

GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE IN NORTHERN ITALY.*

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To understand Gothic architecture as practised in Northern Italy during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and to be able to judge of its successes and failures when compared with the architecture of the same period as practised north of the Alps, it is essential that we understand the architectural environment of the Italian people.

As early as the latter half of the seventh century a style of architecture made its appearance at Pavia and elsewhere in which features of construction and design mark it as distinct from the debased Roman architecture previously practised.

Owing to the disturbed condition of the country during the dark ages the new style made little progress, and it was not until the eleventh century that buildings of importance in the style were erected, but during the eleventh and twelfth centuries it held complete sway in every part of Northern Italy except in Venice, which, from its insulated position and intimate commercial intercourse with Constantinople, sought its architectural inspiration from the east rather than from the west.

One other exception to the universal practice of the style is the Church of San Miniato in Florence, and in some other buildings in that locality, where we find a return to a more classical style.

As this style was the immediate predecessor of the Gothic, and as some of its features were adopted by the Gothic architects, it will assist us in our study of the Gothic style of Italy if we briefly glance at some of its more prominent characteristics.

Before the advent of the Gothic style all the architecture practised, not only in Northern Italy but also north of the Alps, was characterized by the use of the round or semi-circular arch, but though this important feature was common to the architecture of Italy, France, Germany, England and Scotland, each country employed it in such manner and in conjunction with other features, as to give it more or less of a national character. The national character of this round arched architecture, while strongly marked, particularly in Germany and England, was, if possible, more marked in Italy, where it was practised in a style entirely different from the contemporary style as found on the north of the Alps.

The round arched style which prevailed throughout Northern Italy before the introduction of the pointed arch, is known as Lombard architecture, not that the Lombards who had established themselves in the land about the end of the sixth century had any architecture or produced any style of their own. They were, however, great builders, and there is little doubt that in the erection of their earlier buildings they employed native workmen who, knowing no other style than debased Roman architecture, would work in that style; but gradually under Lombard influence new features were introduced which in course of time produced the style to which their name is given.

During their sway, which extended over a period of about two centuries, the land was studded with churches and baptistries erected under the auspices of their kings and queens.

Nearly all the buildings erected by them during the seventh and eighth centuries have disappeared; a few, however, remain as examples of their work, the more notable being San Michele of Pavia, San Friediano of Lucca, and San Ambrogia of Milan.

The Baptistery of Florence, it is claimed, was erected during the Lombard dynasty, but if this was the case it does not possess the characteristics of the style that marks the buildings I have named.

From the few examples of the early Lombard style which remain to the present day, we can see the change in the proportions of columns and piers; the introduction of wild and grotesque imagery in their ornamentation of capitals and walls, that mark the style as distinct from the Roman.

During the two centuries which followed the rule of the Lombards, Italy was in such a disturbed and unsettled condition that little or no progress in art was made, the erection of churches ceased and only buildings required for defence were undertaken. During this period Genoa and Venice, somewhat apart from the scene of strife and rising in importance as maritime powers, were able to proceed with erection of buildings. In Venice, towards the end of the tenth century, the erection of the well-known St. Mark's was begun. Owing to the intimate commercial relations with the East, Greek architects were employed, with the result that in this city of the sea we have an independent development in architecture of a complex character that marks it as distinct from that of Italy.

As the development of the early architecture of Venice is foreign to my subject, I will pass it by, and returning to the mainland we find that the darkness which had enveloped the land during the ninth and tenth centuries began to break and give place to a new era of activity in building. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries a number of buildings were erected superior in size and skill in construction to any that were built during the time of the Lombard rule. These buildings are marked by the leading features which characterized the early Lombard buildings, but in addition we find new features introduced that gave the style a step in advance and prepared it for the advent of the Gothic.

An examination of the work of this period will show that the uncouth and grotesque carvings which characterized the early Lombard buildings has given place to figures and groups in low relief of somewhat better workmanship but still crude in design.

The most conspicuous feature that marks the buildings of this period is one that stamps the Italian character upon the round arched style as practised in Italy, and serving to separate it distinctly from the contemporary architecture north of the Alps. This distinctive feature of Italian buildings was the piling of tier upon tier of decorated arches differing from each other in design, and occupying the whole facade of the building to its very summit. The most notable examples of this arrangement are to be found in the churches of Lucca, but one that is better known to most travellers is the facade of the Duomo of Pisa.

Another feature introduced at this period, which always found favor with the Italians, and which they continued to practice during the whole of the Gothic period, was the use of material of different colors in the construction of the walls and piers; sometimes it was applied to the outside of the building, sometimes to the inside, and sometimes to both outside and inside. Usually the polychromatic effect sought for was obtained by the use of marbles or stones of different colors arranged in alternate courses.

I might mention other features that characterized the later Lombard buildings, and which, adopted by the Gothic architects, influenced them in their designs. These features I will be better able to describe when the views of the buildings are projected on the screen. It was not until the first quarter of the thirteenth century had passed away that the pointed or Gothic style made its appearance in Italy, and when it did make its appearance in the first building erected in the new style—that of San Francesco at Assisi—we find it complete in its forms and details as then practised in the North. It appears that when the erection of the building to receive the mortal remains of the great St. Francis was determined upon, there was no architect of celebrity in Italy, and Elias, the favorite disciple of St. Francis, to whom the work was entrusted, obtained the assistance of a German architect named Jacobus. It was only natural that he should recommend and use the style of architecture then practised in his own country, with the result that in the crypt and in the interior of the upper church we have a style of architecture quite distinct from anything that preceded it in Italy. It is true that long before this time the pointed form of arch was frequently used as a constructive feature in the architecture of Sicily; its use there was no doubt owing to the influence of Saracenic art, which, along with Byzantine and Norman architecture, produced a strange combination that gives so much interest to the mediæval buildings of that island. Though the pointed arch was thus used in Sicily, it did not in any way affect the architecture of Northern Italy; as I have already shown, it was introduced from north of the Alps. As soon, however, as it obtained a footing in Italy, it supplanted the earlier round arched styles, and the Italian architects were obliged to conform to the new style.

From the fact that it was an importation from a foreign country, and was in a sense imposed upon the Italians whose love for the round arched styles was deeply rooted, it follows that we cannot in Italian buildings trace the gradual development from the round to the pointed arch as we can in France and Germany, and more particularly in England, where in many buildings we may mark the first use of the pointed arch in conjunction with the round arch. The struggle for supremacy between the old round arch and the new pointed arch in England was protracted, with the result that between Norman Architecture characterized by the use of the round arch and the massive proportions of its piers and arches, and the Early English period when the pointed style was supreme, we have a well defined transitional period that affords a most interesting study.

In Italian architecture there is no such transition period; when the Gothic was introduced it at once supplanted the Lombard style, and though the Italian architects never hesitated to use the

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