

ON THE MONUMENT OF KING EDWARD II. AND MEDIÆVAL SCULPTURE.

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE MEETING HELD AT GLOUCESTER, 1860.

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IF works of art were only to be considered in the light of productions to gratify the eye or to please the fancy, to exhibit the skill in handiwork or the taste of the artist, they would take a rank in the merely decorative exercises, very unworthy their real object and importance. Whatever pleasure may be derived from the material excellence or beauty of art, or, on the other hand, whatever dissatisfaction low, common, or debased art may produce, we may be quite sure that it has a much stronger claim upon our attention than that which external qualities alone can give it; and, contemplating it from the higher point of view, we shall soon understand the interest it is calculated to awaken in all intelligent minds where it is employed as the language of sentiment. Mediæval art has of late years occupied so much attention, and it has received so much valuable illustration since a return to Gothic architecture has been recommended by its admirers as the most perfect and appropriate example we can take for modern imitation, that a few remarks upon so important an accessory as the sculpture which so abundantly accompanies the design of the mediæval period cannot but command our interest; and it is proposed to connect some observations that will now be offered on this subject with the more remarkable works in this art existing in Gloucester Cathedral.

It is not necessary, nor indeed would it be possible on this occasion, to enter at any great length into the examination of the different phases of the art in the period of its most extensive practice. We must be satisfied here to take a more general survey of the subject, and of the character of the sculpture of those schools, and to pass over minute particulars and characteristics which, however interesting,

would occupy more time than can now be afforded for their consideration. Still, even so, the inquiry cannot be strictly limited to the technical question. While considering the practice it will be necessary also to refer to the causes of its development, and the motives that influenced its progress during the three or four centuries of the supremacy of mediæval art.

The subject itself of ecclesiastical monumental and memorial sculpture appeals strongly to our fondest sympathies and best feelings ; and on this ground alone it should command our consideration even if it had no other claims to our attention. But it will be seen that it has various recommendations to give it interest, according to the different points of view from which such monuments may be contemplated ; whether as the expression of sentiment, the record of historical personages or events, or simply as works of art.

It may be permitted to offer here a few preliminary observations upon the *motive* or impulse of the art-design of the particular age in which it is considered that the Gothic mode or school attained its fullest development. This seems desirable because it has appeared to me that an erroneous impression exists in some minds as to the real causes both of the origin, or rise, and the decline of the art, not only in what is understood by ecclesiastical design, but in the various forms of the Gothic style.

Some persons among the more enthusiastic admirers and advocates of mediæval antiquities and usages, seem to consider that the style of the church architecture of that particular period indicates the high moral and religious condition of the community ; that it is the gauge, as it were, of the degree of national virtue or piety existing at the time. A preference is, moreover, given by this school or party to a particular phase of Gothic architecture, as the only style proper for religious or Christian sentiment. The character of art, most satisfactorily expressive of ecclesiastical orthodoxy, is supposed to reside especially in the Pointed and Decorated forms, according to the fancy of the admirers of each. They have dwelt upon the peculiar features of these two styles, and have assumed that, as these were departed from, evidence was afforded of the deterioration of the religious element in society ; that as it was owing to the more intensely pious impulse of those ages that edifices of such magnificence and

beauty were erected all over this country that, so, bad architectural design proves the diminution of religion in a people. This opinion may be disputed. There can be no doubt that in the twelfth and three following centuries ecclesiastical edifices were erected of a character that succeeding ages have not approached in picturesque beauty and in richness of decoration ; but it would be exceedingly unsound to found upon this circumstance an argument to prove that the age of beautiful architecture was, *ipso facto*, an age of morality and piety ; and then, that the reformers, even of the most extreme school in England, were less moral and religious, because, during their ascendancy, the fine ecclesiastical architecture of preceding times, associated as it was in their minds with the dangerous errors of the Romish church, was looked upon with conscientious distrust and dislike. The general history of the respective periods and the degree of mental culture and the habits of society of these times show how fallacious such a test must be. Narrow as were some of the religious prejudices of the more modern period, it cannot be questioned that there was an infinitely wider spread of real and earnest religious interest in the masses, and a greater craving to be taught what is the truth, after the fifteenth century than before it. Prior to this all men bowed uninquiringly and mechanically to a cleverly devised *system*, that worked conveniently for particular interests, and which, it is not too much to say, could only so work through the general ignorance of the community, enforced and maintained by those who benefited so largely by it. It cannot be necessary to quote authority for the facts here stated, but certainly an interest in religious inquiry was not a characteristic of the mediæval age ; nor would it have been encouraged or permitted even if it had arisen.

But history also proves incontestably that these ages were not pre-eminently a period of primitive holiness, piety, and virtue, and of "peace and good-will towards men." Without denying that there were many great, good, and pious Christians among the clergy and laity, they, yet, were times of violence, and of scant and unequal justice. The strong oppressed the weak, might gave right, and the lower classes were in a state of almost brutal ignorance and subjection. Although, then, it would be as uncharitable as rash to suppose that there was no religious sentiment in many of the authors of those

remarkable works, still, with these facts before us, we must seek elsewhere than in the assumed universality of piety and religious devotion for the causes of the extensive spread of ecclesiastical edifices and monuments in these ages ; and it must be a subject of interest to inquire into what may be regarded as a curious phenomenon ; first, as regards the rise of the art itself, and next, its comparatively short-lived excellence.

It is important in the first place to notice that, in the three or four centuries during which ecclesiastical architecture is considered to have flourished, the power of the Church—that is, of the clergy and priesthood—was exercised with irresistible weight ; the more so as the superiority of churchmen in all exercises of intelligence, for theirs was the only class that could be called educated, gave them an influence which no mere brute force in arms, or of courage and skill in warlike and chivalrous deeds, the chief occupation of the barons and chiefs of the higher classes, could for a moment rival. The jurists, the scribes, the authors, as well as the spiritual guides and confessors of the time, they absorbed all moral power, and to them all classes referred for direction in circumstances of difficulty. The highly born, the brave, the beautiful, the rich, as well as the base-born and labouring classes, all looked to the clergy for counsel and advice ; while from them also they sought for indulgences, and for absolution, if their acts placed in jeopardy their safety in a future state. In the belief inculcated and strenuously encouraged by the clergy that gifts, endowments, and foundations offered to the Church could atone or satisfy for sins committed, and could propitiate the Divine wrath, the most liberal and munificent donations were made to religious houses and chapters. Here then, without underrating or ignoring the existence of the religious element, but recognising the more powerful effect of obedience to the moral pressure exercised by superior intelligence, we see a source of immense wealth to the Church, and which led to the erection of those beautiful edifices with which, during those times of the influence of the hierarchy, the whole land was covered. The appropriation of these ample means to such purposes was perfectly natural, and it was also founded on a shrewd policy. The splendour of rival churches and establishments was soon found to give importance to the members of particular chapters. Votaries

were induced to select particular religious localities for their devotions, and therefore for their bounty ; and thus the most lavish expenditure was well applied to maintain the popularity of a favourite abbey or monastery, and to attract the homage and substantial support of all classes of devotees. This was in the spirit of the time, and it is not alluded to here with the view of raising discussion irrelevant to our immediate object as antiquaries ; but it is necessary to refer to it as tending to strengthen and support the theory to which I incline, under correction, as to the main causes of the extent and character of a particular phase and class of art.

Certain writers on ecclesiastical design, and, strangely enough, even members of our own Church, seem to take pleasure in attributing the decline of fine art to the Reformation in religion in the sixteenth century, and in casting a slur, as it were, on that great movement in the Church ; when a little fair inquiry would have shown that art had degraded long before that event shook the Christian world to its centre. If it had been as these persons assert, it is obvious this revolution should only have affected the design of those countries in which its influence was most actively developed. But this was not the case. In surveying the condition of art, nothing could be worse than the monumental or ecclesiastical design of Rome itself at this period, and it cannot be said that any Reformation or change, spiritual or political, in the Church could be made answerable for its miserable condition there. The same remark applies generally, indeed, to all Roman Catholic countries, where it easily may be seen by any intelligent and unprejudiced inquirer that ecclesiastical or church art was in the most debased state. Besides, the argument that the peculiar strength or purity of religious feelings in the period from the twelfth to the fifteenth century was the cause of the art-excellence then existing may occasion its advocates some little difficulty to account for the low art-condition of the earlier Christian ages—for instance, from the twelfth century as far back as to the Apostolical times. They would not surely consent to be driven to the conclusion that must necessarily follow ; namely, that there was a lower standard of religious feeling, and less of it altogether, in the early Christian times, than in the later mediæval period.

At the first period referred to (from the twelfth to the fifteenth century), the impulse architecture received as a

phase of the beautiful, was not dependent on, nor did it originate in, the prevalence of the purely religious sentiment. The influence of the Church, as has been shown, accumulated, by the circumstances of its *status* and influence, ample pecuniary means. These were applied, naturally, to a purpose which, as it happened, was calculated to favour the development of a certain class of art. Supply always follows demand, and development is a consequence of practice ; and thus the various phases of Gothic architecture—a style of art not bound by precedent, but capable of almost endless variety of forms, according to the taste or fancy of its admirers—may be accounted for by the ordinary laws of progress, or even as the consequence of caprice.¹

The earliest style with which we are acquainted, namely, the solid, severe Saxon and Norman, by degrees changed its character—almost Egyptian or Hindû in its heavy sobriety—for a lighter form. This was the Early English or Pointed ; which again took another character in the Florid or Decorated style. The latter afforded opportunity for the display of extraordinary richness and beauty of detail. The reign of this style was short, and it was superseded by what has been called the Perpendicular style. These seem, for the most part, to have been fanciful changes rather than developments of principles. At any rate, it is scarcely conceivable that these styles or varieties can be referred to moral causes, or special phases of religious teaching or feeling ; as seems to be implied in the doctrine held by some earnest mediævalists that the architecture of the three great centuries of Gothic design expresses the national religious sentiment of that period.

But how, it may be asked, can it be accounted for, that so marked a deterioration or degradation of ecclesiastical art occurred, if there was not a decline of religious impulse as a cause ? Simply, that having reached a degree of beauty beyond which it seems the artists of that age were unable to carry it, like everything else it underwent a change, and that change was deterioration. Not because the religious sentiment was weakened, but because it is in the

¹ This is borne out by the extraordinary changes that were effected at different times by different abbots of Gloucester, as may be seen in the present

cathedral, where the peculiarities of later styles have even overlaid earlier constructions. This is manifestly the case in the choir, as Professor Willis has shown.

nature of man not to be satisfied ; and desiring change or novelty, he is too frequently tempted to loosen his hold of what is good in art, and, by straining after new qualities, to fall into what is weak and bad. What happened in Greece in the best times of art ? After Phidias had in the age of Pericles brought sculpture to its highest excellence, and made the art the handmaid and expression of the most sublime sentiment, a change was required from that which had satisfied, till then, the feeling of the time. Praxiteles then introduced the fascination of the material and sensuous style ; and later, in the age of Alexander, Lysippus exhibited the energetic and exaggerated style, which referred rather to physical than to æsthetical qualities. And so it was in the history of Ecclesiastical design. There is no reason to imagine that such change was to be considered a proof that there was less real religion in the world ; or that when art, or because art, was in its full glory the world was also all religious. Diana was not less fervently worshipped at Ephesus, nor Minerva less honoured at Athens, because the sublime sculpture of Phidias or the exquisite architecture of Ictinus had suffered eclipse, and had given place to less admirable productions. It is no reason, because art changes, that religion dies. The Ecclesiastical art of our Middle Ages simply expresses a fact, in showing the immense force and influence of the Church, at that time, as a body politic, and how that influence acted in a certain direction, and, with respect to art, within a limited range.

Now there is an interesting and curious fact to be noticed with regard to the development of architecture at the period under consideration, and that is the comparative incompleteness of all other contemporary and accessorial art. Wherever, for instance, any attempt was made to represent the human figure—Nature, in fact—that which was before the artists for imitation is, for the most part, reproduced in the rudest manner. Where the forms of art could be compared with and easily corrected by existing living examples in the movements and beauty of the human figure, nothing could be less satisfactory than their practice. What is the cause of this ? It cannot be contended that the most perfect work of Creation—the human form—was unworthy of the care and attention of artists, nor did its inadequate presentation arise from the feeling that has existed in some com-

munities that there was anything objectionable in its imitation, because they did, in their way, make it their model. There was even occasionally the indication of a feeling for the beautiful, but it was not brought to anything like perfection; a short-coming the more to be regretted from the high promise of excellence that is found in some of the sculptured compositions of the fourteenth and following century: in the graceful pose of the figures, the pure character of the expression, and especially in the arrangement of drapery.

This rudeness or incompleteness in a sister and accessory art suggests to us that, notwithstanding the great charm that is found in what is considered the best Gothic architecture, it was, at its best, only in a transition state, and that its full development was checked before it had attained to its entire consummation or perfection: so different, in this respect, from the finest monuments of Grecian art, where the architecture of the best period, and seemingly established on fixed principles, is found associated with the most perfect sculpture. The excellence of the latter, having its standard in nature, affording indirect but fair evidence of an equal perfection having been reached in the art with which it is connected.

As one object of my addressing you is to invite attention to certain characteristics of memorial or monumental sculpture, as it is found in our Gothic churches, I shall now refer to some of those which may immediately serve as examples, pointing out also some of the peculiar features of design which mark different periods. It is a curious and pregnant fact, that all the earlier monuments bearing effigies are of ecclesiastics; another proof of the position and great influence of the clergy. The most ancient examples in this country represent two abbots. One is of Vitalis, Abbot of Westminster; the other, Crispinus. They are in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey. The date of the earlier of these monuments is 1086. There is nothing so early in Gloucester Cathedral; for the monument with the effigy of Osric, which has been referred to the eighth century, evidently belongs to a later period. The first monuments, beginning from the introduction of effigies, were of very simple design. Usually the figure was in very flat relief—scarcely raised above the plane of the coffin-shaped slab, which represented the lid or cover of the receptacle which contained the body. The figure was

usually represented dressed in the official garments ; if a dignitary, with the mitre on the head, or the pastoral staff or the crozier in one hand—sometimes the hand is raised, as if in the act of benediction ; sometimes both hands are in the action of prayer, or one is holding the chalice, or other emblem of church service. The design and relief of the figures is occasionally slightly varied, but the usual type is that above described. When greater facility was acquired by practice, the execution improved, and the details were more elaborate.

The effigy of King John (1216) in Worcester Cathedral, is the first instance occurring in this country of a regal effigy. The effigies of knights, and others, exhibit many particulars of great interest as the centuries advance ; the details are more studied, and there is considerable variety of action, within prescribed limits ; for it is worthy of remark that such representations were always subordinate to a fixed idea, namely, that the figure should be supine, or stretched out in a recumbent position. In the fourteenth century the addition of extensive architectural accompaniments marks a novelty which led to very interesting results. The figure of the person represented was not left simply lying on the tomb, as in the earlier examples, but accessories were introduced, relating either to the personal or family history of the individual. Then again, in order to do more honour to the statue, to protect it as it were, or to enshrine the monument itself, architectural enrichments grew up around it. Canopies, and similar architectural details, were introduced. Within niches around the sides of the tombs are found figures—sometimes members probably of the family of the occupant of the tomb ; these exhibit various forms of expression ; others represent saints, or ecclesiastics. Of these numerous attendants, some are in the act of offering incense, some simply in attitudes of grief. As figures, they are always very subordinate in dimension to the chief effigy. Some very beautiful *motivi* are seen in some of the works of this age in the small accessorial figures of ministering angels, placed at the head and feet of the deceased ; sometimes also they are introduced in the spandrels of the arches and even in the hollow mouldings of the architecture. Salisbury and Lincoln Cathedrals especially supply some beautiful specimens of the kind.

In the monument in Gloucester Cathedral, called of Osric, the figure scarcely accords with the earliest types of such works. From his being represented with a crown on his head and a sceptre in his hand, there can be no doubt that a sovereign is here represented; but the style of the work, and the introduction of angels at the head, establishes the fact of the execution of the monument being of a much later date than the presumed period of Osric. If it were desired to commemorate a founder in this figure, there would be nothing remarkable in its being done at a late period, when possibly some repairs or enrichments were added to the church,—and thus advantage would be taken of an opportunity of doing honour to a former benefactor.

The next monument well worthy of notice is celebrated as the “bracket” monument, from the effigy being placed on a projecting bracket or corbel, panelled on a hollow or ogeed surface,—which takes from it the appearance of a tomb or coffin. The real person intended to be commemorated is not known. Some have conjectured it to be Aldred, who is said to have died in 1069; others Serlo, who died in 1104. The latter re-founded a new church; and this seems implied in the accessory of a church held in the left hand of the effigy. This monument bears evidence of being of a much later date than Aldred, nor can it be attributed even to the later period of Serlo. No design of the kind can be referred to the beginning of that century. The same may be said of that of Curthose, the son of William the Conqueror, whose effigy is on his monument, in chain mail. He died in 1134. The figure is carved in wood, and thickly and clumsily painted. He was a great benefactor to the church, and, though he died at Cardiff, after an imprisonment of twenty-six years, his body was brought to Gloucester, and was interred near the high altar, where, it is recorded, a “wooden tomb” was erected over him.

But the object of paramount interest in Gloucester Cathedral is a monument whose history is well ascertained, and with which are connected many affecting associations. This is the enriched tomb erected by Edward III. over the remains of his father, King Edward II. The interest that attaches to this memorial is of two kinds. One is historical, in which the mind is carried back to the miserable and erring career of a most weak and unfortunate monarch, whose

wretched life and most horrible death have obtained for his memory a lasting hold on all men's sympathies, in spite of the great faults which signalised his reign. The other is awakened by our admiration of the striking work which enshrines the body of this unhappy king. Edward II. died at Berkeley Castle, after deposition, and after many years of suffering, and at last of the most barbarous and revolting ill usage. The monasteries of Bristol and Malmesbury refused to receive the dead body, from a cowardly fear of offending Isabel, the wife of the murdered king, and her paramour Mortimer. But Edward had in brighter days been a visitor and benefactor of the Abbey of Gloucester, and the Abbot Thokey, remembering and grateful for the unhappy monarch's former bounties, caused the body to be interred in his church. The corpse was conveyed to Gloucester in the abbot's "carriage," and there received with such marks of respect as were due to a king; facts which, under the circumstances, are most honourable to the abbot and his clergy. This, as it turned out, was also an act, not only of great charity, but of good policy; for it appears that about this time, owing to the enormous expenses that had been incurred in maintaining the character of princely hospitality of this foundation, and the obligations incurred of receiving dignified personages and their trains into the convent and its precincts, where even parliaments had been held, the funds of the house had been so far exhausted, that it is stated in a memorial of this very Abbot Thokey, they at one time had not means to effect even necessary repairs, and that the church itself was rapidly falling to ruin. Edward III. recognised the noble conduct of the Chapter by granting to it extraordinary privileges; and the splendid monument afterwards erected by the king to his father's memory gave increased importance and popularity to the church, and, as may be supposed, produced the most satisfactory and substantial results.

This interesting monument comes under the head of highly decorated tabernacle work, and is perhaps the finest specimen of the kind extant. Its composition is rich, but at the same time light and elegant. The details are of great beauty, and show throughout the most careful finish. Within this elaborate shrine, if it may be so called, reposes the effigy of the unfortunate king. This is equally deserving

of attention from the simplicity of its attitude, and the generally calm and tranquil expression that pervades the figure, suggesting many reflections upon the anxious, suffering life of the subject of the sculptor's art, and the contrast of that repose which here characterises the figure of the deceased king; repose that could only be found by him in the silent tomb.

There are peculiarities observable in this effigy that have led to the impression it may be intended as a portrait of Edward. This, if so, gives the work considerable additional interest, and one would be sorry altogether to give up any claim it might be supposed to have on that account to our attention. That portraiture was attempted, and even collections of them made at the time of Edward II., is curiously attested by a remark of that king, on once visiting the abbey. Seeing in one of the apartments the representations of certain personages, he is reported to have asked the abbot whether he had his portrait among them. The abbot answered, almost prophetically, that "he hoped his Grace's would occupy a more honourable place." The inability of the artists of that period to imitate, with any degree of accuracy or truth, the human figure—a circumstance to which I have before adverted—will account for any deficiencies observed in their figure sculpture; but still they may have been capable of expressing general character; and we may fairly assume that that of Edward II. would be given with as much care and success as could be expected from such practitioners. But I must not allow my wish to find a true portrait in such works to override my judgment, and I must own that it is only in very defined characteristics that we may expect to find such portraits at all valuable. No doubt, in general figure there would be some truthful record. The very fat and burly subject would scarcely be represented as a thin man, nor the thin and attenuated as a full and stout one. Again, as such effigies were often, nay, usually painted—a characteristic of almost all early and rude art—the general colour of the hair and the eyes, if open, would, in all probability, be given. So far, then, we may find that the effigy in this interesting monument of Edward II. may, indeed, afford us some idea of the person of the royal occupant of the tomb. We must, however, bear in mind that this statue has often undergone repair, and therefore

that its surface may have suffered injury, and be in many respects greatly changed from what it was originally.

I would direct your attention to one peculiar characteristic of mediæval monuments ; and that is, the universality of the design of recumbent figures. This certainly may be attributed to a consistent religious or devotional spirit in the earlier designers of such works ; but we must also always bear in mind the fact that the clergy, being the most intelligent and influential class, could, and, no doubt, did direct all design that was in any way connected with ecclesiastical objects and decoration, so that this secured the continuance of an approved and established type in their monumental sculpture. It is impossible to deny that the intention of such design is by far the most appropriate that can be employed for such memorials. It is the sentiment that should pervade a record of one gone to his rest ; when the tenant of the tomb is represented dying in the act of prayer, or reposing before death in calm contemplation or devotion. It is the expression of an idea with which all persons of right feeling must sympathise.

It is worthy of remark that when a more debased style of architecture, and of art generally, came in, there was still sufficient respect paid to this idea, originated and established by the mediæval artists, to preserve the calm, devotional, religious sentiment in monuments. Persons were still represented recumbent on their tombs, with the hands raised in prayer, though all the accessories may be of a most anomalous and unecclesiastical character. In the next innovation—change, in this instance, producing deterioration—the figure was taken from the quiet, recumbent position, and made to kneel up ; but still, whether male or female, the subject was engaged in prayer—sometimes before a lectern and reading from a book, sometimes simply praying. In monuments of this time, where there was a family, we often see lines of sons and daughters kneeling also, and arranged behind the parents according to sex. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a change, and for the worse, took place in monumental design. To say nothing of the great beds or catafalcs that had been erected, superseding the beautiful Gothic canopies, the figures now begin to show more movement, and, as if impatient or tired of the recumbent attitude, they sit up, lean on their elbows, and seem to look about them. The next still more

offensive change is when the figures are represented seated and lolling in arm-chairs, quite irrespective of the sentiment that belongs either to their own condition or to the sacred edifice in which they are thus taking their ease. But it is painful to dwell upon this degradation of taste ; and I am still less disposed to speak, except in a few words of strong reprobation, of another still more offensive style of art, when employed in churches. I allude to the class of personal boasting or glorification, in figures wielding swords, making speeches, or exercising other common worldly occupations. Of the utter absurdity of some monuments that could be pointed out, in the naked and half naked exhibitions of the figure, or in the Greek and Roman costumes of English worthies on their monuments in our churches, it will be sufficient to record our dissatisfaction without detaining you with unnecessary illustrations, and which the observation and experience of every one may easily supply.

Permit me to say one word, in conclusion, upon this subject. The existence of, and perseverance in, bad taste, is not always attributable to a want of knowing better in sculptors. It is owing, in a great degree, to the bad taste of the employer, and to his dictation as to the design. If all and each of us would not only protest against, but discontinue to employ artists to produce works of the character described, there would soon be an end of them ; and then an improved feeling would necessarily induce a better style of monumental design. Figures brandishing their swords, as if in the thick of battle, senators and legislators making speeches, men of science pointing to their discoveries, or scholars and divines over their books and papers, may all be well and consistently placed in halls, market-places, libraries, or other public situations ; but let our memorials of the dead, of those whom we have loved and lost, of those who have died in humble hope and prayer, be in character with the sentiment of religious thoughts and reflections. In this respect we cannot do better than follow in the steps of the mediæval artists. We may avail ourselves of our increased artistical knowledge in all respects ; but, though we may justly improve upon their work, as regards the form, we should admit our deep obligation to them for the type of a true and appropriate sentiment in Christian monumental design.