

THE JOURNAL
OF THE
Board of Arts and Manufactures,
FOR UPPER CANADA.

SEPTEMBER, 1861.

DECORATIVE PAINTING.

Mural decoration is a subject not yet well understood by our modern house painters. There is evidently a growing desire in the public mind that our principal edifices should exhibit internally a fair proportion of the embellishment hitherto lavished on the exterior. Public buildings of the first class, including our Law Courts, Universities, and Civic Halls, while rivalling in exterior grandeur many similar buildings in Europe, are woefully destitute of internal beauty, and differ but little in this respect from our commonest buildings. The solution of this anomaly is no doubt to be found in the want of skill in the art of decorative painting, the legitimate and most appropriate species of embellishment for walls and ceilings.

Some laudable attempts have, it is true, been made to supply this defect by a species of mural painting, introduced by some German painters, commonly, but falsely, called fresco painting. The specimens we have seen executed in Toronto, and elsewhere are not such as would lead us to believe would be adopted by the originators of our really good buildings, since the art aims at nothing higher than an imitation of architectural details.

Fresco painting, as practised by the ancients, and still followed by many eminent artists, consists in colouring the plaster while fresh, that is, before it becomes dry on the wall. The paintings thus produced are of a more permanent, and durable nature than ordinary paintings on other substances. The remains of ancient frescoes are found to retain their brilliancy of colour after the lapse of many centuries.

The so-called fresco painting, which has been practised to some extent in many of the public buildings in the province, has neither durability or good taste to commend it, and therefore the former is not so much to be regretted. But it is deplorable that, with the talent for drawing evinced by the perpetrators of this species of disfiguration, there should be so little taste in the choice of subject. The true aim of painting is to copy nature, and the truer it is to its object, the more pleasing it is to its admirers. Thus natural objects, whether animal or vegetable, will always be more interesting in a picture than representations of architectural, or similar productions of art. The decoration of walls and ceilings with architraves, pillars, and mouldings is not the

legitimate work of the painter, but of the sculptor, whether he works in plaster, wood, or stone. If we require to supplement the poverty of the architecture in the interior of our buildings by painted shams, may we not apply the same rule to the exterior of our plainer edifices, and paint imitation colonnades and rich entablatures, where we cannot afford a more substantial material. Is not the idea absurd, but wherein consists the difference? Can we endure within what would not be tolerated without? Yet how few we find give themselves the trouble, for it requires no great education of the taste, to discriminate in a subject of this nature what is really good, or even barely tolerable, from what is absolutely worthless.

The subject of decorative painting has not yet received that degree of attention which its importance merits. It has not kept pace with the other branches of art which the recent revival of architecture has so fully developed. The reason probably is that we have so few ancient examples, compared with the more enduring remains of its sister arts. The destruction throughout Europe, and particularly in England, at the Reformation, of almost every kind of work in Christian art in fresco, in wood, or in missals, has doubtless deprived us of many valuable examples of a species of decoration well adapted for our present wants. Unfortunately, too, the few relics of this art have been until recently almost inaccessible to any but the antiquarian, or are published in books so rare and expensive as to be beyond the means of the humble artist, while greater facilities have obtained in procuring the examples in the obsolete pagan styles of Greece and Rome. Consequently we have had no choice between the external graining of the house painter, and the heathen gods and goddesses of the decorative artist, except the drab coloured columns, capitals, and architraves of the Germans.

The attention which is now directed to this subject in England, and throughout Europe, by such artists as Digby Wyatt and others, and the facilities afforded by the improved process of chromolithography, have brought the study of the art within the reach of the poorest mechanic who may possess the faculty of drawing. If the method of illuminating were once understood by our common house-painters, by no greater exercise of talent than is now required to imitate the graining of wood, and the veining of marble, they could produce beautiful effects by the judicious combination of a few colours in simple patterns, at much less cost than that of graining, and in endless variety.

The illuminated style of decoration is not only applicable to plastered walls or ceilings, but to every kind of woodwork, and also to furniture. Mr. W says: "To woodwork illumination may be m