FAMOUS ART CITIES, NO. IV, FLORENCE

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ADOLF PHILIPPI

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BY

ADOLF PHILIPPI

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Fig. 1. Cathedral with Campanile, from the South.

I. CONDITIONS OF FLORENTINE CULTURE.

FLORENCE, the City of Flowers, is wonderfully situated. Climb up to Fiesole in the early Spring, when nature is bare and grey in our cold North—up the green slopes between laurel and silvery olives and pointed, black cypresses, until you look down upon the marble-town with its cupolas and roofs, buried in a sea of blossoms,—and you will understand the name. From the opposite south-side, from S. Miniato across the Arno, you get the view of Florence against this wall of blossoming green. This town, enjoying all the blessing of nature, also takes first place in Italy as a habitation of modern man, especially since the changes of the last thirty years; it offers rest and enjoyment like no other town. Though without industries and noisy turmoil, Florence is not dead, like Venice and Pisa; she lives on the recollections of a glorious past and guards the treasures of her unique culture. What would Italy be without Florence—the cradle not only of Italian book-language, but of the literature of modern Europe! Eliminate all that is connected with Florence, from Dante to Giusti—what would be left? In Florence the writers of classic antiquity have

first been regenerated, read with eager and happy eyes, and made the basis of a new civilization. Then only could the men of science embark on their intellectual work which we certainly do not mean to hold in low esteem. But the fine arts of modern times have their home in Florence. Giotto and Masaccio are the first modern painters. Early Renaissance architecture is almost entirely Brunelleschi's creation, and if we Northerners may think a Renaissance church dispensable, we shall do well to remember that our modern dwelling-house would not exist, were it not for Brunelleschi's and his successors' Florentine palaces. We need houses, and we all love pictures. Most of us, who are not artists, regard sculpture more coolly; perhaps it is not wrong to hold the view, that it reached its zenith with the Greeks of whose mind it was the finest expression, whilst the art of our modern life is painting. The more praise is due to the Florentines of the early Renaissance for having again taken up sculpture, where the late Romanesque and early Gothic sculptors of France and Germany had left it. They might have proceeded on Pisan lines and followed the antique more closely; but instead of setting it up as model, they used it for correcting their own efforts, and where the antique nevertheless prevails, it is only in the superficial aspect and not in the essence which is the expression of innate, artistic realism, based on observation of and feeling for nature. Donatello is the stronger realist, Luca della Robbia has more soul. Ghiberti, their senior, is more clearly linked with the Gothic, though he soon leaves it so far behind that, with his feeling for form derived from the antique, he finds his personal style. In view of these three men's achievements their Gothic precursors are only historically important. Not since the days of the Greeks have the possibilities of plastic art been exhausted as they were in Florence, and the result of these 150 years—Florentine sculpture, culminating in Michelangelo—appears to us in every way worthy to rank with Greek sculpture. Then think of Lionardo's versatile genius, of Raphael's Florentine training, and of all Florence has given to the entire art of Italy, the apparently independent painting of the Venetians not excepted—and you will understand the oft repeated assertion, that after Athens no town has given us more and greater treasures of high culture, than Florence.

But, besides being poets and artists, these old Florentines were also men of excellent commonsense: good farmers and economists, clever merchants and successful bankers and masters of municipal government. At an early date we find well compiled statistics, well regulated taxation, and grand charitable institutions: hospitals, poor-houses, a foundling hospital built by no less a man than Brunelleschi. The numerous Italian terms of our business language testify even to-day, that at one time over thirty Florentine banks ruled the money-market of Europe.