THE ARCHITECTURAL DISCUSSION: BY WILLIAM WALTON OF NEW YORK

The article by Frederick Stymetz Lamb in the May number of The Craftsman, advocating a "modern use of the Gothic," for our contemporary architecture, is one more interesting illustration of the tendency to seek a form of art that shall be especially adapted to the spirit and requirements of the age in which we live,—in other words, "a national art," "a twentieth century style." The impulse is natural and the logic is evident,—why should we be perpetually harking back to the traditions of the dead past, if we cannot find a fire-new inspiration in our own times and business, and must borrow a little, let us at least adapt and ameliorate. It is in this neighborhood that architecture finds herself compelled to part company with her sister arts, and this because she is at least half a science, and science must be of to-day and to-morrow or perish. Not but what there have been prophets and practitioners who have preached zealously the doctrine of a strictly local and contemporary art for painting—(not, as yet, for sculpture, music or literature)—it was long held as a reproach by the European critics that we had never developed any "American School." And no one had the courage to reply that we were under no obligations to do so,—it not being the mission of the painter to make his art "record" anything, or exploit, or instruct, or preach anything, if he does not feel so called. As the past—viewed from the serene and lofty heights of pure art and knowledge—is much greater in wealth and importance than the present more or less scrubby moment, it would seem that the accidents of his time and place should have no particular influence on the true painter’s painting,—he being a cosmopolitan, the heir of all the ages, and not a Paduan or a Poughkeepsian. Of course if he choose to rivet his myopic gaze on the automobile and the cowboy, on east side sanitation and the "hustle" of his neighbor, free be he to do so. But for architecture, it is quite another affair, the very latest in plumbing and steel-frame construction is not late enough. So that Mr. Lamb’s effort to find a style which shall comfortably house the broker and the promoter while not losing sight of the amenities of the past arts, is strictly legitimate. Nevertheless, there appears to be a divergence of opinion, both as to the particular historical style on which it is ad-
visable to found the new one and perhaps even as to the necessity of consulting the dead past at all.

Of the various efforts to develop an architecture that should be peculiarly of our own time, the two most notable and striking instances of recent years have been the two entirely differing ones of the Chicago Exposition of 1893 and the Paris Exposition of 1900. In both of them this problem came up before the assembled officials and designers,—to demonstrate to the world, once for all, that this great art has taken this step forward. To cease to erect new buildings that should “smell of Louis XVI, of Vignola, of Palladio,” as one of them put it in 1900; “is it not worth while to prove, once more, that the column and all its consequences, entablature, pediment, peristyle, etc., are not of our race? This has been evident from all time.” But it was on the banks of the Seine and not of Lake Michigan, curiously enough, that this attempt was seriously made. The most eminent members of their profession, gathered in anxious consultation over the planning of the Columbian Exposition, decided that the great White City could not be made worthy by any “American” architecture; as one of the most distinguished among them, Henry van Brunt, wrote at the time: “A memorable impression of architectural harmony, of secular pomp, on a vast scale, must be created. The forums, basilicas and baths of Imperial Rome, the villas and gardens of the princes of the Italian Renaissance, the royal court yards of the palaces of France and Spain, must yield to the architect of the New World his rich inheritance of organized beauty to make possible a bright picture of civic splendor adequate to the great function of modern civilization.” And he added: “The critical knowledge of the succession of historic styles, which is a necessary part of the equipment of an architect of the nineteenth century, prevents him from considering a problem of this sort with that simplicity of vision which was enjoyed by all previous builders. These, unembarrassed by a great inheritance from the past, were able to express themselves in terms of art without the possibility of affectation. They knew but one style and this was germane to their own form of civilization. On the other hand, modern architecture is sophisticated by archaeology. It is a polyglot language; and, unlike our predecessors, we are constrained to select out of many styles the style in which our own work should be executed.” For those who, by willfully shutting their
eyes, are able to remain content in their "one style," for those Americans, and cases are known, some of them of decided talent, who fear to go abroad lest it should "destroy their own originality," for these devotees of ignorance, there can be but little sympathy. As will be remembered, the dominating style, selected as best capable of satisfying the difficult requirements of the great exposition, was that of the Renaissance.

BUT in the planning of the Exposition Universelle of 1900 a certain section of the not too extensive grounds, on the southern side of the river, on the Esplanade des Invalides, was set apart for the new architecture, and the great monumental entrance, crowned by a colossal colored statue of a very modern Parisienne, on the north side, on the Place de la Concorde, was also conceived and carried out in the very latest,—if not, indeed, in the Next-to-Be. In the permanent structures erected, the two palaces of the Fine Arts, on the site of the old Palais de l'Industrie, and the new iron bridge, Alexandre III, however, much more conservative measures were adopted. But for once, on a very important scale, it was resolved to show what could be done by a total repudiation of past glories, no matter how classic or imposing, by a concerted and intelligent effort "to express in sculptured and architectural forms the new art and life and exuberance of the age, to be distinctly twentieth century, with all that that implies or may warrant us to hope." The results of this concours d'idées were hailed with enthusiasm. "They demonstrate," according to one in authority at the moment, M. Frantz Jourdain, "a very considerable outlay of talent, of spirit, of ingenious invention, and of imagination, which places our architects very far above, among others, those too-much bepraised Americans, whose pitiful failure at Chicago has demonstrated their radical want of personality. A people—oh! happy people—unincumbered by any anterior influences, by any scholastic formulas, by any artistic traditions, a people brutally practical, who for a gallery of machinery can find no other form to select than that of a square building, scarcely merit the enthusiastic eulogiums with which they are overwhelmed by our imbecile snobishness. Thanks to God, and notwithstanding the fears of a jury picked out from the same camp, and notwithstanding the brutalizing education imposed by the State, the old France has dem-
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onstrated that in art she possesses even more initiative than the young America.” The populace, the visitors, and even the Parisian press, however, very generally declined to participate in this enthusiasm,—the latter even fell into the habit of con doling with the dome of the Invalides, built by Louis XIV’s architects, Bruant and Mansart, as “insulted” by the “tohu bohu” of the new palaces in front of it; the intelligent critics “sought in vain for a new thought, a new idea,” and found instead only “the rags of the past,” “a jumble of decrepit architectonic formulas and decorations the triviality of which is not always corrected by good taste.” The unlearned contented themselves with such adjectives as “pastry-cook” and “pretzel” architecture; and indeed the hilarity and vivacity and ingenuity of detail of this double row of buildings, the wealth of crockets and finials and cartouches and caryatides and capitals and wreaths and garlands and interrupted pediments and allegories and symbols will long be re-membered as one of the sights of the Exposition.

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T is a peculiarity of any discussion of any manifestation of art that the disputants are more or less embarrassed—or aided—by the inexactness of the only terms at their disposal. Even in the present series of papers called out by Mr. Lamb’s article there seems to be somewhat of this uncertainty; it is doubtful, for example, if Professor Hamlin’s definition of style, in its “broadest sense,” as meaning “expression,” could be applied to a painting or a piece of sculpture, which may be very expressive, e. g., of vulgarity—the deadly sin in art—and never be thought of as having “style.” Mr. Lamb would probably demur to his statement that in using Gothic forms we were really “proceeding not upon the Gothic, but upon the classic, principle,” as his argument seems to show this conviction that the detail in Gothic more than in any other architectural style is a part of the construction, that it was only in its later developments that the details became divorced from the main structural lines. A confusion of phrases seems also to attend Professor Hamlin’s hailing Messrs. Tiffany and Sullivan as the “true first prophets” of the so-called New Art—this movement, as its name indicates, was an European demonstration, carried out both to its best and its most bitter worst development abroad, one of its most artistic manifestations being the jewelry of René Lalique, as some, at least, of Tiffany’s most ambitious work,
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in its most unintelligent sacrifice of costly and beautiful material, is lamentable. Mr. Lamb would probably accept Mr. Goodhue’s proposed substitution of “Romanticist” for “Gothicist” (uncouth word!); but he has hopes that we may again, some day, “have a distinctive style.” It would seem that his article scarcely, as Mr. Sullivan asserts, makes “a special plea for Gothic as Gothic,” but rather for the principles which have made Gothic beautiful,—as he found some of the same tendencies in the New Art. As for considering “medieval thought more really American than that of Greece or Rome,” it is quite possible that he does, being, thereby, within his rights. These differences, after all, appear to be largely of detail, it being generally understood, with Mr. van Brunt, that it is well to study the principles of all styles and then seek to find those which, with judicious modifications, will more readily express modern conditions, aspirations and ideals.

There are indeed certain qualities in the Gothic which seem to render it peculiarly appropriate to modern requirements, its boldness, its logical development and ingenuity in meeting new conditions, its tendency to abolish the mere wall, and its yearnings for lightness, openness, height, and still more height. The last two qualities are especially apposite for modern buildings,—though it cannot be said that the tie is very close between the multitudinous windows of the modern office structure and the vast expanses of stained and painted glass of the cathedrals, nor between the pious aspirations of the medieval builder, lifting his columns as he lifted his thoughts, heavenward, and the careful calculation as to rental of floor-space of the modern owner. The vastly increased means placed at the disposal of the builder of to-day should inspire him, and not embarrass him, and it is indeed remarkable, as Mr. Sullivan says, that recognition has been so long delayed of the fact that the problem of the tall office building is one of the most magnificent opportunities ever offered to the proud spirit of man.