

**BYZANTINE ART
AND
THE NEW OLD FIRST**

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Byzantine art and the new old First by John Lyman Faxon

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JOHN LYMAN FAXON

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AND

THE NEW OLD FIRST

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PREFACE.



“GREAT nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts,—the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art.” “The acts of a nation may be triumphant by its good fortune; and its words mighty by the genius of a few of its children; but its art, only *by the general gifts and common sympathies of the race.*” (I have italicized the words to give added emphasis, for want of the rest of Ruskin’s preface, which is here omitted.)

“Viva San Marco.”

“Viva, Italia!” you may still hear that cry sometimes, though she lies dead enough. “Viva, Vittor, Pisani!” perhaps that cry, yet again. But the answer—“not Pisani, but St. Mark,” when will you hear *that* again nowadays?”

“But if you will read it (*i. e.*, St. Mark’s and Byzantine art), you must understand now, once for all, the method of utterance in Greek art.” etc. “And this is true, not of Byzantine art only, but of all Greek art—*pur sang*. Let us leave, to-day, the narrow and degrading word ‘Byzantine.’ There is but one Greek school, from Homer’s day down to the Doge Selvo’s (1070); and these St. Mark’s mosaics are as truly wrought in the power of Dædalus, with the Greek constructive instinct, and in the power of Athena, with the Greek religious soul, as ever chest of Cypselus or shaft of Erechtheum. And therefore, whatever is represented here, be it flower or rock, animal or man, means more than it is in itself. Not sheep, these twelve innocent, woolly things, but the twelve voices of the gospel of heaven; not palm trees, these shafts of shooting stems and beaded fruit—but the living grace of God in the heart, springing up in joy at Christ’s coming—not a king merely, this crowned creature in his sworded state, but the justice of God in His eternal law—not a queen, nor a maid only, this Madonna in her purple shade, but the love of God poured forth, in the wonderfulness that passes the love of woman. *She* may forget—yet will I not forget thee.” *

* Ruskin’s St. Mark’s Rest—the *Reptem*.



Just

INTRODUCTION.



RUSKIN truly says, that Art is the *only one* of the three books which gives a true record of a nation's greatness—for Art has been, *and ever will be, the one unfailling, sure, unimpeachable record of the highest types of civilization*—as decadence in Art has marked the decadence of a people—other things pass away, mens' lives, records, traditions, histories, are changeable, perishable; ART, never dies. Time indeed lays its iron hand on Art, and its monuments come down to us (if not destroyed by sacreligious hands), storm-beaten, scarred, dismantled; yet there still remains, that inefficable, glorious element, which reveals to us, a great Art, a great time, a great civilization; and we are awed by, and wonder at, a governing power which is not now rightly understood or appreciated; an intellect too far advanced for us to clearly comprehend, a genius, great as it is lamentably rare in the present age—and we look upon these scarred and battered monuments of ages long ago, grand and beautiful in their noble isolation and contrast with the vain attempts of our own time. And those of us who look beyond the craze of modern materialism, philistinism, and individualism, as opposed to idealism, wonder if America will ever know a "renaissance of Art." Did space allow, I could give sundry weighty reasons why America will never know a truly great art, so long as the present conditions of things exist—so long as our people live only for the non-essentials of life rather than the *essentials*, present materialism rather than future *honor and glory*, realism rather than *idealism*. The close of the nineteenth century does and will show isolated examples of noble art, but as a rule it is utterly impotent in its influence on art, and future centuries will question as to what manner of people we were, as to intellectual growth, art education and comprehension.

II. Ruskin does not mean that a nation is great, in the modern sense, in individual wealth, in broad lands or armed strength; quite the reverse, but great in the higher types of true civilization, in intellectual strength, in national unity for national glory, in *Art*, in *Religion*.