

THE BIRTH OF THE HALO

THERE is probably not one man in ten thousand of those who admire the paintings of sacred subjects in the Metropolitan Museum or the galleries of Europe who knows the origin of the halo," said a well known American painter, just returned from abroad. "Since earliest childhood we have seen it—that circle of golden light, the emblem of holiness, gleaming above the head of apostle or saint, and so used have we become to it as a sign of these qualities that it never occurs even to the painter himself who daily makes use of it to inquire how it ever got there and how, getting there, it acquired its symbolic intent.

"It was from an ancient mariner sort of a painter in Paris that I got my information last Summer. This was the explanation as he gave it to me over a bottle of my own choosing—and paying:

"The first subjects to feel the Renaissance were architecture and sculpture, and this several generations before the days of Cimabue and Giotto, the earliest of the painters. Of these subjects architecture came first, as is still evidenced in the magnificent ruins of cathedrals scattered over Europe. I say cathedrals, because everything was saturated with the religious spirit in those days, and the architect expressed his genius in his conceptions of the house of God.

"Later came the sculptor. He gave expression to his art in the images of the saints and other holy characters. The commonest form of this expression was life-sized images of the saints, which were set in solemn row about the outside of the churches and cathedrals immediately under the eaves of the building.

"Now, the earliest sculptors soon saw that in a very short time the heads and faces of these figures were soiled and disfigured by action of the driving elements in time of storms; even the hot sun contributed its share in cracking the skulls and faces of the sacred images. Accordingly, to protect them they placed upon their heads a flat wooden disk that extended out far enough to act as um-

brella or sunshade, as either was necessary.

"Now, it was several generations before any painters of note arose. These, of the Cimabue-Giotto type, were ignorant even for that day of ignorance. Of course, following the spirit of the age, they must needs make their subjects holy ones, and the statues standing so invitingly to their hands offered themselves as their first models.

"Thinking, in their wealth of ignorance mentioned, that the wooden disk had something to do with the saintly character of their models, these peasants faithfully copied it into their paintings. In nearly all of the paintings of Cimabue and many of those of Giotto, especially his earlier ones, the flat disk is represented, merely as such without any attempt at idealization. Later, however, the painters emphasized the rim and painted the body of the disk a color that barely distinguished it from the surrounding hues.

"Later still, they merely painted the circle of the disk and omitted any coloring whatsoever of the body. Then in the bright morning of that period the painters idealized it by painting the circle the color of golden light—and there you have your halo.' True? I have no reason to doubt the old man. Certain it is that in none of the crude attempts at painting sacred figures made before that time is there any vestige of a halo shown."