

E. H. Gombrich, Review of R. Langton Douglas, Leonardo da Vinci, his Life and Pictures, Burlington Magazine, Vol. 86, 1945, pp.129-30 [Trapp no. not recorded]

Leonardo da Vinci, his Life and Pictures. By R. Langton Douglas. xiii + 127 pp. + 57 pl. (Chicago : University of Chicago Press.) (Cambridge University Press.) £1 4s.

Readers of THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE are familiar with the views and researches of this distinguished critic who has now summed up the work of a lifetime in this small volume on the painter Leonardo. The first three chapters sketch the life of the artist as it can be traced through contemporary records divesting it of the romantic or sentimental legends which have gathered round the enigmatic figure of the painter; the fourth deals with the history of Leonardo's bequest, paying a warm tribute to its faithful keeper Melzi; the remaining six chapters discuss, in chronological order, the pictures attributed to Leonardo by the author. Students of Leonardo will perhaps be especially interested in the author's eloquent plea on behalf of the *Dreyfus Madonna*, in the evidence provided to show that the Pizzuto Portrait represents Beatrice d'Este, attributed, by the author, to Leonardo himself, and in the information that Professor Valentiner has proved that *The Birth of St. John the Baptist* in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool—which he attributes to Perugino—formed part of the Predella of Verrocchio's *Madonna di Piazza* at Pistoia. Special questions such as the London *Virgin of the Rocks* and the respective values of Matteo Bandello's and Sebastiano Resta's information regarding Leonardo's life and work are discussed in appendices. There are a number of polemical remarks against the "Neo-Morellians" of B. Berenson's school of thought and some refreshing asides on the state of art criticism in general, the cavalierly treatment of documentary evidence, excessive reliance on photographs and germane evils. "It is a continual source of wonder to me," says the author, "that art historians as a class pay so little attention to the condition of paintings."

The author sums up his critical opinion in the sentence that "Leonardo, while one of the greatest of men, was not one of the greatest of painters." Indeed he has harsh words to say about some of the master's most famous paintings, about *The Last Supper* and what he calls its "bombast," and most of all about the Louvre *St. John the Baptist*, which he does not only call a "lampoon," a "crime" representing not a saint but "some minister of vice" but to which he also objects on artistic grounds : "Like some favourite of the variety stage, some old trouser giving his valedictory performance, Leonardo repeats all his accustomed tricks to the great delight of his loyal admirers."

The author will hardly expect all readers to agree with such a verdict. Even those of us who are averse to the exaggerations of the nineteenth century genius-worship may still feel—to adopt one of Goethe's sayings—that one must not censure a Leonardo except on one's knees. But apart from considerations of piety we may well ask whether the author's view is entirely consistent. For his book is based on the assumption that Leonardo was "primarily a painter" which leads him to accepting Vasari's picture of a gifted but unsteady painter, "spoilt" and "fickle" in his pursuits and even without a thorough knowledge of the technical aspects of his craft. But why, then, should he have a claim to be called "one of the greatest of men" ? Surely this undisputed title rests on the recognition that Leonardo was not wasting his time and abandoning his true vocation when he turned away from painting. Are we at all entitled to isolate one of the countless manifestations of this unique mind and play it off against the others? Can we ever hope to understand Leonardo's art with its admittedly problematical aspects without seeing it in conjunction with his restless efforts to fathom the secrets of the visible world?