ANTIQUE NEEDLEWORK OF PERMANENT BEAUTY: COPIED FROM A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN PAINTING: BY KATHRINE SANGER BRINLEY

BROWNING, in his poem entitled "Fra Lippo Lippi," makes the irresponsible brother of a Florentine convent say of himself, "Flesh and blood, that's all I'm made of!"—a true epitome of the character and works of the first great master of modern painting. Joy in the things of sense, Fra Lippo stood for. He never attained to expression of the spiritual, though busied all his life with telling in splendid color the stories of saints and angels and of celestial things. The sins of flesh which sullied his life, cramped and darkened an imagination which was essentially fine. Yet the mysterious power of good to gather in the evil, and then to send it forth glorified, is an eternal truth. Out of this man's weakness we gather strength; out of his faltering words we glean a song. For, gladness in the flesh over which his poor soul stumbled, swayed his brush so powerfully that in looking at his works today we catch his spirit. While he struggled, against his wish, to depict for church and convent, heavenly things radiant with celestial light, he produced in Italian painting (all unknown to himself, no doubt) the first likenesses of men, women and children that were palpitant with human life. To have turned citizens of heavenly courts into the people of one's own town; to have made street urchins bear the lilies of their guardian angels, was no small work after all. So, as is often the case, we owe this man who lived four hundred years ago esteem for that which he never meant to do. This unconscious product of the soul, that which we do in spite of ourselves, is the gold that remains after the sifting. We look at Fra Lippo's singing children and go forth to labor with a song in our hearts. And the value of a singing heart, when the day is young, no earthly mathematics can estimate. So we find the poor monk, who often begged florins from the magnificent Medici, bestowing upon us with free hand, wealth beyond calculation! We owe Fra Lippo also the picture of familiar size. Pictures in round frames, which later replaced the formal triptich of the churches, he was the first to paint.

Because he was so human, so keenly alive to material things, Fra Lippo's testimony is especially valuable to one seeking knowledge along material lines in those years which his life covered. If one should, some clear morning, wander into the room of Italian Primatives in the Louvre, having in mind the needlework of the fifteenth century, one would be constrained to pause before "The Virgin in Glory," painted in part at least by the Monk of Prato, because of that beautiful design which is set forth as embroidered ornament on a bishop's cope in its foreground. While parts of the painting have darkened with age, and perhaps through faulty color, there is yet to be seen the gleam of gold in this detail and the color of grapes, set against a background of mellow green. Indeed this design, which is shown reproduced in practical size, is so full of beauty in the rhythmic flow of its lines, and in its skilful treatment of simple forms, that one is impressed immediately with its rare value.

If one could but see the original of this embroidered band as easily as one looks upon the painted likeness of it today! But, alas, the way of textiles is even more uncertain than the way of paintings, which moths at least do not corrupt. We must therefore get from the picture all that is possible as to the needleworker's part in this design; our knowledge of actual embroideries of that period correcting and supplementing the eye's presumption. First of all, we see the gleam of gold in the strap work which goes to frame the many-petaled conventional rose, or it may
"THE VIRGIN IN GLORY": FROM A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTING BY FRA LIPO LIPPI.
DETAIL OF EMBROIDERY DESIGN TAKEN FROM FRA LIPPO LIPPI'S PAINTING OF THE VIRGIN: THE COLORS COMBINED ARE THREE SHADES OF PURPLE, GOLD AND WHITE ON A DULL GREEN GROUND.
be, passion flower. Also there is a hint of gold in this flower itself. Then we catch a crispness in the turned over edges of the petals which means at once to the needleworker, "relief." Those evenly distributed dots, which circle the center of the flower, are also well defined and raised in the painting; and knowing how the luxurious taste of the day ran easily to jewels, one is inclined to believe that pearls or other stones enriched this portion of the original embroidery. The very center or heart of the flower is found to be of a deep purple that suggests a thought of grapes and their attendant symbolism. As one ponders over this design, one feels that more than a single form and more than one symbol went to its evolution. A complex impression is gained which persuades one to believe that its originator having in mind the passionate rose, the pure passion flower, and the twining limbs of the vine, attained by means of them all to the expression of a perfect design, and a whole philosophy.

So much modern decorative design seems to speak in syllables,—to utter but parts of words,—that even when it pleases it often fails to satisfy because born of but half a thought. What Fra Lippo gives us (another good deed to his credit!) expresses clearly a rounded thought of beauty. There is in it, so to speak, just an accent of the East, which tells that it belongs to the time when Italy was an eager student of Oriental art, as we know her to have been in the fifteenth century. For instance, those lines which ray out in groups from golden semicircles, hint of Persia and her lovers of the sun.

The design is shown embroidered upon a silk damask of rich green; its shadowed surface speaks more than a thought of those famous Sicilian silks of the Renaissance and was chosen as peculiarly appropriate to bear the kindred pattern. Such material, where part is loosely and part is tightly woven, presents certain difficulties to the needleworker; it should moreover be stretched in a frame for a day or two before the pattern is transferred to it, or the design is likely to be pulled out of shape by the yielding of parts of the material. The strap work and straight bands on each side of the design, are developed in heavy Japanese gold thread, couched in double lines, set close, side by side till the width of the form is filled, and stitched with pale violet floss the same shade as that used for the body of the flower. At the points of intersection, the gold thread is so disposed that each succeeding joining produces the effect of basket weaving. If preferred, the threads can be cut at such junctures, that by means of a wide-eyed needle carried through to the back of the material, the simple crossing of the straps is produced. But the former is the more effective way. Those rays which suggest the sun are made a telling part of the embroidery by couching upon them single strands of gold thread with regularly set stitches of deep purple floss, the deepest shade of the three employed in this work. Each end of the gold thread must be pulled through to the wrong side of the material, care being necessary to prevent spoiling the gold. The semicircles which spring from the sides of the pattern are formed by couching at the same time two or three strands of violet floss (the second shade employed) and stitching them to the green damask with the lightest shade of the floss. When they are thus filled, outline each edge with a simple thread of gold, couched. Thus far, the means used for embroidering this design are of the simplest nature, yet the result obtained is rich, and with the solid work of the flower added becomes really sumptuous.

Before taking up the silk for this flower, the turned over ends of the petals should be covered with filling stitches of white embroidery or darning cotton; then the center of the flower, which in the painting resembles a formal bunch of grapes, should likewise be padded, but with strands of heavier knitting cotton, coiled and stitched in circular forms as shown. Now with a lighter shade of floss, work all the padded leaf edges "over and over." With the next shade, and using ordinary "satin" or "short and long" stitch, fill in all of the flower up to the dotted circular
band; this is left untouched save for a single strand of fine gold thread, which is couched to each margin; within it at proper intervals pearls are sewed to the damask with heavy silk. The intervening space being now filled with a continuation of the "short and long" stitch, the central "grapes" are worked over and over with two strands of the darkest shade of floss,—the deep purple. And thus the work is finished.

Seen through a vista of years the commonplace becomes quaint; the quaint grows picturesque; and over all things the enchantment of an intervening veil hints of worth which perhaps the noontime glare of the present would not affirm. Yet there is a worth that at all times is unmistakable; and in this design, this imprisoned thought of beauty, given us by one who sang at his work centuries ago, we have something which is not beautiful merely because it is old, but old because it is beautiful; something which could not perish because it possessed the eternal element of beauty.

WORK

"Wise work is useful. No man minds, or ought to mind, its being hard, if only it comes to something; but when it is hard, and comes to nothing; when all our bees' business turns to spiders'; and for honeycomb we have only resultant cobweb, blown away by the next breeze—that is the cruel thing for the worker. Yet do we ever ask ourselves, personally, or even nationally, whether our work is coming to anything or not? We don't care to keep what has been nobly done; still less do we care to do nobly what others would keep; and, least of all, to make the work itself useful instead of deadly to the doer, so as to use his life indeed, but not to waste it. Of all wastes, the greatest waste that you can commit is the waste of labor. If you went down in the morning into your dairy, and you found that your youngest child had got down before you; and that he and the cat were at play together, and that he had poured out all the cream on the floor for the cat to lap up, you would scold the child and be sorry the milk was wasted. But if, instead of wooden bowls with milk in them, there are golden bowls with human life in them, and instead of the cat to play with—the devil to play with; and you yourself the player; and instead of leaving that golden bowl to be broken by God at the fountain, you break it in the dust yourself, and pour the human blood out on the ground for the fiend to lick up—that is no waste!"—(From "The Crown of Wild Olives." John Ruskin.)