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978-1-108-07812-2 - An Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art: More Especially with Reference to Architecture

James Fergusson

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### An Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art

Born in Scotland, James Fergusson (1808–86) spent ten years as an indigo planter in India before embarking upon a second career as an architectural historian. Despite his lack of formal training, he became an expert in the field of Indian architecture, publishing *Cave Temples of India* and a *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, as well as *The Holy Sepulchre and the Temple at Jerusalem*, all reissued in the Cambridge Library Collection. In this illustrated work of 1849, he considers beauty in art, expressed chiefly by the architectural styles of different civilisations, beginning with ancient Egypt, and finishing with ancient Rome. (This book is named ‘Part the First’, but no subsequent volumes were written.) The first section is theoretical, tracing the intellectual development of man and his aesthetic sense, while the second considers the surviving evidence of the ideas of beauty held in the ancient world.

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P. ARNDT DEL. G. HAWKINS LITH.

COURT OF TEMPLE AT PHILÆ



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AN HISTORICAL INQUIRY  
INTO THE  
TRUE PRINCIPLES  
OF  
BEAUTY IN ART,  
MORE ESPECIALLY WITH REFERENCE TO  
ARCHITECTURE.

BY  
JAMES FERGUSSON, Esq. ARCHITECT,  
AUTHOR OF  
“AN ESSAY ON THE ANCIENT TOPOGRAPHY OF JERUSALEM,”  
“PICTURESQUE ILLUSTRATIONS OF ANCIENT ARCHITECTURE IN HINDOSTAN,”  
ETC. ETC.

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TO  
  
JOHN GRAHAM LOUGH, ESQ.  
  
SCULPTOR,  
  
THIS WORK IS DEDICATED,  
  
IN TOKEN OF ADMIRATION FOR HIS TALENTS  
  
AS AN ARTIST,  
  
AND OF ESTEEM FOR HIS CHARACTER  
  
AS A MAN,  
  
BY HIS SINCERE FRIEND,  
  
THE AUTHOR.

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## PREFACE.

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It is not often, I believe, that an author has presented his work to the public so fully impressed as I am with his own inability to do justice to so ambitious a task as he has undertaken, and, consequently, so fully aware of the many defects that must exist in the mode in which it has been carried out.

In the first place, few men have, either from education or the professional pursuits of their life, been less prepared for such a work as this. From boyhood I was destined to the desk. From school I passed to the counting-house; from that to an indigo factory — of all places in the world, perhaps, the one least suited for a cultivation of any knowledge of the fine arts; from this to become an acting and active partner in a large mercantile establishment, from the trammels of which, in spite of every endeavour, I have never been able to free myself; and during the time this work has been in hand I have written, and, perhaps, also thought, more about the state of the money-market, indigo, sugar, silk, and such-like articles, than I have regarding architecture, painting, or sculpture. This, in ordinary times, would only have delayed the work, and rendered its completion less speedy; but the last eighteen months have been times of anxiety and distress to every one connected with mercantile pursuits, and more especially to those connected with the East. All those with whom I was formerly connected have succumbed one after the other. The whole edifice under whose shade I have passed my life has been swept away, and there has been nothing but ruin and misery around me. Under these circumstances I do not feel surprised that I have not been able to devote myself to the task I have undertaken with that undivided attention and wholeness of purpose which are necessary for success, and I am already aware of the many rugosities and blots that have, from this circumstance, crept into the performance. These, however, are principally to be remarked in inelegancies of diction and faults of style, which may sometimes render the meaning somewhat obscure; or in repetitions of the same thing, which are unnecessary and displeasing. Such defects as these can easily be remedied in a second edition, and, in the meanwhile, their worst effect

will be to expose their author to a certain amount of cavil and castigation (for which he is perfectly prepared), but cannot either affect the main purpose of the work nor mar its ultimate success, if it is of that stamp which I proposed to myself it should be when I commenced it. For this I care little—perhaps less than I ought to do; but I shall feel much regret if preoccupation have prevented my stating my general argument with that clearness and conviction with which it exists in my own mind, and as I consequently could have stated it under more favourable circumstances.

Another disadvantage of my mercantile pursuits has been the practical exclusion it entails from the best class of intellectual or artistic society. There are few points connected with this work that I should not have wished to talk over with those who may have made that subject their special study; and, more than this, it would have been an incalculable advantage had I been able to submit my views to any friend who was capable of understanding them, and would have taken the trouble to advise me regarding them before submitting my work to the public. Unfortunately, however, I know no one whose advice I could ask, or whose assistance I could enlist, and I have been obliged, consequently, to plan and write this book by myself and for myself, and to carry it out, in all its details, single-handed; and I need scarcely add how much this defect is necessarily felt throughout the work.\*

At one time I hoped that my previous publications might have remedied this last defect, and given me that introduction to literary society which might have entitled me to ask advice and assistance. They, however, have failed in this as in other respects; and if this work ever benefit by such assistance, it must be through its own merits: it cannot, however, be aided now by the kindly advice of friends, but through the criticism of the press; which though, perhaps, as salutary, is certainly not so pleasant a mode of having its errors expunged. If, however, a malady cannot be prevented, a man should not refuse a medicine because its taste is disagreeable, and prefer the pink draught of a fashionable apothecary, whose innocuous sweetness renders it so favourite a prescription in the hands of a considerate and tender-hearted friend.

I do not state these things in extenuation, but in explanation, of the defects of my work. I have not written it in a style to deprecate criticism, and I am not so inexperienced in the ways of the world as to suppose that I am to be allowed to attack time-hallowed prejudices, and put forward confidently my own heretical views, without meeting with opposition both fair and unfair. I have entered the lists and thrown down my glove to all comers, and certainly not in the expectation that it is to lie there. On the contrary, I shall be disappointed if it be not taken up by some strong man. I shall be surprised if he

\* I must not, however, omit to mention my obligations to Mr. E. Norris, of the Asiatic Society, whose knowledge of languages, and their affiliation, surpasses that of any one I know of, and is only equalled by the disinterested liberality with which he places his stores of learning at the disposal of

others, using none of them for his own advantage. The Ethnographical part of this work owes much to his communications, and I only regret that they were made verbally, and in such a manner as to prevent me acknowledging them more specifically.

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## PREFACE.

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do not deal his blows as thickly and as heavily as his strength will admit of. From the circumstances above stated, I am aware that I am not armed for the combat as I ought to be, or as in other circumstances I might have hoped to have been: there are imperfections in my armour which a quick-sighted antagonist will not fail to detect, or to take advantage of; and I may, in consequence, be worsted again, as I have been before. A man, however, must have much less confidence in himself, or in the goodness of his cause, than I have, who is defeated by the loss of one, or two, or a dozen battles. If I know myself, there are few things I can so easily forget as a defeat in such a cause, and few that would less influence my conduct when I feel that I am right. And as everything I have stated in this work is the result of long thought, and of the most heartfelt conviction, so far as I individually am concerned; and as, besides, I believe it would be a very great benefit to society in general if the doctrines here enunciated were appreciated and acted upon, it is not a little that would disgust me with my present course, nor deter me from following it as long as I am able to do so.

Another, and perhaps the most serious defect of this work in its present form, is that it is only a fragment. The theory of art which runs through every page of it was elaborated from a study of Indian, Mahomedan, and Gothic architecture, with which I am personally far more intimately acquainted than with the styles enumerated in the present volume; and it is from them, and them only, that I should have wished to choose my illustrations: as it is, the theory elaborated from one style I have applied to another, and though it confirms all I have to say, the argument will neither be complete nor properly intelligible till the whole series is gone through. The Second Part is the one, however, on which the main argument rests, and is the one that I would most willingly publish alone, had I only my own convenience in view. The subject, however, could not be complete without the first; and besides my own inability, at the present moment, to carry out the whole work single-handed, I am not sorry to keep back the second part, that it may benefit by the criticism that may be bestowed on the first. This is not a pleasant, nor, personally, a satisfactory way of placing a new theory before the world, but under the circumstances it is the only one that is open to me.

Against these and many other unfavourable incidents of a personal nature, which I need not recapitulate, I can only plead, as a reason for obtruding such a work on the public, an intense love of my subject, which through life has rendered it to me an object of constant thought and study; and as indifferent health and ungenial pursuits debarred me from sharing in the amusements of those I was surrounded by, I seized every leisure moment to cultivate these tastes, which through life I have found to be sources of unfailing delight, and of the most enduring support in every trial: so that, though unprepared for it by education, I have spent perhaps as much of my time, latterly, in the study of the subject as most men have been able to do.

I have also had the good fortune to spend the best years of my life in countries where Art, though old and decrepit, still follows the same path that led it



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towards perfection in the days of its youth and vigour, and though it may be effete, it is not insane. In the East, men still use their reason in speaking of art, and their common sense in carrying their views into effect. They do not, as in modern Europe, adopt strange hallucinations that can only lead to brilliant failures; and, in consequence, though we may feel inclined to despise the results, they are perfection itself compared with what we do, when we take into account the relative physical and moral means of the Asiatic and the Anglo-Saxon.

If, at the same time, I have not read so much as many of my contemporaries, I have travelled a good deal; and as I always travelled alone, with only one object in view, I have had leisure to see a great deal of art; and, what is of far more importance, I have had time to think over and reflect on what I saw. For months together I lived among buildings and the works of art they contain, and I have looked on them long and steadfastly, and until I could read in the chisel marks on the stone the idea that guided the artist in his design, till I could put myself by his side, and identify myself with him through his work, I never felt satisfied.

A course of study pursued among the products of art themselves in this manner, I have found far more instructive than books of theories are, or perhaps ever can be; and I believe all would find it so if they could follow it in such circumstances as would prevent their being influenced by the errors of bad education, or free them from the trammels of the stereotyped opinions of the age.

The belief that it has been so to me induces me now to publish the result of my experience. I believe I see the path which other and cleverer men have mistaken; and as the veriest cripple who progresses in the right direction will beat the strongest pedestrian who chooses a wrong path, I trust to being able to instruct even those before whose superior knowledge and abilities I would otherwise bow in silence.

The work, when complete, is intended to consist, first, of Part I. which is that contained in the present volume, consisting of an Introduction, pp. 174; an Essay on Egyptian art, pp. 83; on Western Asiatic art, pp. 66; on Grecian art, pp. 108; on Etruscan, pp. 35; and finally, on Roman art, pp. 40.

Part II. is intended to contain, 1st, an essay on Eastern Asiatic art, from the earliest times to the present day, comprising a sketch not only of the Buddhist and Hindoo styles of the peninsula of India, but also of the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, Ceylon, Burmah, and Thibet, and extending also to Java and China,—say 100 pages.

2d, An essay on Mahomedan art from the Hegira to the present day, and from the banks of the Ganges to those of the Guadalquiver; occupying, probably, about the same number of pages.

3d, On Byzantine art from the age of Constantine, through the Greek and Russian styles, to the present time; say 50 or 60 pages.

4th, On Gothic art from the time that Christianity was introduced into the Western Empire till the Reformation, including of course the Romanesque and



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## PREFACE.

XV

Lombard styles, as also the modifications of the art in Spain and Scandinavia ; 200 pages.

Lastly, A chapter devoted to lesser and exceptional styles, such as the Druidical, Mexican, &c.

The Third Part is intended to consist, first, of a history of the monkey styles of modern Europe, from the time when men first began to copy, instead of thinking, till the present time, when they have ceased to think, and can only copy—including all the variations of that strange art, from Seville and Sicily, to Stockholm and St. Petersburg. Together with a critique on the modern Schools of Art on the Continent, as well as in this country. Say, pp. 300.

And secondly, an epilogue, forming the counterpart of the Introduction ; being, in the first place, a *résumé* of the argument in the preceding part, and deductions drawn from the facts stated in the text. And lastly, practical suggestions for the improvement of the present Schools of Art, and an essay on its future fate and prospects. Say, pp. 200.

Some may be inclined to think the Introduction too long, and somewhat irrelevant. I thought so myself at first, and would willingly have dispensed with it. I found it, however, impossible to render my subject intelligible without going into all the detail there entered into ; and for any one who really wishes to understand the subject, I think it likely that it will be found too short, rather than too long. If any one, however, is repelled by its aspect, he may pass it over in the first instance ; but I am mistaken if he does not return to it. For my own part, I consider it the text, and the rest of the work merely the illustration of what is there stated.

It may also, perhaps, be thought that I have dwelt more on the chronology of Egypt than is requisite in a treatise of this sort ; but I feel convinced that the subject is quite unintelligible without distinct views on this branch of the inquiry ; and though I am, perhaps, judging from my own preconceived predilections, and from the time and labour I have bestowed on this part of my subject, I cannot help thinking that the views enunciated in that part of the work are as important as any contained in it, and as well worthy of attention. Had the work been intended as a merely popular one, this, and much more, might have been omitted ; but it has been written from better motives, and with aspirations so high as to lead me often to neglect much which might have added to its pleasantness or polish—not that I despise, or would willingly overlook, these minor elegances, but merely that I do not think it worth while delaying the publication—perhaps stopping it altogether—in the hope that I might bestow on it all the polish of which it is capable. I know that in this respect I can do better ; but little as I am satisfied myself with the work in its present form, I am mistaken if it does not belong to a class of works that is much wanted in our literature, and if it is not found to contain statements and views which will redeem many minor defects, either in the mode or diction in which the argument is expressed. Others must judge of this ; but it is this belief that induces me to publish it now.

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The Second Part might, but for the reasons stated above, appear as soon as the woodcuts could be engraved and the text printed. The MS. is in a sufficiently forward state for it to be commenced on at once, and it shall appear as soon as it is demanded; in the meantime, however, there is no cause for haste. The work is not one, I fear, likely to earn either a sudden or extensive popularity. I might, perhaps, have made it otherwise; and had I condescended to fill it with the usual twaddle about classical or mediæval perfection, I might at least have enlisted a numerous body of adherents to assist me in fighting my battle, instead of standing utterly alone, and in opposition to almost every one. I have, nevertheless, the most unbounded confidence in the rectitude of my views and the goodness of my cause: and do not, in consequence, fear the ultimate result. I have the strongest faith in the common sense of the Anglo-Saxon race, and in their power to excel in art, as they have done in everything else which they have tried in earnest. And I have a still sterner and stronger belief in the superiority of honest Protestant Christianity, as compared either with Pagan classicality or mediæval Romanticism, and cannot for one instant doubt the triumph of the former when it puts forth its strength.

These are harsh and unfashionable doctrines, and likely to enlist all educated men against my heresies. But before I die I trust to seeing them better understood and appreciated; and also to leaving this work behind me in a very different form from that in which it is now presented to the public.

In the meantime, I, at least, am in no hurry. I have already put aside entirely the subject of this volume—every spare thought, and every spare moment is absorbed in the science of fortification—and my head is wholly filled with walls of brick and mounds of earth of the most murderous form, and most utilitarian ugliness. Instead of beauty and the gentler arts of peace, it is war, and the art which admits of less beauty than any other in the whole range of human inventions. I can and must employ my mind with this and similar pursuits till happier times and more auspicious circumstances enable me to return refreshed to the object of my earliest affections.

My work on Fortification will soon be finished, and when it is published I hope I may return to this subject. For if I am not deceiving myself, I believe I may do good service to the arts of my country, by placing the whole argument before the public. And if I can point out a path by which artists may reach to loftier aims than have hitherto been presented to them, and give the public a better standard by which to judge of the merit of works of art, I shall have accomplished the end I have aimed at, and done what, in the eyes of every one whose opinion is worth having, will excuse even a more imperfect performance than this is, even in its present form; though that, I trust, is not, or at least is not intended to be, its final one.