

THE POETRY OF ARCHITECTURE,

OR

Architecture in its relation to the other Fine Arts.

BY ANDREW T. TAYLOR, M.R.J.B.A.

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If we turn to Gothic sculpture and carving we find a complete change. It is not so much man as the soul of man that the Gothic carvers tried to represent. It is entirely dominated by a religious or at least an ecclesiastical tone. The figures are now closely draped, and are modelled from the Franciscan monk or the Capuchin friar. The carver was often a shrewd witty fellow and instead of sending his jokes to a "Punch" or a "Grip" he carved them in stone. Did he want a saint? his boon companion in the next cell served for a model. Had the prior or abbot offended him? he immediately gibbeted him high up in some corner as a spouting gargoyle, or put him in the act of being carried off by some imp of Satan. Just as the story goes that Michael Angelo, while painting his great picture of the "Last Judgment," in the Sistine Chapel at Rome, nettled by the impertinence of some empty headed courtier of the pope, who had come to see how he was progressing, copied his features for one of the figures in hell. Very indignant the courtier complained to the pope. He asked where the painter had put him, and on replying that he had put him in the lowest hell, the pope said, "had he put you in Purgatory I might have got you out, but down there I am afraid I can do nothing for you."

The Gothic carvers laid all nature under contribution and lovingly studied the loveliest plants and flowers, that they might bloom perennially twined round some massive pillar, or clasping delicately some panelled surface, or proudly crowning some gable top. The animal world was also not overlooked, and bird, and beast and fish, now in grave posture and now in grotesque shape and feature took their place in the mighty fabric. Angels were even brought down to earth, bearing messages of peace for mankind, and petrified into abiding permanence.

Their sculpture was at first very rude but gradually improved, until for versatility, for conception, for marvellous delicacy of execution it would be difficult to match those later Gothic carvers of our Cathedrals. They cut and hewed and carved their thoughts into the stone many centuries ago,—sometimes in idle jest, at other times in deepest earnestness, perchance like Fra Angelico they may have worked on their knees, and we come in lightest mood and lo! there is a lesson in the stone for us instinct with life. Perhaps you will permit me to read a few verses with reference to this, which I came across lately and which I think are very beautiful and have much of truth in them.

"Trust me, no mere skill of subtle tracery,
No mere practice of a dexterous hand,
Will suffice, without a hidden spirit,
That we may, or may not understand.

"All those quaint old fragments that are left us,
Have their power in this;—the carver brought,
Earnest care, and reverent patience, only
Worthily to clothe some noble thought.

"Shut, then, in the petals of the flowers,
Round the stems of all the lilies twine,
Hide beneath each bird's or angel's pinion,
Some wise meaning, or some thought divine.

"Place in stony hands that play for ever,
Tender words of peace, and strive to wind
Round the graceful scrolls and corbelled niches,
Some true loving message to your kind.

"Some will praise, some blame and soon forgetting,
Come and go, nor even pause to gaze;
Only now and then a passing stranger
Just may loiter with a word of praise.

"Yet, I think, when years have floated onward
And the stone is grey, and dim, and old,
And the hand's forgotten that has carved it,
And the heart that dreamt it, still and cold,

"There may come some weary soul o'erladen
With perplexed struggle in his brain,
Or, it may be, fretted with life's turmoil,
Or made sore with some perpetual pain.

"Then, I think, those stony hands will open,
And the gentle lilies overflow
With the blessing and the loving token,
That you hid there many years ago.

"And the tendrils will enroll and teach him
How to solve the problem of his pain,
And the birds' and angels' wings shake downward
On his heart a sweet and tender rain.

"While he marvels at his fancy,
Reading meaning in each quaint and ancient scroll,
Little guessing that the loving carver,
Left a message for his weary soul."

Before the art of printing when books were few, and those who could read them fewer, it was a wise thought which prompted the carving of Bible scenes and subjects round the cathedral portals. Thus the unlearned peasant could spell out and teach his children the story of Adam and Eve, the fall, the flood, the wanderings of the Israelites, the history of David, and all down the ages to the life of our Lord and on to the history of the early church. Thus we have a compendium of Scripture story on the magnificent western portals of the Cathedral, which Mr. Ruskin has been recently describing under the title of the "Bible of Amiens." The front of Milan Cathedral, the portals of Orvietto, St. Antonio, Verona, the Gates of Ghiberti at Florence, and a long list which time would fail me to mention.

It is a curious fact that the Jews, although by no means averse to carving on their buildings, do not permit to be carved any representation of the "likeness of anything which is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath," translating literally the Second Commandment, and remembering as one must do, the terrible results of idolatry to them as a nation one hardly wonders at it, more especially as we know that not the Jews alone, but Christians also worshipped images. The introduction of printing and books, and the era of the Reformation with its laudable zeal for purity of their worship, did much to bring sculpture into disuse for a time; but it is again asserting its lawful place, not as a thing to be worshipped either for itself or what it represented, but for the thought, the life and the additional beauty it gave to the building it adorned.

Much however of the modern carving and sculpture is not worthy of the name, and would be better away. All carving should have some distinct motive, and have a story or a thought to express. It should not be distributed all over the building, but should be gathered up into bouquets, as flowers are gathered, or as ornaments are worn, to emphasize the design of the building—here adding strength, there giving delicacy, here producing piquancy, there sinking into rest.

I have a few examples here both of ancient and modern carving, and I think you will agree with me that much of the modern work is excellent, notably that designed by the late lamented and very gifted French artist, Viollet le Duc. Sculpture in relation to architecture is an extremely interesting subject, but I