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DOES INDIGENOUS IRISH ART EXIST?

(Continued).

TO THE EDITOR OF THE ALL IRELAND REVIEW.

DEAR MR. EDITOR,

I consider that it is in the arts of illumination and metal work, of the seventh and up to the twelfth century, the Irish scribes and artificers showed a general progress in their various branches of work, especially in that of "illumination"; wherein the greatest delicacy of execution combined with beauty of outline was introduced; the forms of the letters used in Irish calligraphy were gracefully rounded and symmetrically shaped, the angularity and disagreeable outlines very often to be found in the "Gothic" writings, are quite unknown in the works of the Celtic scribes. —(Note A).

The marvellous accuracy of their curves and the bewildering complexity of their interlaced ornaments wherein serpentine forms and borderings—like creatures seemingly engaged in frantic struggles during a wild "Walpurgis-night" orgie—are so fantastic as to puzzle the most erudite experts, to guess what sort of "technique" could have been employed in their production. As "motifs" of decoration, especially in metal works, these interlaced ornaments are of value, for from their very nature they possess the intrinsic quality of being adapted to the flexible curves and ramifications of metallic materials, whether in gold, silver, bronze, or iron; curiously enough we can trace the same animalized forms in the metal work of the Gaulish, the Teutonic, the Etruscan, Mexican, and Semitic peoples; such art forms have certainly been used long before the very earliest dawn of our local history.

But still, such decorative ornamentation does not, and cannot, fill up the total "cosmos" of Art. They are only the rudimentary writings of man's intuitive conception of what "the beautiful" is in extraneous objects. However, rudimentary, as such Art was, we see by a most reasonable sequence of ideas, that our forefathers in this Island (as in many other countries) used these same forms, not only for the decoration of things possessing a quasi-sacred character, but also for warlike arms, implements of the chase, musical instruments, domestic utensils, household furniture (as far as we can judge by Gaulish remains), and the adornment of all their male and female dress, so grandly-eloquently described in the old Irish poems and romances.

These men of old were therefore perfectly logical, in thus applying their characteristic decoration to all the objects used in human life; there was not the absurd jumble of meaningless ornamentation, which we see nowadays; this jumble proceeding from the eclectic tastes of our day, possessed as we are of boundless sources, from whence to draw all the descriptive varieties, we now see around us.

Up to the period of the 9th century when Architecture (mistress of the Arts, in the higher sense) began to direct and plan buildings having any pretensions to the term "artistic"; we fail to see any advance in the application of the beautiful forms of early ornamentation to the embellishment of the abodes of man in this Island. When such buildings as Cormac's Chapel on the Rock of Cashel were founded, all the attendant arts, necessary to furnish and complete the interior of such an edifice, began to make rapid strides towards their higher development. This Chapel in its architecturally unique features has, however, nothing really indigenous in early Irish art; it bears the impress, as an enlightened

beholder can easily see, of that wonderful Byzantine School of Artists, which during the darkest period of the earlier centuries had its home in the beautiful island of Como, as is now beginning to be thoroughly realized.

In Cormac's work we perceive that the native Irish love of, what Hogarth called, "the line of beauty," prevailed over certain forms used in its ornament, thus carrying the curve lines of the illuminators into the more obdurate substance of stone. The interior of this edifice, small though it be, yet most exquisitely proportioned, was carved and painted, in colours, in the very richest and most ornate style of the "Comosines"; there still remain traces, visible on the surface of its walls, and vaultings (as I myself have seen) of a style of fictile ornamentation, strangely enough very similar in type to Japanese, and old Mexican patterns.

The whole of the stonework, as well as the surfaces of the walls, were polychromed throughout in clear primary colours, relieved with gold or yellow, in parts, similar to the treatment of many of the early Byzantine chapels, which we see still existing, in the fortified monastic "Lauras" of the Greek monasteries on the marvellous Cenobitic promontory of Mount Athos; or in the Christian churches, and the Arabic mosques, of Asia Minor, or in the lovely mural paintings of the halls of the Alhambra in Spain.

The modern Irish idea of colourless walls, and white marble, unrelieved by a single trace of colour or gilding, did not prevail in those days ("dark," though they may be sometimes called); works of Art such as the finely wrought gilt bronze shrine, the illuminated and splendidly bound books of the Gospels, the jewelled pastoral staves, the enamelled and gem-decked double-handled chalices, and the Oriental silken vestments, as well as the bevelled glass of their windows, were not seen in a cold and uncoloured interior; for works such as these were demanded colours and gold around them, in order to show their beauties to the best advantage; such artistic jewels demanded a rich and suitable setting.

I have no doubt that previous to the 10th century when the imported (so-called) Hiberno-Norman style began to prevail (as in the earlier portions of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin; at St. Canice's in Kilkenny; at St. Mary's in Youghal; in the antique Cathedral at Ardmore, and in many other edifices throughout the land), the interiors of buildings of the type of Cormac's Chapel, were all decorated in a similar manner as far as their resources would permit.

Even the interior plastered walls "decoration" of the main living rooms of the wattled "duns," of the "Ard-righ" and chiefs, were rudely painted, as we know, from historic sources, with bands of colour, and even pictorial representations of chases and battles; somewhat in the same style as the "Totems," which are daubed on tanned buffalo hides, of the tents, or "wigwams" of the North American Indian tribes.

Such a complete system of decoration involved the portrayal of the human form, in proof of which there are still remaining a few antique frescoes. Amongst these are to be seen the traces of certain figures in the arcades of the "Pronaos," or sanctuary of Cormac's Chapel in Cashel.

This Irish style, though originally of foreign origin, was eventually advancing on its road towards an evolution of what may be termed a "national" artistic type, when its further progress was com-

pletely cut short, and altogether supplanted, by the advent of the so-called "Norman" Romanesque Art in the course of the 11th century.

NOTE "A."—The alphabet which is to-day commonly called "Irish" is the ordinary cursive characters used in every-day transactions by the Roman people. It was introduced into Ireland by the early Christian missionaries; no trace of its existence as a native alphabet is traceable before the time of St. Patrick: the letters of this Hiberno-Irish alphabet (with the exception of a few letters such as the g h, etc.), are precisely similar to the lettering of the Roman inscriptions, "scraffitae" or scratchings of popular phrases such as one sees on many of the Roman walls to the present day. This cursive character, or "running hand," was entirely different from the square-shaped lettering employed in lapidary inscriptions. It is not known with any certainty what shape the Irish alphabet or word-symbols had before the arrival of the Roman Christian missionaries in this island; they may have been shaped like the Scandinavian Runes, or they may have been simply "stones" or strokes drawn on lines similar to the Oghams found on many of our stone monuments; if so they must have been a species of Hieratic writing entirely distinct from the Demotic alphabet introduced in the early Christian period. It is to be hoped that some "learned Irish philologist" as well versed in the science of language as the late Professor Max Muller, of Oxford, would enlighten us on this point.

M. J. C. BUCKLEY.

Montmorenci, Youghal, Co. Cork.

FRANK DOBBS.

I think an interesting supplement to what his descendant has been good enough to write for us about the hero would be the actual text of the great Hebrew prophecy which Dobbs believed to be directed upon modern Europe and Ireland. I may add that when in his place in Parliament he explained his views upon this most interesting subject he was listened to there with the respectful attention to which he was entitled by his character, his abilities and the noble services which he had rendered to his country.

The passage will be found in the 2nd chapter of the Book of the Prophet Daniel beginning at the 31st verse, and reads as follows:—

31 Thou, O king, sawest, and behold a great image. This great image, whose brightness was excellent, stood before thee; and the form thereof was terrible.

32 This image's head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass,

33 His legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay.

34 Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces.

35 Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer-threshingfloors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth.

By the image Dobbs understood the Roman Empire—that later form of it assumed by modern Europe. Ireland was the stone cut out without hands, a power outside of the image, and never a part of the great Empire typified by the image, inasmuch as the Romans never conquered or annexed this island. Dobbs held too, and sought to prove his position by many texts and a very considerable knowledge of Holy Scripture, that the Ireland for which was reserved that great destiny would be filled, informed, and vivified by the presence of our

Lord Himself coming for the second time in His power and glory to execute judgments upon the earth.—Ed.

SEVERE.

What do you think of your friend's—the Vampire—position to-day? She appears to me to be in dire straits. The worst feature in it, from my point of view (not being a violent Imperialist, like yourself), is that this unfortunate country will have to contribute some £12,000,000 to £20,000,000 for all her blundering and blustering in South Africa. How thankful we ought to be for the privilege of being fleeced and plundered in this way by your friend, the Vampire.

L.

Dear L.—I still think that the circle drawn, or attempted by the little paper, includes various other Irish circles, yours amongst them. Pardon me not joining issue with you, and having a fair fight; but I don't feel at all warlike about things of that nature just now.

By the way—are you learning Gaelic? If not, do. You will find it a study most pacifying and consolatory. Crede experto. How it is, or why, I don't know, know only that it is so. The mere sound of the words, like the ringing of Cormac's bell-branch at Tara, or the chiming of Patrick's bell on Croagh Patrick, drives away, if only for a season, the sinister powers, which for ever infest and assail the soul of man in his passage through time.

Please try it. You are a Home Ruler, I know; but I don't think a study so Irish and homely would involve any abdication of your political principles. Then, too, you might do it under the rose and not tell the rest. Some other time, dear L., we may have a friendly bout of it and maul each other a little for the amusement of idle lookers on; but not just at present. Indeed, dear L., though you won't believe it—no one will—I am not a politician at all. I could manage a herd of nightmares more easily than even one of our current political problems. A propos, what did you think of my account of the inception of the Irish difficulty contained in that description of Diarmuid na n-Gall setting out for Saxonland?—Ed.

FRUIT, VEGETABLES, AND FLOWERS.

Next week we shall commence a series of most interesting and important articles on this subject written by Walter Cole, the well-known Irish importer of foreign fruits, flowers, and vegetables, who, in common with all Irishmen of spirit and understanding, is justly indignant at the apathy and stupidity which have hitherto prevented us from even supplying ourselves with things that can be so easily and economically produced here in our midst, not to mention the great export trade which, if Mr. Cole be right, we can appropriate whenever we please.

WILLOW-GROWING.

I have been inquiring into the subject of willow-growing in Ireland, about which some letters appeared in the Review. Enquiries leads me to believe that the market is rather over-stocked, and that unless to feed a local basket-making industry it could not be undertaken with advantage.

B. M.

Another correspondent tells me that basket-making cannot be profitably pursued in Ireland owing to the competition of German prison and convict labour in that department.—Ed.