



*Boymans Museum, Rotterdam*

## THE SUPPER AT EMMAUS

Vermeer of Delft

**T**HE mysterious story of what happened in the course of the journey to Emmaus undertaken by two of Christ's disciples on the first Easter Sunday evening has hardly ever been treated altogether worthily in pictorial art. The two finest versions of it are probably Titian's and Rembrandt's, both of them in the Louvre. But it may be questioned whether even a Titian or a

Rembrandt seized all or even the most essential implications of the story. We are told that on the way to Emmaus the disciples did not recognise the Traveller who joined them. It was only when, impressed by His conversation, they urged Him to stop and have supper with them, and He, having agreed, blessed bread, broke it and gave to them, that their eyes were opened. And then He vanished

out of their sight. Obviously, the drama here is the drama of the disciples. The chief priests and rulers had condemned their Master to death and crucified Him. But He had come back from the dead. An unrecognisable stranger walking the roads had proved to be He. Anybody one met might be He. He might be anybody one met. It was the final revelation. No wonder that with their minds in a tumult the disciples hurried back to the brethren in Jerusalem.

Neither Titian nor Rembrandt concentrated attention on the disciples. Indeed Rembrandt's great picture is more a transfiguration of Christ than a revelation to the disciples. In Titian's picture, the drama is more an inward drama. There is no theatricality but it is obvious that something urgent has happened. Without halo or any attribute of the kind the Christ is clearly a figure of divine understanding. The disciple on the left (who is supposed to have the features of the Emperor Charles V) is making a startled gesture. The disciple on the right, however, is a rather mundane figure. He hardly shows more than a kindly, almost, one might say, a polite interest. In a version of the subject by Caravaggio at the National Gallery, the dramatic interest is more evenly distributed. But here as everywhere Caravaggio's drama is, unfortunately, as superficial as it is violent.

Much stress has been laid on the element of expression in a hitherto unknown *Supper at Emmaus* by that supremely decorative master, Vermeer of Delft, recently discovered and now at the Boymans Museum at Rotterdam. But where Titian and Rembrandt were less than completely successful it is hardly to be expected that Vermeer should succeed. For Vermeer was essentially a quietist and more interested in what light and shade do to faces than with what emotions and perceptions do to them. So though, here, he tries for expression and with the individual figures achieves it, he can hardly be said to have risen to the full height of his subject. He does not carry the elucidation of the drama of Emmaus any farther than his great predecessor or his great contemporary had carried it. As in the Rembrandt

picture, the Christ is clearly the Christ who has already suffered. But the disciples, though gravely intent on what is happening, do not in any way suggest that the world has suddenly been transformed for them.

However, if, considered dramatically, it falls somewhat short of the overwhelming achievement that the adequate representation of such a subject would be, and if, again, considered as a composition, one is made to feel that the figures are crowded into too small a space, Vermeer's *Supper at Emmaus* nevertheless remains a great picture. In actual handling it shows the rarest finesse. As it is evening the light could not well be the all pervading light that Vermeer loved, yet the colours are of the most delicate luminosity and in as nearly perfect harmony with each other as could well be. The figures of the two disciples are well-nigh flawlessly modelled though painted on a much larger scale than Vermeer's figures usually are. (Perhaps only Georges Dumenil de la Tour amongst Vermeer's older contemporaries modelled like that.) And as virile types they contrast admirably with the female attendant who, like Vermeer's famous girl at the Mauritshuis, is of a somewhat exotic type of beauty that, though less intellectual, recalls the women of Leonardo.

The Christ is heavy featured but I think Dr. Bredius is justified in suggesting that the head recalls the famous drawing of the *Head of Christ* in the Brera that for centuries was attributed to Leonardo (*Burlington Magazine*, November, 1937). One is inevitably reminded of the theory, sponsored I think by Dr. Bredius, that Vermeer may have had greater knowledge of Italy than the scanty records we have of him would suggest. For if his *Concert* at Boston seems like a perfect re-statement in terms of mid-seventeenth century Holland of a mood that Giorgione had brought into European painting a hundred and fifty years earlier, and if over and over again Vermeer's colours remind one of Correggio, it is not less remarkable that he should, here, have brought something of the Renaissance imagination into the relatively prosaic art of the North. T. MCGREEVY.