Lovers with the Massacre in the Background and Other Essays on Historical Painting

Excerpt

This lyrical, quiet and tender painting refers to one of the most appalling massacres which is known in European history as St Bartholomew's Day. On 24 August 1572 in Paris thousands of French Calvinists, called Huguenots, were slaughtered. The number of those who perished was estimated at 30,000. It was the most dramatic moment of the religious war waged in France at the time, the war which had a clear political dimension. [...] On the pretext of the wedding of Henry III with Marguerite de Valois, who was a sister of king Charles IX, the wedding which was designed as a political marriage aiming to maintain the truce between Catholics and Calvinists, the most eminent representatives of the Protestant movement were lured to Paris. On this infamous day […] Huguenots who had arrived for the wedding received "a bloody welcome". [...] Massive slaughters lasted for a few days and from Paris they spread to other towns. [...]

In the painting of John Everett Millais, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, no signs of the looming devilish work can be seen. As these were not the events of the Massacre which inspired the painter, but the opera entitled Les Huguenots by Giacomo Meyerbeer the libretto of which was based on the events of St Bartholomew's Day. The opera was first staged in Paris in 1836 and London's Covent Garden has been staging it every year since 1848. A Huguenot, on St Bartholomew's Day Refusing to Shield Himself from Danger by Wearing the Roman Catholic Badge, which was first exhibited in 1852, refers to the events of Scene 2 of Act 2 of the opera. Preparing the massacre, duc de Guise ordered Catholics to bind white sashes around their arms and to attach white crosses to their hats. In the picture a Catholic girl tries to persuade her lover Raoul de Nangis to save himself by binding around his arm a white cloth. He, however, resists, preferring to die rather than deny his faith. Thus she converts to Protestantism and they both are murdered. [...]

Criticism

A Huguenot, on St Bartholomew's Day..., painted in 1851 and 1852, was created in the first years of the existence of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, when the relationship between the members of the group and their ideals were very strong. In 1950 Millais received harsh criticism after his painting Christ in the House of His Parents was exhibited. This criticism became part of the legend of the Brotherhood. [...]

A Huguenot... met with favourable reception. Undoubtedly, it was easier to accept this painting than the previous one. The appearance of the models and touching theme attracted attention, and thanks to the long title the work could not be interpreted as a love scene "deprived of moral messages". Millais devoted a lot of time to paint this picture, as he always did in the first years of his artistic activity. He spent many days, as he wrote in his diary, painting the details of the mossy brick wall covered with ivy. He precisely depicted flowers filled with symbolic meaning. Canterbury bells growing at the girl's feet symbolise "faith" and "stability", nasturtiums at the Huguenot's feet denote "patriotism" and loyalty towards faith, ivy refers to "friendship". This painting is clear and simple. Contrary to works of other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood it does not require metaphorical reading. But Millais had an inborn talent which his friends from the Brotherhood had to cultivate,

frequently with hard effort. His talent was the main source of his artistic success and popularity but gradually popularity made his pictures lose much of its clearness to the benefit of sweetness and sentimentalism.

A Huguenot, on St Bartholomew's Day... displays all the premises of the artist's success. At the age of 22 he was already able to demonstrate his remarkable skill at depicting every detail: mossy bricks, moss covering the wall, gleaming ivy leaves, the girl's patterned damask gown, the man's velvet clothes, their hair and complexions. The means he uses are simple: the girl and the Huguenot are the only people in the picture, they seem to fill its surface enclosed with an arch but without *horror vacui* which overpowers many of the works of the Pre-Raphaelites who tended to fill their paintings with pedantically depicted details. The space in the picture is shallow but not confined. The structure of the painting is also simple and subordinate to the figures of the models. The dark luxuriant ivy provides a contrast to their gleaming faces and the brick wall is the background to their dark clothes. Only the lovers are important, the rest is only a necessary addition. Only they are present in the painting. The depiction of their tragedy – the conflict between love and faith – is lapidary. The painting concentrates on the hands of the young man, one hand on the girl's head, the other pushes away the white cloth the girl tries to bind around his arm. The young lovers look in each other's eyes. Nothing more.

A private tragedy

The success of *A Huguenot, on St Bartholomew's Day...* exhibited in London's Royal Academy was enormous. It could be partially attributed to its anti-Catholic message which matched the fear of "papal aggression". Of course the artistic values of the painting were also praised. But the source of the success of the picture could be found elsewhere. Millais started to display great historical events through the prism of personal miseries of ordinary people who have no influence on history, who are only small cogs in the machine. This was another great innovation of the historical painting of the 19th century. The first was the abandonment of allegorical depicting of history as *exempla virtutis* to the benefit of presenting attractive anecdotes deprived of deeper meanings. Instead of glorious events, everyday life was presented but it was decorated with historical costumes and settled in historical sceneries. Familiarisation replaced glorification. Great personalities were presented unofficially, in private situations. On the other hand, historical scenes and panoramas, wars and battles created a good opportunity to provide the recipients with entertainment which contained a small dose of historical didacticism. Thus the function of these scenes changed: they were no longer designed as an apotheosis. Leading actors playing their roles on the stage of history also changed. Rulers, leaders and heroes were replaced with "common people" or anonymous figures. Privacy, however, does not mean unimportance – we can observe a genuine moral dilemma. As the heroes who face this dilemma are beautiful, young and honest – success is bound to come.

In the 19th century the way of presenting history in painting underwent some fundamental transformations, some of which have been presented above. Historical painting started to be treated as "the art for the masses" and it had to conform to the rules governing this kind of art. The needs it was responding to turned out to be more durable than the painting itself. [...]