

INTRODUCTORY.

ROMAN AND BYZANTINE ART.

PERIOD OF PREPARATION.

I. ROMAN ART.

- SECT. 1. *Architecture of the Catacombs.*
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SECT. 3. *Sculpture and Painting of the Catacombs, and
Ancient Roman School of Painting, as perpetuated
North and South of the Alps during the
Middle Ages.*

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Excerpt

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LETTER I.

R O M A N A R T.

HAVING thus taken, as it were, a Pisgah glance at Palestine — having familiarized ourselves with the grand outlines and the leading features of the ‘terra incognita’ below us, and acquired some familiarity with the language and the habits of thought of the community that people it—let us descend and investigate the subject in detail, and form that intimate acquaintance with the schools and masters of the past, apart from which we can entertain no rational hope of greatness for the future. We must begin *ab initio*, and I propose, accordingly, to consider, in this and the following letter, the early efforts of Rome and Byzantium, during the first ten or twelve centuries of the Christian era, forming a ‘Period of Preparation,’ during which the life-giving Teutonic element was as yet, intellectually, in its nonage. We will commence with the Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting of Rome and the Latin Church, during the early ages of Christianity,—and let me entreat you at the outset, once for all, to give me credit for an earnest abhorrence of the spirit of dogmatism, although I fear that

strong and intimate conviction may sometimes induce me to speak with unbecoming assurance. I will at least study that my words be few—as few as the subject will admit of.

SECTION 1.—*Architecture of the Catacombs.*

It is true, in a certain sense, that Christian Art dates from Constantine; nevertheless it would be more correct to say that it then first emerged above ground,—its earliest efforts must be sought for in the Catacombs.

Rome, as you are aware, is undermined in every direction by subterraneous excavations, forming a maze of unknown extent and labyrinthine intricacy, formed during the early ages in the process of quarrying tufo, and hallowed to the imagination of the Christian world by their having become the refuge and abode of the primitive Church during the ages of persecution. To our Classic associations, indeed, Rome was still, under Trajan and the Antonines, the city of the Cæsars, the metropolis of Pagan idolatry—in the pages of her poets and historians we still linger among the triumphs of the Capitol, the shows of the Coliseum—or if we read of a Christian being dragged before the tribunal, or exposed to the beasts, we think of him as one of a scattered community, few in number, spiritless in action, and politically insignificant. But all this while there was living beneath the visible an invisible Rome—a population unheeded, unreckoned—thought of vaguely, vaguely spoken of,

and with the familiarity and indifference that men feel who live on a volcano—yet a population strong-hearted, of quick impulses, nerved alike to suffer or to die, and in numbers, resolution, and physical force sufficient to have hurled their oppressors from the throne of the world, had they not deemed it their duty to kiss the rod, to love their enemies, to bless those that cursed them, and to submit, for their Redeemer's sake, to the "powers that be." Here, in these "dens and caves of the earth," they lived; here they died—a "spectacle" in their lifetime "to men and angels," and in their death a "triumph" to mankind—a triumph of which the echoes still float around the walls of Rome and over the desolate Campagna, while those that once thrilled the Capitol are silenced, and the walls that returned them have long since crumbled into dust.*

In these recesses, these Catacombs, we must seek for the first efforts of Christian art, the earliest, I

* "Siste, Viator.

Tot ibi trophæa, quot ossa,

Quot martyres, tot triumphi!

Antra quæ subis, multa quæ cernis marmora,

Vel dum silent,

Palam Romæ gloriam loquuntur.

Audi quid Echo resonet Subterraneæ Romæ!

Obscura licet Urbis Cœmeteria,

Totius patens Orbis Theatrum!

Supplex Loci Sanctitatem venerare;

Et posthac sub luto aurum,

Cœlum sub cœno,

Sub Româ Romam quærto!"

Inscription, abridged, Roma Subterranea, 1651, tom. i. p. 625.

should say, which have come down to us, since whatever may have existed of such early date in the elder East has long since perished. But in vindicating this antiquity you must not misunderstand me as asserting their intrinsic merit, or that ancestral relation to the glorious works of the middle ages which is the distinction of Greece rather than Rome, as I shall hereafter show. Art in the Catacombs was of feeble growth from the first, and although it survived its translation to upper earth, it never attained a richer development than is exhibited by those plants that we find growing in subterraneous caverns, secluded from the sun, colourless and uncouth—and which, when removed to the ungenial light of heaven, either immediately wither or gradually decay. The latter alternative, as you will presently find, attended the Sculpture and Painting of these dreary regions; the former more peculiarly expresses the fate of their Architecture, after the conversion of Constantine.

This Architecture is, in the strictest sense, Sepulchral; tombs were the first altars, and mausoleums the first churches of Christendom. The mortal remains of the vulgar herd were deposited in niches scooped out of the walls of the long winding passages, the streets or thoroughfares of the subterranean city, and secured by flat slabs of marble, between the chinks of which the white skeletons may frequently to this day be seen glittering in undisturbed repose. But to the confessors and martyrs, the heroes and heroines of the faith—to bishops, and in general, to those of higher mark and renown, more distinguished

resting-places were allotted. A space broader and more regular than the usual passages, and ending in a blank wall, was in such cases selected or excavated; recesses, surmounted by semicircular *conchæ*, or shells, were hollowed out at the extremity and in the two sides of the square; within these recesses were placed sarcophagi, their sides covered with the symbols and devices of Christianity; the roof was scooped into the resemblance of a dome or cupola,—this was usually painted, as well as the shells of the recesses, and the whole, thus completed, formed a chamber bearing some faint resemblance to the Greek cross, and well suited, by its comparative space, for the congregation of the faithful and the services of religion, the sarcophagus at the upper end of the cell serving as a communion-table, or altar. These primitive churches abound in the Catacombs, and may still be seen in that of S. Sebastian,—of course they are very rudely executed. Where their plan and distribution originated, it would be perhaps idle to enquire; but it is at least a singular coincidence that the central chamber of the Pagan catacombs of Alexandria, and its lateral recesses, present the exact model of those of Rome, only on a far more splendid scale.

After the conversion of Constantine and the consequent enfranchisement of Christianity, the Catacombs ceased to be frequented as a place of refuge, but past associations had invested them with the deepest interest, and for centuries afterwards they were held in veneration, and constantly visited both

by individual worshippers and by the clergy, who performed regular services at the tombs of the martyrs. But in the course of the thirteenth century they fell into oblivion, and remained almost totally forgotten till the great Catholic revival in the sixteenth, posterior to the Council of Trent, when the policy of Sixtus V., and the enthusiasm of the learned Bosio, brought them once more to notice. Assisted by a faithful friend, Bosio spent thirty-five years in exploring them—making accurate plans, copying sculptures and paintings with unwearied assiduity—and his labours resulted in the massive folios of the ‘*Roma Subterranea*,’ now of inestimable value, since the Catacombs being for the most part closed up and inaccessible—the tombs removed and the frescoes destroyed*—they form the sole record of much that then existed in its freshness, now obliterated.†

Of these paintings and sculptures I shall speak more at length hereafter, since, bad as they may be, they were the models of Latin art for many centuries. But the Architecture, or rather architectural forms,

* I use the word, in its common acceptation, for all wall-paintings, executed in fresh or water-colours, as opposed to oils. But the reader will remember that fresco, in its strict technical acceptation, as practised by Raphael and Michael Angelo, is of much later date.

† With the ‘*Roma Subterranea*,’ (which has been republished more than once, much augmented and improved, by Aringhi and Bottari,) may be associated the work of Boldetti, entitled ‘*Osservazioni sopra i Cimiterj de’ Santi Martiri ed antichi Cristiani di Roma*,’ *Rome*, fol. 1720, and the very interesting little essay on the Catacombs by M. Raoul-Rochette, of the French Institute.

to which they were allied, and which were far more susceptible of expansion and improvement, were, except in the case of one insignificant class of buildings, the funeral chapels, neglected and abandoned by Rome, and heathen models imitated in preference. Little else indeed was to be expected, for the art which had been transplanted to Italy in its decline, and long after its original lofty inspiration had evaporated, had for three centuries been more and more degenerating,* and the descendants of those who built the Pantheon in Augustus's time, were unable or afraid, save on the most trifling scale, to imitate its stately dome in Constantine's. To this we may, partly at least, attribute the adoption of the basilica form for church architecture, in lieu of that suggested by the cells of the Catacombs, in which the dome constitutes so marked a feature; the adoption, I admit, is not servile, the adaptation is most ingenious, and the result is such that it is impossible to wish that matters had taken a different course,—still it must be confessed that Rome left the grander flight, the glory of creating a new and peculiarly original Christian architecture, to Byzantium.

* A momentary revival was effected by Trajan, but the decadence recommenced under Hadrian and his successors, and in the words of Niebuhr, "Ancient art had ceased before Christianity was introduced." *Lectures*, vol. ii. p. 259.

SECTION 2.—*Christian Architecture of Rome.*

CONSTANTINE, perhaps, little thought that, in proclaiming himself a Christian, he announced a new era, a new world for Art, as for every other department of intellectual enterprise. Such was indeed the fact. The first consequence of the step was a demand for architectural structures adapted to the rites of the new Establishment. Two new styles immediately arose* at Rome and at Constantinople—each of them destined to a long and uncontested supremacy respectively in the East and West, and ultimately, in their combination, to become the parents of a still more illustrious progeny, the architecture of Lombardy and that of the North, commonly called Pointed, or Gothic. Of these the former style, or that of Rome, at present invites our attention.

The buildings required for the religious ceremonies of the Church in the fourth century were of three descriptions,—Baptisteries, for the performance of the initiatory rite of Christianity—Churches, for the united worship of the initiated and the celebration of the mystery of the Lord's Supper—and Sepulchral Chapels, for the commemorative prayers offered up for the welfare of the departed, who "sleep in Christ." For the first of these the public baths, for the second the basilicas, or courts of justice, for the third, as I have already intimated, the subterraneous cells of the

* Churches had indeed been built long before the age of Constantine, but there is a deficiency of clear evidence as to their form and design.