

An Ancient Advice.

By Nicholas Roerich.



IN one of the old Italian manuscripts, possibly of the Fifteenth Century—the first pages and all the decorations of which have been torn out by the “noble” hand of some bibliophile—is related simply the story of how a pupil came to the artist-teacher, Sano di Pietro, for advice regarding his painting.

The Teacher was working over a special order and could not answer the call of his pupil who had independently begun his picture, “Adoration of the Magi,” for a small village church in the Siennese District. The Teacher said:

“My dear boy, I have given my word to the Abbot of Montefalcore not to leave my house until I have completed the “Coronation of the Holy Virgin,” commissioned by him. But, tell me, wherefore are your doubts? I am afraid that you have worked too much with me and are lost before your own work!”

“Revered Teacher,” said the pupil, “my picture is complicated and it is difficult for me to coordinate its separate parts. Is it better to paint a dark olive grove against a red rock, at a distance? Are the tree-trunks visible and how distinct is the outline of the foliage?”

“My dear, paint as is necessary!”

“The mantle of the Virgin is full of a golden design. Would it not be better to break it up into small folds and cover it with a pattern of large squares?”

“Do as is necessary!”

“Revered Teacher, thou art too busy with your own resplendent works. I had better be silent until your nearest moment of respite.”

“My dear one, I do not expect any respite soon and you must not lose time if your picture has so much still unfinished. I am listening to everything and answer you, although with certain surprise.”

“The heads of the warriors which follow the kings are many. Is it necessary to find one line for them or to paint in each head and from these to have the outline of the crowd?”

“Do just as you need.”

"I have made bushes on the distant fields and inter-crossed them with flowing rivers. But I wanted them quite clear cut, as is sometimes seen by the naked eye. I wanted to see the ripples in the water and a vessel on them and even an oar in the hand of the oarsman. But it is all in the distance."

"Nothing is simpler. Do what is necessary."

"Master, I am frightened. May be you will in any case tell me, should the crowns of the kings be made convex or only leave the applied gold for the crown?"

"Place the gold where it is necessary."

"I begin to think whether or not to make tufts of wool on lambs, although they are hardly seen, but I remember what silky soft fleece the lambs have. I want to make them with a fine brush, but in the general picture they are almost unseen"

"Make them as is necessary."

"Master, I do not find any advice for my work in your answers. I know that all Must be as is necessary. But what is 'Necessary'! It is obscure to me."

"Tell me, did Father Giovanni make any stipulation of work for you?"

"Outside of a date, no conditions. He said, 'Benvenuto, paint a good image of the Adoration of the three Magi before the Holy Child, and I will pay thee ten ducats out of the monastery funds.' Then he gave the date for the work and the measurements of the panel. But during the work I had various thoughts, in my desire to create a better image. And so, Master, I came to thee as before, for good advice. Tell me what is the meaning of 'as necessary'"

"'Necessary' means all must be as is 'good.'"

"But what means, 'good'?"

"Poor, 'uncomprehending Benvenuto. What did I always speak about to you? What word did I often repeat to you? To make as good as possible, means only one thing: 'As beautiful.'"

"And 'beautiful.'"

"Benvenuto, go out of this door and to the shoemaker, Gabacuc. Tell him, please hire me to soften leather, because I do not know the meaning of *beautiful*"; But do not come to me any more and, still better, do not touch your work."

After this story, the manuscript gives some recipes concerning the preparation of olive oil and about the use of olive pips. Then there is also a story about a citizen of Pisa, Chirilli Koda, who was buried alive.

But the last two narratives do not concern us.