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An architect and architectural theorist, George Edmund Street (1824–81) was one of the key proponents of the 'High Victorian' Gothic style in nineteenth-century Britain. He is best known as the mind behind London's Royal Courts of Justice. Elected an associate of the Royal Academy in 1866, Street became its professor of architecture in 1880. In 1874 he received the gold medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects after John Ruskin declined it, and he served as the Institute's president in 1881. Street's Gothic architecture was influenced by continental examples: this book, first published in 1855, serves as an important source for interpreting his output. It is copiously illustrated, arranged as a travelogue of mostly pointed-arch architecture seen in Italy, and covers exterior and interior elevations, sculptural details, metalwork and furniture.

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Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages

Notes of a Tour in the North of Italy

George Edmund Street

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Frontmatter
More information

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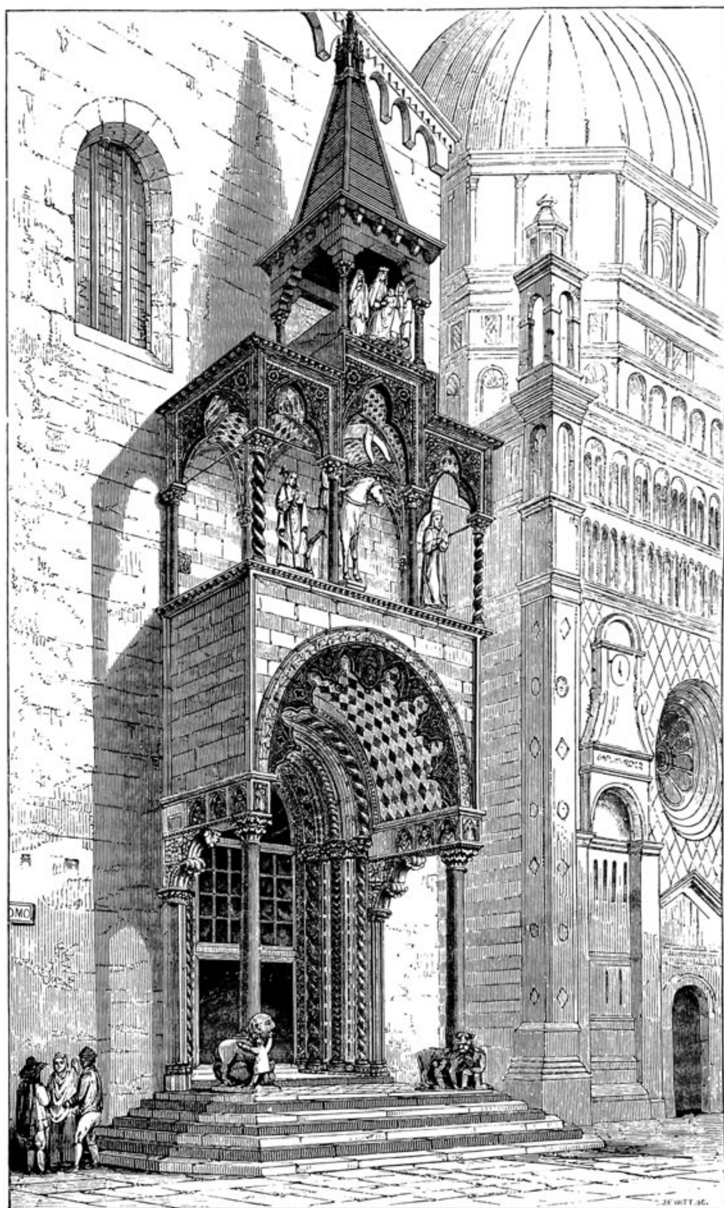
Frontmatter
More information



1.—NORTH PORCH, STA. MARIA MAGGIORE, BERGAMO.

Page 56.

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Frontmatter
More information

BRICK AND MARBLE

IN

THE MIDDLE AGES:

NOTES OF A TOUR IN THE NORTH OF ITALY.

BY

GEORGE EDMUND STREET, ARCHT., F.S.A.

COPIOUSLY ILLUSTRATED.

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Frontmatter
More information

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George Edmund Street
Frontmatter
More information

TO

THE RIGHT REVEREND

THE LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD,

ETC. ETC.,

IN TOKEN

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AND

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Frontmatter
More information

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George Edmund Street
Frontmatter
More information

PREFACE.

In these days of railways and rapid travelling there is scarcely any excuse for stopping quietly at home. The most busy man finds some short holiday in the course of the year, and, if wise as well as busy, spends it not in quiet sojourn at some watering-place, but in active search of the picturesque, the beautiful, or the old, in nature or in art, either at home or abroad.

And as the holidays of busy men are short, and therefore to be made as much of as possible, I conceive that I shall be rendering some service, and providing myself with a fair excuse for my presumption, if I venture to show, by a simple narrative of a tour undertaken in the course of the year before last, how much it is possible to accomplish with pleasure, and, when one has some definite object in view, with profit of no common kind, even in a short holiday.

There are many classes of travellers, and each doubtless flatters itself that its own is the very best of all modes of travelling; and sorry should I be to attempt to disabuse any one of so pleasant a self-deceit. But the more I think of it, the more certain it appears that the reasons and objects which always take me away from home are precisely such as make up the sum of happiness and pleasure to a traveller.

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George Edmund Street
Frontmatter
More information

Indeed, without some definite object before him, beyond the mere desire of relaxation and pleasure, I can scarcely understand that thorough joy of heart being felt which an architect feels as he seats himself in the railway carriage which bears him away from home on some ecclesiological or architectural ramble.

Such an one, hard worked for more than five-sixths of the year, may, if he will, press into the short remainder left to him for a holiday as much both of profit and of pleasure as it is possible to conceive. He goes, sketch-book in hand, with some ancient town or thrice noble cathedral set before him as his goal; and, passing along smiling valleys, or over noble mountains, drinks in all that he sees, not the less gratefully or delightedly in that he views it as the preface only to his more intense enjoyment in the study and pursuit of his own well-beloved art.

If such be my case—and such it is—wonder not, gentle reader, that I desire to show how much enjoyment may be snatched from time in little more than one short month, nor that I am anxious to put on paper the thoughts that have been uppermost in my mind as I travelled, and looked at and drew the old builders' works in the north of Italy, the more as they seem to bear with much force upon questions debated with more and more eagerness and anxiety every day, by very many of those who take the most lively interest in the progress of Christian art.

In past years I had travelled—rapidly it is true, but not without learning much, very much, of what was useful—by the noble cities of Belgium, up the church-besprinkled banks of the fair Rhine, over the

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George Edmund Street
Frontmatter
More information

plains of Bavaria, and through much that was most noble and interesting in different parts of France and Germany; I had dreamt of old times and old men in the antique streets of Bruges and Nuremberg, and under the shade of the still more ancient walls of Ratisbon, in the solemn naves of Amiens, of Cologne, of Freiburg, of Strasburg and Chartres, and of many more most noble piles; I had paced the ruins of old abbeys, and studied, so far as I could, in all of them the science and the art of our forefathers; but so far all my time had been devoted to the study of northern art, and I had found no time and no opportunity for the study of that modification of the pointed style which distinguishes the cities and the churches of the north of Italy. No wonder then that, with a prospect at last of a sight of Italy and Italian architecture before me, I looked forward long and anxiously for the end of summer, for that happy autumn which brings ease and relaxation to so many a wearied heart, and that when, at last, at the latter end of August, I found myself absolutely on my way, I was in no common degree disposed for the thorough enjoyment of all that I met with.

It is well here to observe, by the way, that there is much in the present position of architects and the world which may give to these few remarks upon the pointed architecture of the north of Italy—slight and sketchy though they may be—a degree of value beyond what they would have had only a short time since.

It is impossible not to feel that the great and general interest in art, created by the revival of true

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Frontmatter
More information

principles within the last few years, is a subject of the greatest congratulation to all true artists. It is not only in architecture, but happily in painting also, that first principles are now studied with some determination by men who command the respect of a world educated hitherto to admire and believe in the falsest and weakest schools of art. It was, therefore, with the desire to see how far these first principles were worked out by the architects of the middle ages in Italy, how far moreover they were developed in directions unattempted by their brethren in the North, and how far they have succeeded in leaving us really noble works for our study and admiration, that I undertook my journey.

Let me say, too, at the same time, that I started without either the intention or the desire to examine at all carefully the works of the Renaissance architects. For this there were many reasons—among others my own unfitness by predilection and education for the task, the shortness of my time, and the fact that, as it appears to me, their works have already received as much both in the way of illustration and of description as they deserve.

I should wish also, I must confess, in all my studies of foreign architecture, to confine myself to those buildings in which there appear to me to be the germs at least of an art true and beautiful in itself, and of service to us in our attempts to improve our own work. It does not appear to me that the works of the Italian Renaissance architects really contain this. I see no reason whatever for doubting that if we wish for a purer school of art we must either

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Frontmatter
More information

entirely forget their works, or remember them so far only as to take warning by their faults and failures. I see no reason for allowing that they have succeeded in carrying out true principles, either of construction or ornamentation, to any greater extent than their imitators in England. The same falseness of construction, and heaviness, coarseness, and bad grotesqueness of ornamentation, seem ever to attend their works, together with the same contempt of simplicity, repose, and delicacy which we are so accustomed to connect with them. In short, I see but little reason to differ from the estimate which Mr. Ruskin has given of their merits in the 'Stones of Venice,' and what he has so well said I need not attempt to enlarge upon.

My own feeling is, that, as in the pointed arch we have not only the most beautiful, but at the same time incomparably the most convenient feature in construction which has ever been, or which, I firmly believe, ever can be invented, we should not be true artists if we neglected to use it.

I hold firmly the doctrine that no architect has any right whatever to neglect to avail himself of every improvement in construction which the growing intelligence of this mechanical age can afford him; but this doctrine in no way hinders the constant employment of the pointed arch; on the contrary, it makes it necessary, because it is at once the most beautiful and the most economical way of doing the work we have to be done.

There are, I well know, advocates for the round arch, whose theory appears to be that we ought to go

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George Edmund Street
Frontmatter
More information

back for some ages, to throw ourselves as it were into the position of men who knew only the round arch, and from this to attempt to develop in some new direction; this is Mr. Petit's theory, and it is, as appears to me, one which it is not difficult to meet.

Its supporters assert that pointed architecture is so essentially the effort of a particular age, and marked by certain peculiarities so decided, as to be filled, even in its most noble works, with a kind of spirit which in this age it is vain to attempt again to evoke. The old Gothic spirit is, they say, dead, and, glorious as it was, its flight was but meteor-like, and, having passed across the horizon of the world in its rapid flight, it has sunk beyond all possibility of revival.

It appears to me that those who so argue confound the accidents with the elements of the true Gothic architecture of the middle ages, and mistake altogether the object which, I trust, most architects would propose to themselves in striving for its revival. The elements are the adoption of the best principles of construction, and the ornamentation naturally and properly, and without concealment, of the construction; the accidents are, as it appears to me, the particular character which individual minds may have given to their work, the savageness, or the grotesqueness as it has been called, which is mainly to be discovered in the elaboration of particular features by some particular sculptor or architect, and which in the noblest works—and, indeed, I might say, in most works—one sees no trace of. The true Gothic architects of the middle ages had, in short, an intense love of nature grafted on an equally intense love of reality and truth, and to this it

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Frontmatter
More information

is that we owe the true nobility and abiding beauty of their works; nor need we in this age despond, for, if we be really earnest in our work, there is nothing in this which we need fear to miss, nothing which we may not ourselves possess if we will, and nothing therefore to prevent our working in the same spirit, and with the same results, as our forefathers.

The mediæval architecture of Italy presents, however, one further practical argument against this theory of the lovers of the round arch which they cannot, I think, meet.

It will be found in the following pages that in Italy there did not exist that distinction between the use of round and pointed arches which did exist for three centuries north of the Alps. They were content there to use whichever was most convenient, and whichever appeared to them to be most effective in its intended position. We therefore find, I might almost say invariably, round and pointed arches perpetually used in the same work, the former generally for ornament, the latter for construction; and the effect of this is in some degree to make us lessen the rigidity with which a study of northern art might otherwise affect our views on this point. But I think no argument can be used by the lovers of the round arch which would ever go farther than to leave us open to the choice of both round and pointed arches, just as in these old Italian buildings: they have no right to say "You may not use the pointed arch at all," but they perhaps may be allowed to ask "Why exclude for ever the round arch?" and then I should refer them to Italy for a proof that as a rule the

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George Edmund Street
Frontmatter
More information

mixture of the two is neither harmonious nor satisfactory; at the same time I should show them that, when they talk of the virtues of Roman and Romanesque architecture, of the repose and the simplicity which distinguish them, of their grandeur and their general breadth and nobility of effect,—in all these things they do but sing the praises of the best Italian architecture of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and that we therefore in selecting a style may well be guided by it in all we do, not to the forgetfulness of the glories of our own land, but to the development in a forward direction of what we inherit from our forefathers of that architecture which, after a lapse of three centuries, we now see on all sides reviving with fresh vigour from its temporary grave, and which requires only prudence and skill on the part of its professors to make even more perfect than before.

My object therefore in the following pages will be mainly, to show the peculiarities of the development of pointed architecture in Italy, and specially to show in what way the materials so commonly used there—brick and marble—were introduced both in decoration and in construction. All these points are of the very greatest importance to us, for I am persuaded that not only will some reference to Italian models do somewhat towards the improvement of our art, but that in no matter is information more needed, and improvement more easy, than in the use of brick in architecture; whilst working in marble has been as yet so little practised among us, that we may almost regard it as at present unattempted, though, as I hope to show, there is no longer any reason why this should be the case

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Frontmatter
More information

It is impossible to conclude this preface without mention of the obligations which not only all who travel in Italy, but all who are interested in good architecture, owe to Mr. Ruskin. No man need or can profess his acquiescence in every one of the opinions which he has propounded, but as an architect I feel strongly that a great debt of gratitude is owing to him for his brilliant advocacy of many laws and truths in which every honest architect ought gladly to acquiesce. He may be well content to bear the opposition which he has evoked, satisfied that all that he has written is in the main most certainly for the benefit and exaltation of art of all kinds.

Nor less is a debt of gratitude to be acknowledged by every traveller to my friend Mr. Webb for his most excellent and trusty work on Continental Ecclesiology: it is certainly the most absolutely correct guide-book ever drawn up for ecclesiologists anywhere; and in travelling over the same ground, as I have done in this tour, my excuse for giving what I have in the way of descriptions of the same buildings is, that what I have written has been all with a view, beyond that of merely describing the churches, of showing the principles upon which their builders worked, and giving, so far as the limits of such a work will allow, drawings of the buildings I have described.

It will depend on circumstances whether I am able at some future day to continue my inquiries among the churches and domestic buildings of Central Italy, a tract at least as rich as that over which the tour described in the following pages took me.

It remains only to say that all the illustrations

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George Edmund Street
Frontmatter
More information

which I have given are engraved from my own drawings on the wood from my sketches made on the spot,[1] and that I have endeavoured as much as possible to avoid giving subjects which have been before published. It would have been easy to add largely to them, especially from my sketches in Venice, but it seemed to me that, as this could only be accomplished by adding also to the cost of the book, it was much better to omit them. I have avoided therefore giving drawings of any buildings already drawn by Mr. Gally Knight, to whose work I must refer my readers for representations of several of the buildings described, and for illustrations of Venice I must refer to Mr. Ruskin's engravings and to the photographs which have rendered her features so well known to almost all students of architecture.

In conclusion, I cannot speak too highly of the assistance afforded to the architectural student by Murray's Handbook of Northern Italy: it is almost invariably correct, and gives just what one wants to know of nearly all buildings of any interest or importance.

[1] With one exception—the drawing, namely, of the curious cloister at Zurich, borrowed from Mr. Fergusson's 'Handbook of Architecture.'

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George Edmund Street
Frontmatter
More information

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

South-Eastern Railway Company's handbills — Crossing the Channel — Novelties of the French coast — Journey to Paris — The Madeleine — The Invalides — S. Clothilde — Unreality of modern sculpture — S. Geneviève — Notre Dame — The Sainte Chapelle — Parisian art — Strasburg Railway — Bâle — The Rhine . . . . Page 1

CHAPTER II.

Churches of Bâle — Storks — Rheinfelden — Frick — Baden — Zurich: the cathedral — Fondness of the Swiss for bright colours — Lake of Zurich — English tourists — Rapperschwyl — Linth canal — A wayside inn — Wesen 15

CHAPTER III.

Wallenstadt — Sargans — Gorge of the Tamina — Ragatz — Coire — Ems — Reichenau — Thusis — Zillis — Andeer — Splügen — The Splügen route — The custom-house — Cascade of the Medessimo — Campo Dolcino — A storm 30

CHAPTER IV.

Chiavenna — Lake of Riva — Colico — Lake of Como — Varenna — Stelvio pass — Lecco — Bergamo: its Broletto and churches . . . 47

CHAPTER V.

Pallazzolo — Coccaglio — Brescia: its new and old cathedrals, Broletto, and churches — A dusty road — Donato — Dezinzano — Peschiera — Verona 61

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978-1-108-05192-7 - Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages: Notes of a Tour in the North of Italy
George Edmund Street
Frontmatter
More information

CHAPTER VI.

Verona: Campanile of the Palazzo dei Signori — Sta. Anastasia — Monuments — Piazza dell' Erbe — The Duomo — Sta. Maria l'Antica — Cemetery and palace of the Scaligers — Domestic architecture — Piazza di Brà — The Austrians — Ponte di Castel-Vecchio — S. Zenone — S. Fermo Maggiore — Chapel near the Duomo — Romeo and Juliet — Dwarfs — Wells . . . . Page 75

CHAPTER VII.

Neighbourhood of Verona — The two schools of art — Padua: Palazzo della Ragione — Giotto's Chapel — The Eremitani — S. Antonio — The Duomo — Few antiquarian remains 108

CHAPTER VIII.

Padua and Venice railway — Venice: the gondola — Piazza and church of S. Mark — Beauties of the city — Inferiority of its churches — Sta. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari — SS Giovanni and Paolo — Sta. Maria dell' Orto — S. Stefano — Domestic architecture — The Fondaco de' Turchi — Especial fault of the Venetians — Description of an ordinary palace — House in the Corte del Remer — The Ducal Palace — Archway — Other palaces — Balconies — Venetian architecture — A festival — Paintings 120

CHAPTER IX.

Venice to Verona — Verona to Mantua — Villa Franca — Mantua: its churches and palaces; the theatre — Montenara — Campitello — Casalmaggiore — Longadore — Cremona: the cathedral; churches and public buildings — Lodi — Pavia: its churches; castle of the Visconti — The Certosa — Drive to Milan 181

CHAPTER X.

Milan: the cathedral — S. Ambrogio — S. Eustorgio — Sta. Maria delle Grazie — Monza: the cathedral — The Broletto — Sta. Maria in Strada — Como: the Broletto — The cathedral 213

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978-1-108-05192-7 - Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages: Notes of a Tour in the North of Italy
George Edmund Street
Frontmatter
More information

CHAPTER XI.

Departure from Como — Varese — Lake of Varese — Italian boatmen — Intra — Laveno — Lago Maggiore — Magadino — Road to Hospenthal — The Dazio Grande — Rivolo — Hospenthal — Ascent of the Furca — Valley of the Reuss — Lake of Lucerne — Lucerne — The Unter Hauenstein — Strasburg . . . . Page 235

CHAPTER XII.

Contrast of English and Italian mediæval architecture — Use of the arch — The bearing-shaft — The cornice — Chief aim of Italian architects — Tracery — Mouldings — Carving — Planning — Groining — Italian brickwork — Introduction of colour in construction — Principle of truth 254

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978-1-108-05192-7 - Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages: Notes of a Tour in the North of Italy
George Edmund Street
Frontmatter
More information

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

		Page
1.	N. porch, Sta. Maria Maggiore, Bergamo . . . . *Frontispiece.*	
2.	Shop-window, Rheinfelden . .	17
3.	Cloister of Zurich Cathedral *to face*	20
4.	Church on the Lake of Zurich .	24
5.	Wooden Spire, Ragatz	35
6.	Interior of Cathedral, Coire *to face*	36
7.	Broletto, Bergamo . . „	53
8.	Campanile, Bergamo	59
9.	Window, Coccaglio	62
10.	House at Coccaglio . . *to face*	62
11.	Detail of windows and corbelling for chimneys, Coccaglio . . .	63
12.	Wooden balcony, Coccaglio . .	64
13.	Cloister, Broletto, Brescia . .	66
14.	Broletto, Brescia . . *to face*	66
15.	Detail of circular window, Broletto, Brescia	67
16.	Doorway, Broletto, Brescia . .	68
17.	Brick cornice, Broletto, Brescia .	68
18.	Details of brickwork in ditto *to face*	68
19.	S. Francesco, Brescia	69
20.	Campanile, Verona . . *to face*	75
21.	Pavements, Verona . . „	78
22.	Door-frame, Sta. Anastasia . .	80
23.	Door-frame, S. Pietro Martire .	82
24.	Crest of metal railing, Verona .	91
25.	Metal railing, Verona	91
26.	Court-yard of Palazzo Scaligeri, Verona . . . . . *to face*	92
27.	Doorway, old house, Verona . .	93
28.	Court-yard of old house, Verona *to face*	93
29.	Windows, old house, Verona .	94
30.	Brick battlement, Viccolo Cavaletto, Verona	94
31.	Cloister of S. Zenone, Verona *to face*	98
32.	Coupled shafts, ditto . . „	100
33.	S. Fermo Maggiore, Verona „	103
34.	Italian brickwork . . . „	104
35.	Domestic window, Verona . .	105
36.	Interior of Sta. Maria dei Frari, Venice . . . . . *to face*	132
37.	East end of ditto . . . „	134
38.	Corte del Remer, Venice . „	144
39.	Archway, Ponte del Paradiso, Venice . . . . . *to face*	153
40.	Balcony, Venice.	158
41.	Angle window, Venice . *to face*	160
42.	Ca' d'Oro and other houses, Venice . . . . . . *to face*	161
43.	Capital of window-shaft, Venice	162
44.	Ducal Palace, Mantua . *to face*	183
45.	Window in ditto . . . „	184
46.	Castello di Corte, Mantua . „	185
47.	Gateway, Palazzo della Ragione, Mantua . . . . . *to face*	186
48.	Campanile, S. Andrea, Mantua „	187
49.	Brick window, S. Andrea, Mantua	187
50.	Brick window, S. Andrea, Mantua	187
51.	Window, Campitello	190
52.	Belfry window, near Casalmaggiore	191
53.	Brick window, Cremona Cathedral	196
54.	Cathedral, Cremona, N. transept *to face*	196
55.	Rose window, Cremona Cathedral	197
56.	Palace of Jurist Consults, Cremona . . . . . *to face*	198
57.	Window-jamb, ditto	198
58.	Chimney and battlement, Cremona	199
59.	West front of S. Pantaleone, Pavia . . . . . *to face*	206
60.	East end of ditto . . . „	207
61.	West end of S. Francesco, Pavia *to face*	208
62.	Window, Cathedral, Monza . .	227
63.	The Broletto, Monza . *to face*	228
64.	Sta. Maria in Strada, Monza „	229
65.	Broletto, Monza	229
66.	The Broletto, Como . *to face*	232
67.	Cornice, S. Francesco, Brescia .	262
68.	String-course, Palace of Jurist Consults, Cremona	270
69.	Window in north transept, Cremona Cathedral	271
70.	Detail of window-jamb, Cremona	271
71.	Brick archivolt, Vescovato, Mantua	272
72.	Arch-mould, Cremona . . .	272
73.	Window, Verona	274
74.	Brick window, S. Andrea, Mantua	275

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