

**GUIDE TO THE PRINCIPAL
PICTURES IN THE
ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS
AT VENICE, IN TWO PARTS**

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Guide to the principal pictures in the Academy of fine arts at Venice, in two parts by John Ruskin

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JOHN RUSKIN

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GUIDE
TO
THE PRINCIPAL PICTURES
IN THE
ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS
AT
VENICE.

ARRANGED FOR ENGLISH TRAVELLERS

BY

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GUIDE, ETC.

In the first place, if the weather is fine, go outside the gate you have just come in at, and look above it. Over this door are three of the most precious pieces of sculpture in Venice; her native work, dated; and belonging to the school of severe Gothic which indicates the beginning of her Christian life in understanding of its real claims upon her.

St. Leonard on the left, St. Christopher on the right, under Gothic cusped niches. The Madonna in the centre, under a simple gable; the piece of sculpture itself engaged in a rectangular panel, which is the persistent sign of the Greek schools; descending from the Metopes of the Parthenon.

You see the infant sprawls on her knee in an ungainly manner:—she herself sits with quiet maiden dignity, but in no manner of sentimental adoration.

That is Venetian naturalism; showing their henceforward steady desire to represent things as they really (according to the workman's notions) might have existed. It begins first in this century separating itself from the Byzantine formalism,—the movement being the same which was led by Giotto in Florence fifty years earlier. These sculptures are the result of his influence, from Padua, and other such Gothic power, rousing Venice to do and think for herself, instead of letting her Greek subjects do all for her. This is one of her first performances, independently of them. She has not yet the least notion of making anybody stand rightly on their feet; you see how St. Leonard and St. Christopher point their toes. Clearly, until we know how to do better than this, in perspective and such matters, our painting cannot come to much. Accordingly, all the Venetian painting of any importance you are now to see in the Academy is subsequent to these sculptures. But these are, fortunately, dated—1378 and 1379. Twenty years more will bring us out of the fourteenth century. And therefore, broadly, all the painter's art of Venice begins in the fifteenth; and we may as well at once take note that it ends with the sixteenth. There are only these two hundred years of painting in Venice. Now, without much pause in the corridor, though the old well in the cortile has its notabilities if

one had time,—up the spiral stairs, and when you have entered the gallery and got your admission tickets—(quite a proper arrangement that you should pay for them,—if *I* were a Venetian prefect, you should pay a good deal more for leave to come to Venice at all, that I might be sure you cared to come,)—walk straight forward till you descend the steps into the first room in the arrangement of the Academy Catalogue. On your right, at the bottom of the steps, you see a large picture (16) in a series of compartments, of which the central one, the Crowning of the Virgin, was painted by a Venetian vicar, (vicar of St. Agnes,) in 1380. A happy, faithful, cheerful vicar he must have been; and any vicar, rector, or bishop who could do such a thing now, would be a blessing to his parish, and delight to his diocese. Symmetrical, orderly, gay, and in the heart of it nobly grave, this work of the old Plebanus has much in it of the future methods of Venetian composition. The two angels peeping over the arms of the throne may remind you to look at its cusped arches, for we are here in central Gothic time; thirty years after the sea-façade of the Ducal Palace had been built.

Now, on the opposite side of the room, over the door leading into the next room, you see (1) in the Academy Catalogue “The work of Bartholomew Vivarini of Murano, 1464,” showing you what ad-

vance had been made in eighty years. The figures still hard in outline,—thin, (except the Madonna's throat, which always, in Venice, is strong as a pillar,) and much marked in sinew and bone, (studied from life, mind you, not by dissection); exquisitely delicate and careful in pure colour;—in character, portraits of holy men and women, such as then were. There is no idealism here whatever. Monks and nuns had indeed faces and mien like these saints, when they desired to have the saints painted for them.

A noble picture; not of any supreme genius, but completely containing the essence of Venetian art.

Next, going under it, through the door, you find yourself in the principal room of the Academy, which please cross quietly to the window opposite, on the left of which hangs a large picture which you will have great difficulty in seeing at all, hung as it is against the light; and which, in any of its finer qualities, you absolutely cannot see; but may yet perceive what they are, latent in that darkness, which is all the honour that the kings, nobles, and artists of Europe care to bestow on one of the greatest pictures ever painted by Christendom in her central art-power. Alone worth an entire modern exhibition-building, hired fiddlers, and all; here you have it jammed on a back wall, utterly unserviceable to human kind, the little angels of it fiddling unseen,

unheard by anybody's heart. It is the best John Bellini in the Academy of Venice; the third best in Venice, and probably in the world. Repainted, the right-hand angel, and somewhat elsewhere; but on the whole perfect; unspeakably good, and right in all ways. Not inspired with any high religious passion; a good man's work, not an enthusiast's. It is, in principle, merely the perfecting of Vivarini's; the saints, mere portraits of existing men and women; the Madonna, idealized only in that squareness of face and throat, not in anywise the prettier for it, otherwise a quite commonplace Venetian woman. Such, and far lovelier, you may see living to-day, if you can see—and may make manifest, if you can paint.

And now, you may look to the far end of the room, where Titian's 'Assumption' has the chairs put before it; everybody being expected to sit down, and for once, without asking what o'clock it is at the railroad station, reposefully admire.

Of which, hear first what I wrote, very rightly, a quarter of a century ago.

"The traveller is generally too much struck by Titian's great picture of 'The Assumption' to be able to pay proper attention to the other works in this gallery. Let him, however, ask himself candidly how much of his admiration is dependent merely on the picture's being larger than any other