Week III: Set Reading – Primary Source (2)

Giorgio Vasari on Giotto and Simone Martini.

Giottino di Bondone (1267-1337)

That very obligation which the craftsmen of painting owe to nature, who serves continually as model to those who are ever wresting the good from her best and most beautiful features and striving to counterfeit and to imitate her, should be owed, in my belief, to Giotto, painter of Florence, for the reason that, after the methods of good paintings and their outlines had lain buried for so many years under the ruins of the wars, he alone, although born among inept craftsmen, by the gift of God revived that art, which had come to a grievous pass, and brought it to such a form as could be called good. And truly it was a very great miracle that that age, gross and inept, should have had strength to work in Giotto in a fashion so masterly, that design, whereof the men of those times had little or no knowledge, was restored completely to life by means of him. And yet this great man was born at the village of Vespignano, in the district of Florence, fourteen miles distant from that city, in the year 1276, from a father named Bondone, a tiller of the soil and a simple fellow. He, having had this son, to whom he gave the name Giotto, reared him conformably to his condition; and when he had come to the age of ten, he showed in all his actions, although childish still, a vivacity and readiness of intelligence much out of the ordinary, which rendered him dear not only to his father but to all those also who knew him, both in the village and beyond. Now Bondone gave him the care of some sheep and he, leading them for pasture, now to one spot and now to another, was constantly driven by his natural inclination to draw on the stones or the ground some object in nature, or something that came into his mind. One day the artist Cimabue, going on business from Florence to Vespignano, found Giotto, while his sheep were feeding, drawing a sheep from nature upon a smooth and solid rock with a pointed stone, having never learnt from anyone but nature. Cimabue, marvelling at him, stopped and asked him if he would go and be with him. And the boy answered that if his father were content he would gladly go. Then Cimabue asked Bondone for him, and he gave him up to him, and was content that he should take him to Florence.

There in a little time, by the aid of nature and the teaching of Cimabue, the boy not only equalled his master, but freed himself from the rude manner of the Greeks, and brought back to life the true art of painting, introducing the drawing from nature of living persons, which had not been practised for two hundred years; or at least if some had tried it, they had not succeeded very happily. Giotto painted among others, as may be seen to this day in the chapel of the Podestà’s Palace at Florence, Dante Alighieri, his contemporary and great friend, and no less famous a poet than Giotto was a painter...

After this he was called to Assisi by Fra Giovanni di Muro, at that time General of the Order of St Francis, and painted in fresco in the upper church thirty-two stories from the life and deeds of St Francis, which brought him great fame.
Scenes from the Life of St Francis, attributed to Giotto, though some probably not by him (Upper Church, Assisi).

It is no wonder therefore that Pope Benedict [XI, 1303-1304] sent one of his courtiers into Tuscany to see what sort of a man he was and what his works were like, for the Pope was planning to have some paintings made in St Peter’s. This courtier, on his way to see Giotto and to find out what other masters of painting and mosaic there were in Florence, spoke with many masters in Siena, and then, having received some drawings from them, he came to Florence. And one morning going into the workshop of Giotto, who was at his labours, he showed him the mind of the Pope, and at last asked him to give him a little drawing to send to his Holiness. Giotto, who was a man of courteous manners, immediately took a sheet of paper, and with a pen dipped in red, fixing his arm firmly against his side to make a compass of it, with a turn of his hand he made a circle so perfect that it was a marvel to see it. Having done it, he turned smiling to the courtier and said, “Here is the drawing”. But he, thinking he was being laughed at, asked, “Am I to have no other drawing than this?” “This is enough and too much,” replied Giotto, “send it with the others and see if it will be understood.” The messenger, seeing that he could get nothing else, departed ill-pleased, not doubting that he had been made a fool of. However, sending the other drawings to the Pope with the names of those who had made them, he sent also Giotto’s, relating how he had made the circle without moving his arm and without compasses, which when the Pope and many of his courtiers understood, they saw that Giotto must surpass greatly all the other painters of his time. This thing being told, there arose from it a proverb which is still used about men of coarse clay, “You are rounder than the O of Giotto,” which proverb is not only good because of the occasion from which it sprang, but also still more for its significance, which consists in its ambiguity, *tondo,* “round,” meaning in Tuscany not only a perfect circle, but also slowness and heaviness of mind.

So the Pope made him come to Rome, and he painted for him in St Peter’s, and there never left his hands work better finished; wherefore the Pope, esteeming himself well served, gave him six hundred ducats of gold, besides having shown him so many favours that it was spoken of through all Italy.

After Giotto was returned to Florence, Robert, King of Naples, wrote to his eldest son, Charles, King of Calabria, who was at that time in Florence, that he must by some means or other send him Giotto to Naples. Giotto, hearing himself called by a king so famous and so much praised, went very willingly to serve him, and did many works which pleased the king greatly. And he was so much beloved by him that the king would often visit him, and took
pleasure in watching him and listening to his conversation, and Giotto, who had always some jest or some witty answer ready, would converse with him while going on with his painting. So one day the king saying to him ..., “Giotto, if I were you, now that it is hot, I would give up painting a little”, he answered, “And so would I, certainly, if I were you” ...

There are many other stories remaining of the witty sayings of Giotto, ... told by Boccaccio [among others]. ... It is said that when Giotto was only a boy with Cimabue, he once painted a fly on the nose of a face that Cimabue had drawn, so naturally that the master returning to his work tried more than once to drive it away with his hand, thinking it was real. And I might tell you of many other jests played by Giotto, but of this enough.

Simone Martini (c. 1284-1344)

Truly happy can those men be called, who are inclined by nature to those arts that can bring to them not only honour and the greatest use, but also, what is more, fame and a nearly eternal name. Happier still are they who have from their cradles, beyond such inclination, a grace and gentlemanly manners [gentilezza e costume cittadineschi], which render them very dear to all men. But happiest of all, talking of craftsmen, are those who not only receive a love of the good from nature, and noble ways from the same source and from education, but also live in the time of some famous writer, from whom, in return for a little portrait or some other similar artistic courtesy, they gain at some point the reward of eternal honour and name, by means of [mention in] the author’s writings; and this, among those who practise the arts of design, should be particularly desired and sought by the excellent painters, seeing that their works, being on the surface and on a ground of colour, cannot have that eternal life which castings in bronze and works in marble give to sculpture, or buildings to the architects.

Very great, then, was the good fortune of Simone, to live at the time of Francesco Petrarca [i.e. Petrarch] and to come across that poet most given to love [amorosissimo] at the papal court in Avignon, who wanted to have the image of Lady Laura by the hand of Maestro Simone, for, having received it as beautiful as he had desired, he [Petrarch] memorialised Simone in two sonnets...

These sonnets, in truth, ... have given more fame to the poor life of Maestro Simone than all his own works have ever done or ever will, seeing that they must at some time perish, whereas the writings of so great a man will live for eternal ages. Simone Memmi of Siena, then, was an excellent painter, remarkable in his own times and much esteemed at the Court of the Pope, for the reason that after the death of Giotto his master, whom he had followed to Rome ... he made a Virgin Mary in the portico of St Peter’s ... and in this he imitated the manner of Giotto very well, receiving, so much praise ... that he was summoned with very great insistence to the Court of the Pope at Avignon, where he wrought so many pictures, in fresco and on panels, that he made his works correspond to the reputation that had been borne thither. Whence, having returned to Siena in great credit and much favoured on this account, he was commissioned by the Signoria to paint in fresco, in a hall of their Palace, a Virgin Mary with many figures round her, which he completed with all perfection to his own great credit and advantage. And in order to show that he was no less able to work on panel than in fresco, he painted in the said Palace a panel which led to his being afterwards made to paint two of them in the Duomo, and a Madonna with the Child in her arms, in a very beautiful attitude...
This done, Simone was brought by the General of the Augustinians to Florence, where he painted the Chapter House of Santo Spirito, showing invention and admirable judgment in the figures and the horses that he made, as is proved in that place by the story of the Passion of Christ, wherein everything is seen to have been made by him with ingenuity, with discretion, and with most beautiful grace… This work would bear much stronger witness to the excellence of Simone, if, besides the fact that time has eaten it away, it had not been spoilt by those Fathers in the year 1560, when they, being unable to use the Chapter House, because it was in bad condition from damp, made a vaulted roof to replace a worm-eaten ceiling, and threw down the little that was left of the pictures of this man…

Next, Simone painted three walls of the Chapter House of the said Santa Maria Novella, very happily. … [On the first wall] in Heaven is seen the glory of the Saints, and Jesus Christ; and in the world below remain the vain pleasures and delights, in human figures, and above all in the shape of women who are seated, among whom is the Lady Laura of Petrarca, portrayed from life and clothed in green, with a little flame of fire between her breast and her throat. There is also the Church of Christ, and, as a guard for her, the Pope, the Emperor, the Kings, the Cardinals, the Bishops, and all the Christian Princes; and among them, beside a Knight of Rhodes, is Messer Francesco Petrarca, also portrayed from the life, which Simone did in order to enhance by his works the fame of the man who had made him immortal. For the Universal Church he painted the Church of S. Maria del Fiore, not as it stands today, but as he had drawn it from the model and design that the architect Arnolfo [di Cambio] had left in the Office of Works for the guidance of those who had to continue the building after him; of which models, by reason of the little care of the Wardens of Works …, there would be no memorial for us if Simone had not left it painted in this work…
[His younger brother, Lippo], although he had not the excellence of Simone, none the less followed his manner as well as he could, and made many works in fresco in his company for S. Croce in Florence... Finally, both having returned to their native city of Siena, Simone began a very large work in colour over the great gate called Camollia, containing the Coronation of Our Lady, with an infinity of figures, which remained unfinished, a very great sickness coming upon him, so that he, overcome by the gravity of the sickness, passed away from this life in the year 1345, to the very great sorrow of all his city and of Lippo his brother, who gave him honourable burial in S. Francesco.

Lippo afterwards finished many works that Simone had left imperfect... At Assisi, ... in the lower Church of S. Francesco, he finished some figures that Simone had begun for the altar of S. Elizabeth, which is at the entrance of the door that leads into the chapels, making there a Madonna, a S. Louis King of France, and other Saints, in all eight figures, which are only as far as the knees, but good and very well coloured...

Lippo ... lived for twelve years after Simone, executing many works throughout all Italy, and in particular two panels in S. Croce in Florence. And seeing that the manner of these two brothers is very similar, one can distinguish the one from the other by this, that Simone used to sign his name at the foot of his works in this way: SIMONIS MEMMI SENENSIS OPUS [the work of Simone Memmi Sienese]; and Lippo, leaving out his baptismal name and caring nothing about a Latinity so rough, in this other fashion: opus MEMMI DE SENIS ME FECIT [Of Memmi of Siena made me]...

Over the tomb of Simone was placed this epitaph: ‘SIMONI MEMMIO PICTORUM OMNIUM OMNIS ÆTATIS CELEBERRIMO. VIXIT ANN. LX, MENS. II, D. III.’ [To Simone Memmi, most celebrated of painters of all ages. He lived 60 years, 2 months, 3 days].

As we have already said..., Simone was not very excellent in draughtsmanship, but he had invention from nature [invenzione dalla natura], and he took much delight in drawing portraits from the life; and in this he was held so much the greatest master of his times that Signer Pandolfo Malatesta sent him as far as Avignon to portray Messer Francesco Petrarca, at the request of whom he made afterwards the portrait of Lady Laura, with so much credit to himself.
