CHAPTER IX

THE UFFIZI: THE FIRST FIVE ROOMS

Cimabue and Giotto—The Primitives—Fra Lippo Lippi—Filippino Lippi —Leonardo da Vinci and Verrocchio

LET us now enter the first room on the left, after either climbing the stairs or mounting in the lift. The first large picture on the left of the first room, No. 884, the Cimabue, marks the transition from Byzantine art to Italian art. Giovanni Cimabue, who was to be the forerunner of the new art, was born about 1240. At that time there was plenty of painting in Italy, but it was Greek, the work of artists at Constantinople (Byzantium), the centre of Christianity in the eastern half of the Roman Empire and the fount of ecclesiastical energy, and it was crude in workmanship, existing purely as an accessory of worship. Cimabue, of whom, I may say, almost nothing definite is known, and upon whom the delightful but casual old Vasari is the earliest authority, as Dante was his first eulogist, carried on the Byzantine tradition, but breathed a little life into it. In his picture here we see him feeling his way from the unemotional painted symbols of the Faith to humanity itself. One can understand this large panel being carried (as we know the similar one at S. Maria Novella was) in procession and worshipped, but it

is nearer to the icon of the Russian peasant of to-day than to a Raphael. The Madonna is above life; the Child is a little man. This was painted, say in 1280, as an altar-piece for the Badia of S. Trinità at Florence.

Next came Giotto, Cimabue's pupil, born about 1267, whom we have met already as an architect, philosopher, and innovator; and in his picture at the end of this room, No. 8344, we see life really awakening. The Madonna is vivifying; the Child is nearer childhood; we can believe that here are veins with blood in them. Moreover, whereas Cimabue's angels brought masonry, these bring flowers. It is crude, no doubt, but it is enough: the new art, which was to counterfeit and even extend nature, has really begun; the mystery and glory of painting are assured and the door opened for Botticelli.

But much had to happen first, particularly the mastery of the laws of perspective, and it was not (as we have seen) until Ghiberti had got to work on his first doors, and Brunelleschi was studying architecture, and Uccello sitting up all night at his desk, that painting as we know it—painting of men and women "in the round"—could be done, and it was left for a youth who was not born until Giotto had been dead sixty-four years to do this first as a master—one Tommaso di ser Giovanni Guido da Castel San Giovanni, known as Masaccio, or Big Tom. The three great names then in the evolution of Italian painting, a subject to which I return in Chapter XXIV, on the Carmine, are Cimabue, Giotto, Masaccio.

We pass on in this first room from Cimabue's pupil Giotto, to Giotto's followers, Taddeo Gaddi and Bernardo Daddi, and Daddi's follower Spinello Aretino, and the long dependent and interdependent line of painters. For the most part they painted altar-pieces, these early craftsmen,

the Church being the principal patron of art. Their works are many of them faded and so elementary as to have but an antiquarian interest; but think of the excitement in those days when the picture was at last ready, and, gay in its gold, was erected in the chapel! Among what is so purely ecclesiastical and formal there is, however, in this room, one real picture, as distinguished from church adornment, and that is No. 454, attributed to Giotto, in which there is composition, drama, and colour—a really beautiful and sincerely felt "Deposition."

In the second room we are back to pure ecclesiasticism again, the principal work being a "Coronation of the Virgin" by Lorenzo Monaco, almost rivalling Fra Angelico in gaiety. Here also is another altar-piece with a subtle quality of its own—the early Annunciation by Simone Martini of Siena (1285-1344) and Lippo Memmi, his brother. (d. 1357), in which the angel speaks his golden words across the picture through a vase of lilies, and the Virgin shrinkingly receives them. It is all very primitive, but it has great attraction, and it is interesting to think that the picture must be six hundred years of age. This Simone was a pupil of Giotto and the painter of a portrait of Petrarch's Laura, now preserved in the Laurentian library, which earned him two sonnets of eulogy.

In the third room we find a battle by Paolo Uccello, but it is not so fine as that in our own National Gallery. Opposite is a lucid and very attractive group by Domenico Veneziano, a harmony of pale pinks, greens and blues. Here also are those early experimentalists, Masaccio and Alessio Baldovinetti, both trying so hard and making grave and beautiful things, if crude. A little unknown painter's "Virgin and Child" should be looked at. But Ignoto almost always paints well!

The fourth room has five Lippo Lippis, which is an interesting circumstance when we remember that that dissolute brother was the greatest influence on Botticelli; for Botticelli draws near. The largest of the Lippis is the Coronation of the Virgin with its many lilies—a picture which one must delight in, so happy and crowded is it, but which never seems to me quite what it should be. The most fascinating part of it is the figures in the little medallions: two perfect pieces of colour and design. The kneeling monk on the right is Lippo Lippi himself. Next it is the Madonna Adoring—No. 8353—with herself so luminous and the background so dark. The pendant—No. 8350—is less remarkable. But there still remains one that is copied in every picture shop in Florence: No. 1598, a Madonna and two Children. Few pictures are so beset by delighted observers, but apart from the perfection of it as an early painting, leaving nothing to later dexterity, its appeal to me is weak. The Madonna (whose head-dress, as so often in Lippo Lippi, foreshadows Botticelli) and the landscape equally delight; the children almost repel, and the decorative furniture in the corner quite repels. The picture is interesting also for its colour, which is unlike anything else in the gallery, the green of the Madonna's dress being especially lovely and distinguished, and vulgarizing the Ghirlandaios which hang near. The best of these is No. 881, but it is too hot throughout, and would indeed be almost displeasing but for the irradiation of the Virgin's face. Of the other Ghirlandaios No. 1619 is a charming thing, and the little Mother and her happy Child, whose big toe is being so reverently adored by the ancient mage, are very near real simple life. This artist, we shall see, always paints healthy, honest babies. The seaport in the distance is charming too. But it is all overheated.

THE LOGGIA OF THE PALAZZO VECCHIO AND THE VIA DE LEONI

And now we come to what is perhaps the most lovely picture in the whole gallery, judged purely as colour and sweetness and design—No. 3249—a "Madonna Adoring," by Filippino Lippi. If only the Baby were more pleasing this would be perhaps the most delightful picture in the world: as it is, its blues alone lift it to the heavens of delectableness. The Tuscan landscape is very still and beautiful; the flowers, although conventional and not accurate like Luca's, are as pretty as can be; the one unsatisfying element is the Baby, who is a little clumsy and a little in pain, but diffuses radiance none the less. And the Mother—the Mother is all perfection and winsomeness. Her face and hands are exquisite, and the Tuscan twilight behind her is so lovely. I have given a reproduction, but colour is essential.

In the fifth room are two pictures which bear the name of the most fascinating painter who ever lived and worked—Leonardo da Vinci. One is the Annunciation, upon the authenticity of which much has been said and written, and the other an unfinished Adoration of the Magi which cannot be questioned by anyone. The probabilities are that the Annunciation is an early work and that the ascription is accurate: at Oxford is a drawing known to be Leonardo's which is almost certainly a study for a detail of this work, while among the Leonardo drawings in the His de la Salle collection at the Louvre is something very like a first sketch of the whole. Certainly one can think of no one else who could have given the picture its quality, which increases in richness with every visit to the gallery; but the workshop of Verrocchio, where Leonardo worked, together with Lorenzo di Credi and Perugino, with Andrew of the True Eye over all, no doubt put forth wonderful things. The Annunciation is unique in the collection, both

in colour and character: nothing in the Uffizi so deepens. There are no cypresses like these in any other picture, no finer drawing than that of Mary's hands. Luca's flowers are better, in the adjoining room; one is not too happy about the pedestal of the reading-desk; and there are Virgins whom we can like more; but as a whole it is perhaps the most fascinating picture of all, for it has the Leonardo darkness as well as light.

Of Leonardo I could write for ever, but this book is not the place; for though he was a Florentine, Florence has very little of his work: these pictures only, and one of these only for certain, together with an angel in a work by Verrocchio at the Accademia which we shall see, and possibly a sculptured figure over the north door of the Baptistery. Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, and Francis I of France, lured him away, to the eternal loss of his own city. It is Milan and Paris that are richest in his work, and after that London, which has at South Kensington a sculptured relief by him as well as a painting at the National Gallery, a cartoon at Burlington House, and the British Museum drawings.

His other work here—No. 1594—in the grave brown frame, was to have been Leonardo's greatest picture in oil, so Vasari says: larger, in fact, than any known picture at that time (see opposite page 100). Although very indistinct, it is, curiously enough, best as the light begins to fail and the beautiful wistful faces emerge from the gloom. In their presence one recalls Leonardo's remark in one of his notebooks that faces are most interesting beneath a troubled sky. "You should make your portrait," he adds, "at the hour of the fall of the evening when it is cloudy or misty, for the light then is perfect." In the background one can discern the prancing horses of the Magi's suite; a staircase

with figures ascending and descending; the rocks and trees of Tuscany; and looking at it one cannot but ponder upon the fatality which seems to have pursued this divine and magical genius, ordaining that almost everything that he put forth should be either destroyed or unfinished: his work in the Castello at Milan, which might otherwise be an eighth wonder of the world, perished; his "Last Supper" at Milan perishing; his colossal equestrian statue of Francesco Sforza broken to pieces; his sculpture lost; his Palazzo Vecchio battle cartoon perished; this picture only a sketch. Even after long years the evil fate persisted, for in 1911 his "Gioconda" was stolen from the Louvre and was too long absent.

Next we have what is in many ways the most interesting picture in Florence—No. 71, the Baptism of Christ—for it is held by some authorities to be the only known painting by Verrocchio, whose sculptures we shall find in the Bargello and Or San Michele, while in one of the angels—that surely on the left—we see the hand of his pupil Leonardo da Vinci. Their faces are singularly sweet. Other authorities consider not only that Verrocchio painted the whole picture himself but that he painted also the Annunciation at the Uffizi to which Leonardo's name is given. Be that as it may—and we shall never know—this is a beautiful thing. According to Vasari it was the excellence of Leonardo's contribution which decided Verrocchio to give up the brush. Among the thoughts of Leonardo is one which comes to mind with peculiar force before this work when we know its story: "Poor is the pupil who does not surpass his master."

The rest of the room—in addition to the Botticellis, to which we come in the next chapter—is given to some fine work of the two Pollaiuolos and to the picture of Tobias

and the Angels—No. 8359. This—called officially School of Verrocchio, and by one firm of photographers Botticini, and by another Botticelli—is a fine free thing, low in colour, with a quiet landscape, and is altogether a delight. It represents Tobias and the three angels, and Raphael moves nobly, although not with quite such a step as the radiant figure in a somewhat similar picture in our own National Gallery—No. 781—which, once confidently given to Verrocchio, is now attributed to Botticini; while our No. 296, which the visitor from Florence on returning to London should hasten to examine, is no longer Verrocchio but School of Verrocchio.