

COLOUR: HOW FAR ADMISSIBLE IN ARCHITECTURE.

BY REV. G. R. FERRIS.

INTRODUCTION.—Before entering immediately on the subject of the present paper, it may be necessary for me to say a few words by way of its introduction at such a Meeting as our present. Our Society is engaged principally, at any rate, with the cold, dead, past: to search for, and enquire into, and reverently to preserve, or, where that may not be, to store up memorials of all that time has left us, in this County, of the works of our fathers is, one of its chief aims. And the papers read this evening, have been of this kind. My subject belongs to the present, the warm, living, present; not to the past, but to the day of an existing life. It owes its birth and its features, and the outline of its form to the past; it traces its rise back into the ages that are gone. But this is all; at least, it comes before us now as a living present question. The spirit which animates it is one, happily, which is of to-day, and which, we may hope, will continue to live in ages yet to come;—the desire to make the house, and the worship of God, more worthy of Him to whom they are offered.

This, then, must be its apology for its appearance among the papers of this evening. That, though a creature of the present, it can trace its descent from those venerable remains which we are all so anxious to preserve.

POSITION OF QUESTION.—“Colour: how far admissible in Architecture?” A few years ago such a question would have been met by a decided negative. And there it would have rested. There would have been little, or no desire shewn to enquire, whether such an uncivil rejection might not, in a measure, be modified, and some little kindness manifested towards a question, which came and asked, so humbly, for admission. And even now, in many minds,

it is received with a scarcely less articulately pronounced "No;" or with a hesitating, doubtful, "Yes," only less negative, because affirmative in form.

And, on this account, I have preferred to bring it before the Society in the form of a question. Not because I think this to be all that the subject can claim; to be treated as an open question, a subject to be discussed, examined, turned over, objected to, before it can take its place as a conclusion with which we are satisfied. Nor because this is the form in which it presents itself to my own mind. But because this is the attitude in which, possibly, most minds still regard it, as a doubtful question. Or, at any rate as able to assume no more positive a position, than that represented by the title of this paper. "Colour: how far admissible in Architecture?" "Admissible," received with the doubtful, negative-looking, affirmative; but only admissible with certain limitations, under certain restrictions, in certain places, applied to certain parts of a building; *e. g.*, windows. And, therefore, to be most jealously watched, and kept in its place.

This is the attitude in which, in most instances, the subject is even now regarded. But it is not that which it assumes in my own mind; nor is it the one, in which I hope to see it, finally, placed. I hope, and I confidently expect, that, in a few years, it will take its place as one of the recognized means for adorning our Churches and houses.

I must now then, if you will allow me, make two or three preliminary remarks before I go any further.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS.—I. The first is, that I am about to plead for the *general* use of colour; *i. e.*, not in particular parts of a building, as windows, pavements, hangings, &c. But in *every part*; walls, windows, roofs, piers, pavements. I would see them all in this respect, and with proper harmony contributing each their part in one glorious whole.

II.—Next, I would say that I claim no special authority for anything which I may be led to say in this paper. I desire its conclusions to go forth with no more special weight, than will belong to the conclusions of any thoughtful mind loving the subject, and desiring to see it better understood, and received amongst us. I speak with no peculiar or technical knowledge; I only claim to

bring forward what might have been arrived at by any other mind;—by any one in, or out of this room, who may choose to think about it. But what I do claim is, that the subject may not be met by the articulate “No,” with which it was the fashion, a few years ago, to meet it. That it may, at least, prefer its claim to be thought about by those who are interested in Architecture.

III.—And therefore I would say at the outset, that, for anything which I may say, I claim no higher place, no other attitude, than of a subject to be discussed, pulled in pieces, turned in-side out, if you will; so it only may not be received with a dead silence in the minds of the members present. Let the subject be thoroughly examined—it will well bear the light—not for the value of what is to be here said of it by me, but for its own sake. The only thing which it needs to dread is, the silent darkness of those holes, and corners of our minds, into which we stuff away things which we have once heard, but which we do not want, and do not care to remember.

IV.—Another thing, I would say, is; that it is quite possible I may have to go over ground—to use arguments: with which some of the members may be familiar. I shall certainly arrive at conclusions, which have already been arrived at by others, who have written on the same subject: I may have to employ the same kind of arguments. Be it so. I have not hesitated to use such as I have met with, which were suitable to my purpose. For anything else; “In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.” And if two different minds, starting from two different points, arrive at the same truth, and in reaching it have to go over the same kind of ground; this is but one proof more that truth belongs not to any one particular party. She is the inalienable inheritance of no one mind, or set of minds. She may be possessed by all who lovingly, and reverently, seek for her.

V. And, lastly, I would say that the whole subject of the application of Colour in Architecture is, at present, in so imperfect a state; our knowledge of the conditions under which it is to be applied—of the general principles which are to be our guides—of the laws which must regulate its use—is of so slight a kind that there is, at present, no room for dogmatism on either side. This only should be our present conclusion: That it is admissible—nay! even

necessitated, if we would, fully, carry out our principles. Let us only arrive satisfactorily thus far; and the path beyond, to a knowledge of the way in which it is to be applied, will be both easier to find, and safer to travel.

ARGUMENT FROM ANTIQUITY.—“Colour: how far admissible in Architecture?” I see the strongly defined negative coming forward, every instant, more clearly into view from the background of many minds. Let it stay there awhile longer, before it comes quite into the light. Our fathers did not think in this way of it; they to whose works we are still compelled to look up with unbounded admiration—I might almost say, with awe. And, at least, they knew something of the matter.

OBJECTION.—But it will be said, “Oh, those were the dark ages, and we live in the light.” This is not quite so certain a conclusion as it sometimes seems to be. Our fathers did not live quite so much in the dark, as we sometimes, complacently, imagine. “Darkness,” is altogether a relative term. And the gloom of a November day is broad day-light to the man, who has been shut up for a month in a dungeon. And the men of the dark ages had a very clear insight into things of which we, of the light, more often than not, make an awful bungle. Even in such simple matters as the sanitary arrangements of our dwellings we can well afford to take a lesson from them. There is many an old passage, and tunnel, which tradition avers to have travelled to fabulous distances, and which has puzzled whole generations of antiquarians to decide upon its use, will find its most natural explanation by assuming the humble, but necessary office of a common sewer. How far we are superior to them in this respect, those, who have had the happiness to live in some modern planned houses, are well qualified to give a very sufficient testimony.

But, at any rate, in our present matter, the witness of former days is most clear and decided. Not a fragment of wall—hardly a pier which time has left, but will shew, if it be carefully examined, that it has been adorned with colour.

The negative, then, may be met at once by a confident appeal to the practice of antiquity. And no reverent mind will reject, without examination, anything which has received such a sanction. It may be necessary to qualify

our reception of that which comes to us so sanctioned. We may have to modify, and adapt it to our present wants. In some few instances, to reject it as unsuited to the present day. Certainly not to reject it without due attention.

VALUE OF ARGUMENT.—The appeal, then, in this matter, to antiquity will have this value; that they, to whom we owe the principles of our native Architecture, and many of its details—and therefore, who at least, knew something about it—did not think their work to be complete without the addition of colour.

ARGUMENT FROM NATURE.—But we may appeal still higher. We may appeal to their common teacher, as well as ours, in matters of art; to that from which clearly they learnt, and from which we also must learn, if we would arrive at any satisfactory result. We may appeal to Nature—to the work of their God, and ours. To His work who has profusely scattered—poured colour over us; and over all things about us; and who has given to us alone, of all His creatures on earth, the power of enjoying it. Without going into the philosophical reasons for colour, it will be enough to ask the objectors to colour—“Can you find an *uncoloured* object in nature. Can you find a thing which has not its own colour, that you may begin to build a colourless building? If you can find a colourless object in nature; there will be one stone laid down on which an objection to the use of a coloured Architecture may rest. But when you have found it, expose it to the air; let us see it; bring it up where men may look at it; leave it there awhile; and then come and look at it, and it will witness against you. The first shower that came down, the first strong ray of light which fell on it coloured it—has left its trace. Nature has begun her work: she has laid on her first colours. A few years more, and the moss will be growing over it, and the lichen covering it, and it will take its place amongst coloured things.”

And this is the more to our purpose, because this is just the way in which nature marks her dislike of the way in which we are trying to work. We object to colour in Architecture; and being unable to work without some colour, we reduce it, as far as possible to the condition of an uncoloured thing by spreading over our wall one uniform hue of dead white, or greyish white, or yellowish

white. And yet watch what is the effect of the first ray of the afternoon sun stealing in over the heads of your congregation. There is there a very visible mark left of nature's pencil. "What a lovely light," you are compelled to exclaim. Nature is there, and doing for you that which you should yourself have done, and telling you of her own glory.

GENERAL OBJECTIONS.—But let us examine the objections to the general use of colour more closely. There are general objections to its use; and there are particular objections. The general objection is, perhaps, difficult to get into any definite shape, so as to be able to meet it. Perhaps, it may be more a feeling against it, as something unusual, something which we are not wont to see. More of this kind, than a judgment against it; "Use colour in particular parts—in your windows—in your pavement;—perhaps, we may allow it in your wood-work; we are not sure: use it in your altar-hangings, your pulpit cloths,—sparingly. But on your walls—on your piers—on your arches—on your stone-work, that is; never." Such is one form of the general objection. The other is, that very sweeping negative, "Not at all."

I.—Let me take the last objection first, as the most unreasonable. Can you get your work, in the first instance, uncoloured? To do this you must, first, get uncoloured materials, with which to build, and that is very hard, at any rate, to do. He will be a clever man who can find such. They will be sure to have some colour of their own. That being so, you determine to come as near to your ideal as you can, and in order to do this, you fancy white will be the nearest approach to it. And you cover all your walls with this hue. Not a very cheerful one, nor a very warm one; but still a colour. And as such it still has its advocates and admirers.

Well, but can you keep your walls to this hue? What was the effect on them of the last Sunday's sun, when you looked at them? Not an uniform hue of white at any rate. Or, to leave this, the lapse of a few years will answer this question for you in the negative. And if so, is it wise to leave that to be done, which *will* be done by certain laws of nature's own, but which will be, as far as you are concerned in its result, from a want of careful observance of those laws on your side, a hap-hazard result. Here a

stain—and there a stain; weather stains you call them. In reality, nature's protest against the way in which you are trying to work. By a little more careful observance on your part, and a selection, and arrangement of your materials nature would have coloured for you a very harmonious, and satisfactory whole.

II.—Or to come to the other objection. That colour is to be used in particular parts of a building only. May not this objection be found, in reality, to rest upon this? That there are two ways of colouring stone-work; a right way, and a wrong way, and you are thinking of the wrong way, *e.g.* no one objects to the use of coloured marbles. Piers and shafts of such a material would be universally admired, and coveted. That is one way of colouring piers and shafts. If your walls be faced with slabs of the same, the effect will be still more satisfactory. That is one way, also, of colouring walls.

There is, then, a right way of colouring—by your own confession—even stone-work; by using such materials as nature has coloured for you.

THREE WAYS OF COLOURING.—But this is an expensive way. We are not all of us able to build with marbles. We must look round us, then, and see if we cannot do something like this in less expensive ways. Briefly, then, there are three ways in which we may do it. All that has hitherto been said in this paper has gone, it will be seen, on the supposition that the employment of colour in Architecture is a necessity. That it is not a matter of choice, or opinion, or of taste and feeling. It is not one of those questions that admit of a divided answer: "Oh! that is a matter of taste." All my reasoning has gone on the idea that our buildings must have some colour; the natural colour of the material with which we build—brick—stone—marble; or a colour which we affix ourselves; or one which nature will put on for us—not approving of uniform hues of any sort; weather-stains—the influence of time and locality—light and shade thrown on them, according as they be seen from different points of view, or at different hours of the day, or in different states of the atmosphere. Or again a hue, to a certain extent, thrown over them by the work of our own hands: some parts of them being in relief—thrown forward; others drawn back; some at one angle of view; some at another. So that we scarcely ever see the same building twice, with precisely the same colour

about it. And the only question left for us, properly, to decide upon is, what particular colour, or colours we will use.

But some colour we must have. And we may do this in three different ways.

1st.—By the use of *naturally* coloured materials; variously coloured stones, marbles, &c.

2ndly.—By the use of *artificially* coloured substances; brick-work, cements, glass, &c.

3rdly.—Artificial pigments laid on the surface.

FIRST AND SECOND NOT OBJECTED TO.—Against the two first methods the objection is not considered to lie. Most inconsistently so; because if the objection be to the use of colour, it must be to its employment under any method, natural or artificial. If not, it becomes a mere debate as to the best mode; and the point in dispute is given up. But it is against the use of the third method, that the objection is conceived to lie strongest; *i.e.* against the use of artificial pigments laid on the surface.

MUST BE USED TRUTHFULLY.—Now, let me say, that much here depends upon the way in which these pigments are used. There is a way in which they may be used to make our work appear more costly than it is. To paint wood-work to represent stone; common ordinary stone to imitate the more expensive marbles; ordinary wood grained, so as to be like a more costly kind; are instances of this. Nothing can be worse: nothing deserves a severer condemnation, than this at our hands. Let our materials bear honestly on their face what they be. Let deal be still deal; stone be still stone; wood be still wood. Let them not seem better than they are.

AND ARTISTICALLY.—Again, we may have pigments inartistically laid on; gaudy, glaring, colours; violent contrasts; an absence of all taste and feeling. No one wishes to advocate such a system. It is not for such results that we plead.

These, then, are bad ways which, the sooner we get to understand our true position with regard to this subject, the sooner we shall get rid of.

OBJECTION.—But it will be said; “If you come to paint stone are you not, in reality, making it seem other than it is *e.g.* if you gild it.?” I don’t believe this is, in reality, the true objection which men ever feel, but an argument

handy for their purpose. But it must be answered. I think not then. No one, by any possibility, can fancy, if we gild a bit of stone;—say in one of our Churches; lay gold colour on a capital, or a bit of foliage; that we have used gold in our walls. There is no deception practised, because no one would, certainly, now look for any such costly material in any such situation.

WHAT IS THE LEGITIMATE USE OF COLOUR?—But here opens on us the whole question. What is the legitimate use of colour in Architecture. There is much yet to be learnt on the subject. We are as yet too imperfectly acquainted with it; our eyes—and they are great teachers in the matter—are too little trained in it; our minds too much accustomed to the use of one uniform hue; too little wont to see much colour used; to be able to speak, authoritatively, on such a point. We are, as yet, but feeling our way; trying how this, or that will do; feeling after, as men in the dark feel after, its true use. And yet I fully hope and believe, that it is the twilight which precedes the full dawn, not the dusk of departing light on the matter, in which we are groping.

WHO ARE QUALIFIED TO PRONOUNCE.—Thus much, however, we may confidently say; that the true method will not be found in the direction of any sham painting. Further, that it *will* be found by the careful and laborious study of ancient examples. These have at least pointed out the direction in which we must travel. And the men to make the discovery must be men qualified to decide on such points; minds imbued with the requisite skill and knowledge, with the due degree of taste and feeling; above all with a true and simple love of God's works; with a love for all that is truly lovely and lovable in His world around us, joined with the feeling that in such matters, when brought into comparison with His works, we are but as learners from Him, not teachers in our science.

It is only such men who are qualified to decide such a matter; *e. g.*, it is only such men who can decide what degree of colour it is right and proper to give to stone foliage. We all of us join in the feeling that the most appropriate ornaments for God's house, are such as are taken from His own works; feeling that nothing which men can invent of themselves is worthy of Him. Feeling that we are doing right when we carve, to the best of our

abilities, as ornaments for His temple the representations of His own perfect works—leaves and flowers. Yet none, but such men as I have spoken of, are qualified to say how—and how far—such foliage admits of being coloured. All I contend for is, that it must be coloured in some way, and we may colour it rightly, and we may colour it wrongly; and it is worth while to try and find the right way.

SPECIAL OBJECTIONS.—But there are also special objections. I will name but one, as coming within the province of this paper. And that one is founded on the unsatisfactory attempts which have come down to us. And in saying this I refer not only to modern attempts in this direction, but also to ancient examples. There are men who, seeing the quaint figures, which are sometimes revealed to us on the walls of our Churches, when these walls come to be freed from their coat of whitewash, are not desirous that such results should be laid before the eyes of our people. Justly thinking that their effect must be to shock religious minds, and in the end to lower their tone. It is a grave question, and one which is every day, more and more, meeting us, as we come, more and more, to see how the walls of our old Churches are covered. Let us see if we cannot arrive at some more satisfactory conclusion, than that which will leave us only bare walls. I will here throw out a suggestion.

SUGGESTION.—These early attempts, are urgently wanted as example from which to study—whatsoever they be. Let all such when found, be carefully examined. If they should, eventually, be found to be such as, for any reason, we are compelled to obliterate, let them, first, be carefully copied. They are much wanted as materials for study. Then—if need be—let them be obliterated. And let these copies be carefully preserved. But where they can be left on our walls, let them be left. They mark at least our father's piety; and let us respect that, even if it be quaintly shewn.

WORK FOR THE SOCIETY.—Here, I think, is a legitimate field in which a Society like ours may do good service. Let all its Members try, and see what can be done towards this end; and they will do good service towards our arriving at a satisfactory result.

PAINTINGS NOT UNDERSTOOD.—But the sober truth of

the matter is, that this point is often, very much misunderstood. From seeing the quaint—one may almost say grotesque—character of some of the old wall paintings, people have come to conceive a prejudice against *all* wall-painting; as though it were inseparable from this character. But the truth is that these quaint paintings were owing chiefly to our father's want of skill—mechanical skill; want of accuracy of hand in drawing from natural objects. They found themselves forced into a position which they scarcely knew how to fill, and they had no time to think. They could only try, and meet the necessity in the best way they could.

FAULTS INSEPARABLE FROM THEIR TIME.—The fact was that the large wall space—the huge flat surfaces which *e. g.* Norman Architecture presented, required to be treated in some way. They observed too closely, and they reasoned too justly, to be ignorant of the general principle, that all nature—God's fair work on earth—was coloured. And they loved that manifestation of Him too well to deprive themselves of its help. They felt that they must colour in some way: they could not leave their walls bare; if they did, nature would colour them for them. And therefore they would do the best which they could. And so they covered their walls, as best they knew how, with representations which were akin to the purposes for which they built; embodying in these representations their own simple faith; delighting in them, doubtless, as children delight in their first efforts to draw. After a while a truer feeling came in; and a greater skill came by practice; and then their taste became more trained. And the effect of this change is seen in the more perfect works of the succeeding ages. And, then, after that, there was a decline again.

But still enough was done to shew that, like in all man's works, there must be a beginning. That there is a time when he needs to be taught; or, if there be none to teach him, he must teach himself. That nothing good can be attained at once; only by trial, by hard work, by steady perseverance, through many mistakes, by faithful earnest labour.

CONCLUSION TO BE ARRIVED AT BY US.—In this, I conceive, we shall find a truer conclusion, than in that which would have us cease all attempts because others, before

our time, have failed. What former ages failed in doing, may yet be done by us. And it is quite in our power, while following out the principles which former ages have searched out for us, to avoid the mistakes which they made.

VALUE OF STUDY OF ANTIQUITY.—It is in this, I conceive, that the value of the study of antiquity chiefly lies. Take, only, our greater mechanical skill in drawing; our knowledge of anatomy; our acquaintance with the laws of perspective; of the harmony and contrast of colours; of reflected light; what may not be done with these. What glorious results might be wrought out of these? turned by us to their legitimate use by being consecrated to His glory who gave us this knowledge.

Only let us not sit down quietly, with the conclusion, that it is unlawful—unworthy of Him to use them to His honour; that while our secular buildings, our private dwellings, the instruments of our pride, the monuments of our wealth, the signs, of our consequence, are all glowing with colour; God's house only—the Palace of the King of kings—shall alone stand cold and grey with its bare, plastered walls. That is not the right way to use any gift of God;—to use it for our own pleasure;—perhaps, in a way adverse to His glory. But to do our very best, out of that which He has given us, to make His worship acceptable to men.

CONCLUSION.—I am sensible, that I have treated the subject very imperfectly; that I have done no more than glance over its surface. But I have, already, taken up too much of your time; though the subject is by no means exhausted. There is much to be said of the details of such work; to instance only the degree of conventionality to be adopted. Besides the wider and previous question, Are we to be conventional? The degree and scale of colour; the object to be more particularly aimed at by the artist, whether to impress the mind with solemn thoughts, or with those of a lighter and more cheerful hue.

Still I feel that this paper would be still more incomplete, than it is, did I not try to suggest some practical rules for our guidance in the study of the subject. And here it must be confessed that much yet remains to be done by us in it. Our knowledge of the best mode of applying colour—I do not mean in the mechanical part; is at present

too imperfect to allow us to be confident. Nor are Church restorers, at present, as a general rule, sufficiently qualified to pronounce authoritatively. Still, let us work on; only let us be sure that our work, except we colour it, will be imperfect, and the right way will soon be found.

RULES FOR OUR GUIDANCE.—There is a point in which our knowledge exceeds that of our fathers; *e. g.*, in mechanical skill. There are others on which we, like them, must be learners. And we must learn, also, from the same teacher—Nature.

I.—And one of the first things on this head which she tells us is; that her colours are mostly quiet. Not dark, and heavy, and gloomy, except in her exceptional moods; but quiet and peaceful. She has her bright and dazzling colour; but she is dainty of them, jealous over them, and gives them out sparingly. She is most lavish of such also in her exceptional moods; when disturbed, or agitated, as *e. g.* in a stormy sunset. Then, like the dying dolphin, she seems stimulated in some mysterious manner. Mostly, there is a quiet cheerfulness about all her colours. This then will give us our first rule; that our prevailing tints must be quiet. Our brightest colour must be used sparingly, in small masses; as the exception, not as the rule.

II.—Again, colour is not merely a (1) vehicle of pleasure; but (2) a medium for rendering objects distinct. This will give us a second rule: to place our darker dints so as to heighten relief; our brighter hues on the more prominent parts; *e. g.* the upper surface of foliage; where the light falls strongest.

III.—As a third rule: colour is the effect of light—its child. And the brighter the light, the more vivid the tint. The brightest tints of all, then, should be set in the windows, in the glass, through which the light comes to us. Naturally there most, where the light falls strongest.

FORMS.—And, then, in what form is colour to be applied? In large masses of a single hue? or in small masses of many tints? As a rule, the colours of nature are seldom, if ever, in any considerable masses of any one uniform tint. The green of the fields and woods, or the blue of the unclouded sky, are, perhaps, instances of the largest masses of any one colour. And, yet, if we take into consideration the play of light and shade, the passage of clouds, the rippling of the surface occasioned by the

movements of the leaves and stalks in the wind, the slope of the earth—more, or less steep; the differences in the distances at which different parts of a field lie from us, and the variations in the tints caused by this; in the case of the sky, the difference of the part at which we are looking; low down near the horizon, or high up towards the zenith; there will be seen to be little uniformity in the tints. It is more the result of many tints blended and harmonized together. This will lead us, in like manner, to aim at applying colour to our walls, not in large masses of any one, but in an union and harmony of many, but adapted hues. Diapers, then—figures—scrollage, are the forms which we may use. Diapers are, perhaps, the best for general adoption. Figures, and scenes from Scripture would, as a rule, necessitate the employment of an higher class of artists, than it is in the power of all to command. They seem, besides, more suitable to our more costly buildings, than to our quiet, simple, village Churches. Scrolls with illuminated texts on them are, possibly, the least desirable forms, when used *for application of colour*. They should be used for higher purposes; not as vehicles of colour. Besides, their purpose is to be read, not to be made mere ornaments. While the effect of the employment of fanciful, or mediæval letters, though productive of a great variety of colours, is, very often to make that obscure, which should be “in a tongue understood of the people.” For these reasons I should myself prefer to keep to the employment of such forms as diapers for the purposes of colour; and, where desired, to have texts of Scripture in the plain ordinary Roman letter.
