

FOR ALL MOTHERS

Michelangelo's "Pieta"

(Written for "The Listener" by G.E.E.)

"... Deep-hearted man, express
Grief for thy Dead in silence like to
death;
Most like a monumental statue set
In everlasting watch and moveless woe,
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath!
Touch it! The marble eyelids are not
wet—
If it could weep, it could arise and go."
—Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

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THE war, among other things, has compelled us to re-examine our spiritual and artistic values, and much has been discarded which seemed in times of peace a pleasant ornament of leisurely and secure life. There are, however, a few works of literature, art, and music which have stood the test of time and which transcend the boundaries of national hatred. Even during the war we continue to enjoy and admire the music of Bach and Beethoven and the pictures and sculptures of Raphael and Michelangelo.

It is not to their nationality we pay tribute, but to their universality; they are part and parcel of the whole world. Their humanity, their interpretation of joy and sorrow, of love and suffering is in its way as "global" and all-embracing as the war in which we are engulfed.

One of the most moving examples of this kind is perhaps Michelangelo's "Pieta," which is reproduced on the cover of this issue.

Universal Pity

To say this marble group is famous is to be almost ridiculous; but it is perhaps worth while to examine the reason why it has survived over 500 years, and why its appeal, far from diminishing, is as strong and perhaps even stronger than it was when it was first placed in one of the chapels of St. Peter's in Rome. To-day the Holy Virgin's mourning over the corpse of her son has acquired new significance: it becomes a symbol for the grief the mothers of the world are called upon to bear in our time. Like any other mother, Mary, too, laments the loss of the being dearest to her heart, who sacrificed himself to redeem the world. The sacrifice of our soldiers, sailors, and airmen is offered in a similar spirit. The mother, every mother, will recognise the necessity for this bitter death, but her sorrow will be none the less deep and personal and yet tinged with universal pity. This is the meaning of the Italian "Pieta."

Michelangelo succeeds in stressing this feeling to the point of poignancy: his sculpture expresses the pity of all mothers over all dead sons. He is, in the words of Walter Pater, "in possession of our inmost thoughts, dumb inquiry over the relapse after death into the formlessness which preceded life, the change, the revolt from the change, then the correcting hallowing, consoling

rush of pity . . . at last—a passing light, a mere intangible external effect over those too rigid or too formless faces; a dream that lingers a moment, retreating in the dawn, incomplete, aimless, helpless."

Hopeless and Passionless

The artist refrains from exhibiting the expression of violent grief; there is no contortion of the dead man's limbs, no desperate anguish in the Madonna's face that would distort her features. Michelangelo knows that "hopeless grief is passionless." But representation of this kind is not as natural as it may seem at first sight. If we compare the "Pieta" with the so-called "Vesper-Group" which originated in the German art of the 14th Century the essential difference becomes evident. These early wooden sculptures treat the same subject: Mary mourning for her dead son. They are full of a wild, passionate grief: a violent sorrow generally pervades the Virgin's stricken face; the corpse which she clutches in despair is cramped and stiff and often painted a bloody red, to remind us of the wounds which were inflicted upon Christ on the Cross.

Michelangelo takes over the idea of these Gothic "Laments," but he renounces their emotionalism (imbued frequently with a distinct macabre note). This avoiding of any excess in feeling may be an expression of the Renaissance period. It showed a clear wish for a calming-down in form and style, as opposed to the preceding Gothic era. Apart from this, however, it also means a more subtle interpretation of a deep feeling. Only primitive man pours forth his sorrow and happiness in a straightforward, uncomplicated fashion; the more civilised has sublimated his emotions to a higher extent.

Symbolic Composition

Michelangelo follows the example of the Middle Ages for the composition of his figures. As in this sculpture, Christ was always reposing on the knees of his mother; never was she seen merely standing close to the dead body or only leaning over him compassionately. But Michelangelo scorns the method of symbolic representation that makes the Lord a little child. He not only chisels the body of a full grown man, but gives at the same time a realistic description of the human frame. The position of the unclad body allows a full display of limbs, trunk, and head. The knowledge of anatomy and shortened per-



"... No desperate anguish in the Madonna's face"
(Detail of the Madonna's head from the "Pieta")

spective which came in the wake of the Renaissance and which the sculptor masters supremely, is not used for its own sake. It has its functional value in the composition of the whole group, as has the diagonal position in which the corpse rests: the broad massive of the marble is loosened. Thus not only Christ, but also the Virgin, is thrown into relief.

The Lord's head has sunk far back in the agony of death, but the features of the calm face reveal utter tranquillity and peace; it is He who died saying: "It is finished . . . Father into Thy hands I commend my spirit." And Mary, though overwhelmed with grief, knows—so it seems—that death is not final, that it is "swallowed up in victory."

The Unseen Beauty

Michelangelo might not have expressed himself in the actual words of the apostle, but his artist's creed is akin to the conception of the first letter to the Corinthians. For his confessed aim was: "to apprehend not only the outward beauty, but the unseen (i.e., the spiritual) beauty which excels all others." This, linked with his deep humanity and understanding of mankind's suffering, makes his work a living entity.

It might happen one of these days that a 'bomb or a high-explosive will fall on St. Peter's and will destroy the "Pieta." Perhaps this is a dire necessity of total warfare. People who have lost their dear ones or seen their homes in ruins, and the collapse of a whole world, may find it squeamish to mourn over the destruction of a single marble sculpture. But should we not lament the fact that we have already destroyed much of the spirit of *Pity* and *Piety* embodied in Michelangelo's masterpiece?