzantine paintings at Aghia Labra to a very early date, or suppose them to have been executed since the Renaissance under the influence of the Vasari school. The latter supposition is, however, inadmissible, owing to the historical accuracy displayed in the rendering of the details. The armour, the little chains, the helmets, all warrant us in believing that the artist was the contemporary of the knights and nobles whom he represents, and whom he must have seen at the court of the Palæologi and the Comneri. The perfect state of preservation in which the works appear is accounted for by the fact, that Mount Athos has remained intact for ages from all political storms and agitations.

The mode of instruction in painting pursued by the monks, whatever be its effectiveness, has certainly the merit of extreme simplicity. Those of the pupils who exhibit most ability are placed on a platform behind those who have been promoted to the rank of masters, and there watch them while at work. After a few years of this, they are themselves permitted to practise. Before commencing, the wall is entirely laid bare, and then covered with a coating of plaster, which is carefully smoothed by the trowel. The ablest of the monastic artists then indicates to his subordinate the nature of the design to be executed, the size of the principal figure or figures, and the legend which is to accompany it. The latter then sketches the outline in a brownish-red, and hands the brush to one still less advanced, who gives the figure some local tones, and makes some attempt at shading. The finishing is done by the same hand which traces the outline, but the execution is in most instances extremely rude.

It is a trite remark, that there is no unmixed evil under the sun; and yet this is a truth which, like many others equally obvious, is too often lost sight of by hasty disputants and headstrong innovators. The subject of which we have been treating supplies a case in point. Nothing is more common than to hear people denounce the monastic system as an unmitigated curse to society. Convents are described as mere nests of corruption, or, at best, cradles of absurd superstition, and monks as lazy worthless drones, whose existence is scarcely to be tolerated. Yet, from what has been stated above, it appears they may be, and history tells us they have been, of great service to literature and art, not to mention their many deeds of charity.