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## ON THE REVIVAL OF POLYCHROMATIC DECORATION IN CHURCHES.<sup>1</sup>

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WITH a few praiseworthy exceptions the restorers of our cathedrals and churches omit one important element of a perfect restoration—the precious element of colour. No archæologist who has studied the subject of polychrome can for a moment doubt that our ecclesiastical edifices were intended by their designers to be adorned with painting, and in this matter the architects, “master workmen,” or whatever they were called, only followed the universal practice of antiquity. From the earliest ages every important edifice was coloured internally, frequently externally. To cite a few examples of buildings in which polychromatic decoration remains: there is the Parthenon, there are the Baths of Titus, the house of Augustus in the Palatine, the houses of Pompeii, the Mosque of Sta. Sophia at Constantinople, the Mosque of Omar at Jerusalem, the churches of Salonica, those of Monreale and Palermo, Rome, and Ravenna, St. Mark’s at Venice, the Gothic churches of Assisi, Padua, Florence, Siena, and the Renaissance churches of the Certosa at Pavia and San Maurizio at Milan.

These are all polychromatised, and in most cases with bright positive colours. It has been urged that in lighter and brighter climes than our own, this effulgence, this brilliancy may be tolerated, but that we must be content with sadder tones. Our ancestors did not think so; they also revelled in colour, as their illuminated MSS. sufficiently show, and here and there a wall painting has escaped the whitewashers, to protest against the monotone which until late years has

<sup>1</sup> Read in the Architectural Section at the Canterbury Meeting, July 23, 1875.

prevailed in all our churches.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately there is reviving in the minds of their descendants an appreciation of the beauty of bright colour. We began by admitting stained glass, and, finding that white walls looked more poverty-stricken by the contrast, we ventured to tone them, then to diaper them ; at length we got bolder, and at last reached the stage of talking about painting St. Paul's. Thus the passion for colour is not quite extinct amongst us, so we may fairly call upon those who have the charge of restorations to preserve or restore the polychrome. We all know how valuable in the eyes of the archæologist are the traces of vermilion, green, and gold, which we find amongst the mouldings of an ancient shrine, and the traces of figures and diapers which are still to be seen on the walls of many of our churches. If it be necessary for the preservation of a building that these should be destroyed, at least they should be restored, or if that is not practicable, replaced by other painted decorations. We know from the numerous fragmentary examples of wall painting which remain, and, if they did not, we could gather from parish accounts (in which "Robertus" or "Jacobus Pictor" is mentioned as having received certain sums for dragon's blood, orpiment, and other pigments to be used in the painting of the church) that the practice of polychrome was almost universal. We can, therefore, with justice exclaim, "Give us back the ancient colours in place of white walls and mouldings which look as if they were moulded in plaster, otherwise your restoration is imperfect, for no building of any importance was, up to the seventeenth century, considered perfect unless it was decorated with colour, and no church, whether it be restored or newly built, is complete unless it be polychromatised."

By polychromatised I do not mean tinted with *fade* washes of pale yellow, pale green, or pale grey, but painted in oil, fresco, or tempered with bright positive colours. That this was the practice during the first periods of art I have learnt from the inspection of the various buildings already mentioned and many others. To illustrate this important fact I have prepared a large number of drawings,<sup>3</sup> in which the prin-

<sup>2</sup> Such as the painting lately discovered on the choir screen of Canterbury Cathedral, which has lately formed the subject of an interesting paper by Sir Gilbert Scott,

in the present volume of the "Journal."

<sup>3</sup> Exhibited at the reading of the memoir.

cial styles of decoration are imitated—Basilican, Byzantine, Lombard,<sup>4</sup> Italian, Gothic, and, lastly, Renaissance.

It may possibly be said that such colours are only suitable for Italy and the East, and that they would be out of place in our duller atmosphere; but the beauty of colour is universal, it is appreciated as well in the North and West as in the East and the South; and if Nature has not given us such brilliant colouring in the objects around us as exists in more favoured countries, there is no reason why Art, which supplements Nature, should not supply this want.

Again, those whose taste has been educated to admire the sombre and neutral tints which prevail in dress and the decorations of houses may think that the use of bright colours is not consonant with refinement; but those who take pleasure in bright colours may say that they prefer the refinement of the pure blue sky, of the gorgeous red sunsets, of the well-stocked flower garden, of the ruby, the sapphire, and the emerald, to the refinement of weak and indefinite tints. Gaudiness does not result from the use of bright colours if they are properly applied, but simply from their ill-judged arrangement. Bright red and blue of equal force juxtaposed would be intolerable, but if the one be dark and the other bright, and they are divided by lines or masses of gold, white, or black, the result may be most harmonious and beautiful. By a proper combination of the positive colours in small quantities the effect of any of the secondary or tertiary colours may be obtained. This was

<sup>4</sup> The application of colour to the Lombard style of architecture was illustrated by a drawing of a modern church at Baveno on the Lago Maggiore. The church is octagonal in plan, in imitation of early Lombard edifices copied from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem, and is built of reddish granite with narrow courses of grey marble. The walls internally have a yellowish ground with running foliated patterns in dark red, separated by grey lines corresponding with the marble courses. The boarding of the roofs is toned with oil and varnished, affording thus a rich yellow ground upon which bold arabesques are painted with stems of chocolate, and leaves and foliage of bright colours. The stems and foliage are bordered and heightened with white. The borders which surround the doorways, nave, arches,

and windows are of geometrical and foliated patterns in red, blue, and green, with black and white lines. The soffits throughout are deeper in tone than the borders, resembling in colour and pattern those at Monreale and St. Mark's at Venice. The forms of the ornamentation throughout has the semi-Byzantine character which is common to the Lombard, Romanesque, and other styles derived from the Greek and Roman architecture. The pavement is of venegran, a mosaic somewhat resembling the "opus Alexandrinum." The whole of the church furniture is either of coloured marble or painted wood, and all the windows are of stained glass. As this is one of few churches in which a complete system of polychrome is carried out, I mention it as an illustration of the manner of colouring which I here advocate.

done in the Alhambra and other edifices in which the system of decoration approaches perfection.

In the restoration of an old church, if the system of polychrome can be perfectly traced it should be carefully restored, but in new churches and in others in which there is no trace left of the original painting, a more perfect manner of decoration is advisable, and for this more perfect manner it is I think allowable to follow the examples of decoration to be found in Italy, the kingdom of the arts. I do not for one moment advocate any departure from severity of style; the manner in which many of our cathedrals and churches are restored is enough to make an antiquary weep. Venerable chancels, stately towers, and transomed windows, of fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, are often removed, to be replaced by constructions in the nineteenth-century Gothic style—a weak imitation of thirteenth-century architecture—simply because it is laid down, as a rule, that the thirteenth century was the best period of art. Stone work is scraped, mouldings are pared, colour removed, an essentially modern aspect given to the whole edifice, and all ancient landmarks, evidences of dates and marks of age, so dear to the antiquary, are swept away. No, it is only with regard to the superior character of the drawing and brilliancy of colouring that I should advocate the study of Italian churches, and for the reason that while “Robertus Pictor” was covering the walls of English churches with rude figures of the gigantic St. Christopher, misshapen imps, and ungainly angels, Fra Angelico was painting his lovely ethereal figures with graceful outlines and glowing colours at Orvieto, Florence, and elsewhere. The art of the one was coarse and unrefined, that of the other full of grace and beauty, and therefore the more fit to be studied and followed, though necessarily at a great distance.

But it would not do to reproduce Angelico’s paintings in our Norman churches: adherence to style is an essential feature in all good decoration, and for want of examples of Norman decoration we must fall back upon the Byzantine churches for precedent. The forms of classical foliage and ornament were somewhat similarly rendered by the Byzantines, the Lombards, Normans, and others who practised an architecture derived from the Greek and Roman styles; therefore they may safely be adopted in Norman

churches. There is no lack of examples, Sta. Sophia, St. Mark's, the cathedral of Monreale, the Capella Reale at Palermo, and St. Vitale at Ravenna, contain treasures of ornamentation which might be adapted in a thousand ways. For the iconography we cannot have a better guide than the Manual of Denys, the painter of Mount Athos, found by M. Didron and translated by his companion M. Durand. In it there is a regular iconographic system indicated, which seems to have been followed in the Greek Church from the time when the Manual was supposed to have been written (the tenth century), down to our own day—to such an extent that the Greek wall-paintings have all such a stereotyped character that it is almost impossible to ascertain their date either from the forms or colours of the figures. This most interesting manual consists of three parts: the first treats of processes; the second part contains receipts for the representation of every leading event in Scripture History, commencing with a description of the mode of representing the nine orders of angels. These formulæ were so complete that the painter had no scope for the exercise of his imagination, but executed his work mechanically, and as a natural consequence of this uniformity we see the same saints at St. Mark's, Mount Athos and Athens.

To give an example of one of these recipes. In order to paint the Adoration of the Magi—Represent “a house, the Blessed Virgin on a seat, holding in her arms the infant Saviour; before her the three Magi with their offerings in golden vessels. One of the kings is an old man, with a long beard, his head uncovered, presenting his gift with one hand, with the other holding his crown; the second king has a long beard; the third none at all. Behind the Virgin stands St. Joseph looking on with admiration; outside, a young man holding the horses by their bridles. In the distance mountains, with the Magi on their way guided by an angel.”

In the third part directions are given for the arrangement of subjects on the walls and domes of churches. In the centre of the principal cupola there is to be a figure of the Pantocrator, surrounded by a circle of colours such as that seen in the rainbow. Below, at the east side of the dome, there is to be a figure of the Blessed Virgin with hands raised in supplication; on the west the Precursor; below,

the Prophets; in the pendentives the Four Evangelists. The "Manual" proceeds to give the order in which figures and pictures are to be disposed in other parts of the church. Altogether the book is invaluable to those who are engaged in church decoration; and although it is not to be wished that the painter should be trammelled by being compelled to follow these recipes in a servile manner, still if the system therein described were to be followed to a certain extent, we should have something like fixed principles of decoration to follow, instead of being left to arrange our pictures and to distribute our symbols in a hap-hazard manner.

For our gothic churches we could not have better examples than those afforded by the Upper and Lower churches of St. Francesco at Assisi, the Arena chapel at Padua, or the chapter-house of Sta. Maria Novella at Florence; each of these is complete in itself. The general arrangement consists of a dado, or lower division, running all round the building diapered with dark colours, pictures in bright colours on the walls, and a roof of light blue with gold stars. The colours become lighter and the patterns more elaborate as they ascend. In the Lower church of Assisi, which is somewhat dark, the tone of the colouring is much deeper than in the Upper church, which is lighter. This illustrates a rule which should be always observed in decoration—in buildings in which there is stained glass the colouring should be more forcible and darker in tone than in those in which the windows are not stained. The Upper church has six bays; the ceilings of three of them are of blue and gold stars, the others have groups of figures. The walls above the dado are covered with two series of pictures by Cimabue and Giotto. Damp has given the brilliant ultramarine a greenish tinge, and otherwise injured the colouring. The whole is now undergoing a thorough, and it is to be hoped a judicious, restoration.

At the Arena chapel, Giotto's greatest work, the colours are wonderfully brilliant—almost as bright as when they were laid on—consequently this affords the most perfect specimen of what a highly-decorated church should be. The dado is dark, not filled with diapers as at Assisi, but with figures emblematical of the Vices and Virtues painted in chiaroscuro. The manner in which Giotto obtained these

brilliant results may be ascertained from the treatise of Canino Cennini, who, writing of himself, says,—“Giotto as his pupil had Taddeo Gaddi, the Florentine, for twenty-four years. His descendant, Agnolo Gaddi, instructed me in the method for a period of twelve years.” Cennini communicates his secrets under 161 heads, but the chief secret of the success of Giotto and his contemporaries appears to have lain in the fact that they began from the beginning. The lime and sand for the *intonaco* were either prepared by their own hands or immediately under their inspection; and until our painters condescend to handle the trowel or look sharply after the composition of their mortar, we can hardly expect their frescoes to be equally brilliant or to stand equally well the encroachment of time. I am borne out in this by Maclise’s report on the frescoes of the Houses of Parliament. Writing about the Blucher and Wellington fresco he says,—“The wall in question has been unfortunately prepared carelessly, and exhibits every variety of bad plastering. Discoloration is here and there very apparent over the whole surface of the wall, arising from the unequal distribution of lime and sand.”

The progress of decorative art is seen collectively in the chapels of that most picturesque of monasteries—St. Benedict at Subiaco. From the cave of the saint at the base of the building to the upper chapel there is a consecutive series of wall paintings executed between the sixth and the fifteenth centuries, interesting not for any peculiar beauty of execution, but simply from an historical point of view.

The Chapter-house of Sta. Maria Novella, in Florence, presents one of the most perfect specimens of decoration in Italy. This room is almost square in plan. It was built A.D. 1350. Vasari states, (though this has been recently disputed) that it was painted throughout by Simone Memmi and Taddeo Gaddi. The sides are covered with allegorical compositions, in which architectural accessories, such as canopies, occupy the spaces between the figures, and give exceeding richness to the whole. In the architectonic backgrounds, which are seen also in Giotto’s pictures in the Arena, and Gaddi’s in Sta. Croce, there is a slight indication of perspective, and but little shadow. It was only in the sixteenth century that the deceptive principle of shading was introduced, and it was used to such an extent by Michael Angelo in the

ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, that a plain curved surface is there made to bristle with salient points, architraves, and pediments.

The fine frescoes of the Campo Santo at Pisa are familiar to every one from drawings and photographs. In their present decaying condition, the pristine beauty of the colouring can hardly be realised.

Fra Angelico's best decorative painting is to be seen on the ceiling of the chapel of the Madonna del Brizio in the Cathedral of Orvieto. The compartments between the groining ribs full of prophets and martyrs, exhibit his boldest work. He was the last who followed the Christian traditions of art. Signorelli, who worked with him, and who has painted the wonderful pictures on the walls, introduced pagan subjects such as the rape of Proserpine, Perseus and Andromeda, utterly unsuitable for the walls of a church, into the smaller panels.

However, in the paintings of some of the decorators of the sixteenth century, the greater grace of classical times was combined with the severity of feeling of the Christian mediæval period. Such are the splendid frescoes by Pinturichio, which covered the walls of the Library at Siena, those of Carpaccio in his charming little chapel of the confraternity of St. George at Venice, of Gaudenzio Ferrari at Vercelli and Sarrano, and especially those of Borgognone and Luini in San Maurizio at Milan. In all these correct drawing and fine expression are combined with that severe arrangement which is requisite in good architectural decoration. It seems to me that for the decoration of a Renaissance or modern Italian church, these works are to be preferred as a basis for study to the more flowing style of the Caracci, or even the greater grace of Corregio.

Of this character are the fine wall paintings of the Sistine Chapel, by Perugino, Botticelli, and Signorelli, far more suitable for the purpose for which they were intended than the academical studies of the great master Michael Angelo. Most of those who visit the Sistine Chapel are so lost in admiration of that "great battle of Titans" the "unfrosted Last Judgment," that they neglect altogether those more simple and more appropriate specimens of church decoration.

So much for the works of the past, let us now consider those of the present. Our Continental neighbours have

had the start of us. In Paris there are three of the finest polychromatised buildings of modern times in three distinct styles.

The church of St. Vincent de Paul — the combined work of the great classical architect Hittorf, and the great painter of religious subjects, Flandrin,—satisfies at once the admirer of good architecture, and the connoisseur in polychromatic decoration. When gazing at the dignified procession of saints in many-coloured robes over the architrave, the cornices of interlacing medallions peopled with angelic beings, and the grand composition of the couch of the apse, we recognise the taste which has designed the ornament and chosen the colours, and acknowledge that a building of even classical forms may, by proper decoration, be made an appropriate place of worship. A little more severity in the treatment of the figures would render the church a tolerable revival of the primitive basilica.

The Romanesque church of St. Germain des Prés, in which the treatment is bolder, befitting the style, shows what churches of this period were in their pristine beauty. Here the ornament is correct in style, and leaves nothing to be desired; but the pictures, also by Flandrin, require a more archaic character to please the eye of an archæologist.

That Gothic gem, the Sainte Chapelle, glows with colour of the most brilliant description, which dazzles the beholder. The patterns and colours are faithful reproductions of the old work by Lassus and Vitet, therefore we see here what a mediæval church of the best period was in all its glory. The only thing that the eye requires is a little repose, which no doubt would be given by hangings, vestments, and the dark dresses of the congregation in case the chapel were used for divine service.

In our own country little has been hitherto accomplished in the way of polychrome. Those who wish to realise what the mediæval cathedral was and ought to be, should visit Ely, and looking at Mr. Gambier Parry's magnificent work on the roof, and Sir Gilbert Scott's in the reredos, imagine what the effect would be if the walls, columns, pavements, stalls, were similarly enriched with colour.

That such colouring is essential to the completion of good architecture is now beginning to be a recognised fact, and

we have the advantage of having the initiative taken, and the public taste guided in the right direction by her Majesty the Queen, who has sanctioned the use of polychromatic decoration in the two monuments which commemorate the late Prince Consort—the Monumental Chapel at Windsor, and the Albert Memorial. The former may be seen by comparatively few, but the highly coloured mosaics, and the burnished pinnacles which surmount the latter, will be seen and admired by hundreds of thousands, and from them they will draw the inference that colour is the natural complement of form, and that it is essential to all good architecture. May the lesson they teach, then, lead to the conclusion that our churches—which we ought to look upon as our most precious buildings—should be made as perfect as possible by adornment with colour. Let us cherish the hope that though we may not live to see it, a time may come when no church, whether ancient or modern, shall be considered complete, unless windows, walls, roof, pavement, and altar, are resplendent with bright positive colours, arranged not gaudily, but in accordance with the correct precepts of art.