THE MEDIÆVAL CRAFTSMAN: THE REASONS FOR HIS INSPIRATION AND ACHIEVEMENT:
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"When we admit that great cathedrals were designed and built by men bred as working masons, it is not to be inferred that mastership was less esteemed, but that workmanship was more valued."

Very period of creative activity in the arts has been the result of a combination of peculiar circumstances. These circumstances can never be foreseen, nor brought into being by legislation; nor can they be reproduced when they have once passed. It is as if many streams were flowing to a common outlet; and it is only from the height afforded by time that we can encompass the whole within a single view how each little stream threads in and out with the slope of the land, seeking the channel of least resistance, neither fretting nor boasting over its ultimate distinction, but making as fertile and beautiful as may be the immediate course to which Nature has allotted it.

In the perusal of a general history of the Middle Ages one is left in doubt how to account for that remarkable constructive skill and artistic feeling which combined to build and enrich the churches and extended from these, the highest manifestation, away down through all the industrial arts to relatively unimportant things of daily use. There seem so many muddy and turbulent streams that one wonders how their union could effect such a broad, clear stream of artistic achievement.

But history likes best to date its epochs from the wars that men have waged, from the blood that has been spilled during the course of the ages. A great number of arrant knaves, ambitious and unscrupulous, managed to carve their names in Mediæval history with their swords. Undoubtedly there was a great deal of fighting and wanton plundering; there were many men to whom the cruelties of an Apache would have been a tame diversion, and who unfortunately were in positions to embroil their fellow men in their own petty squabbles. Human beings were bartered like potatoes in a sack; towns and provinces were more than once staked on a throw of the dice. As towns and cities grew apace and communal life gradually displaced the older feudal units, the people were forced to hem themselves about with ramparts built at tremendous cost of labor and material; and all too frequently the old craftsman had to drop his tools at the sound of the tocsin bell, hasten to enroll himself under the banner of his guild and take his appointed place on the walls to fight for his life, his home and the privilege of plying his trade in peace.

We learn that education, if book learning be education, was at a
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low ebb,—there were few indeed who could read or write; that the moral standards of the day were not as ours; that Christianity was narrow in content, superstition dominating all classes. We know that most of the things which we deem essential to physical comfort were lacking; that roads of communication were few and poorly kept and so infested with lawless raiders that travel was dangerous; that towns were frightfully unsanitary,—refuse was dumped into the streets, and it is estimated that the soil of many Mediæval towns was raised seven or eight feet in as many centuries, as witness Ravenna, where the church floors are several feet above their original levels. And so it goes. From much that we read we are apt to feel that life must have been a sorry thing in those days. Ah, well! What sort of a mess, think you, are we making of civilization for the eyes of writers eight hundred years hence?

But of one thing there is ample evidence. Somewhere, flowing through Mediæval life, may be found a clear, pure stream more potent than all these muddy little creeks combined. When we have dreamed in old world towns, have pried with quiet wonder into all the nooks and corners of a big cathedral church and have learned to love the product that came from the workshops of the time we have not far to seek. Whatever else may have entered into the lives of those workers, there was one all-pervading factor—sincerity of purpose. From beginning to end there is the same persistent pains-taking character, the same kind of soul stuff that comes from earnest thought and honest effort. It is piled stone upon stone in the churches, cut where all may read the story in the sculptures; it glows many-lived through the glass of the windows; it is wrought in wood and metal. And when enough people are sincere and earnest in the work that falls to their lot, what may not be accomplished? A small mean people will produce a small mean art; a boastful vain-glorying people will boast through their art; for it is so ordained,
whether we wish it or not, and for good or bad, that we shall be known by the things we fashion with our hands. A man who keeps his soul in his pocket with his loose change will never produce a work of art that will move his fellow men. And so we must believe that there were many big earnest men in those days, simple and uncultured, it may be, but men who were big and strong in all that counts for manhood. If they fought and hit hard it was from necessity rather than choice; they were establishing the right of the individual to act for himself. And if unquestioning faith of some sort or other is essential to the production of such beautiful things as they left behind, would that a little of it might seep through into our own lives.

How vividly the spirit of the times is portrayed in a letter written during one of the rebuildings of Chartres Cathedral. The people were about ready to give up the fight, abandon the ruins of their town and church and scatter to other parts. But they found new courage in the vigorous preaching of their bishop and set about once more to the rebuilding of their church on bigger and finer lines. An abbot who journeyed down to Chartres to see what progress affairs were making, wrote as follows to a brother abbot in England:—“Who has ever heard or seen in all the ages of the past that kings, princes and lords mighty in their generations, . . . that men and women, I say, of noble birth have bowed their haughty necks to the yoke and harnessed themselves to carts like beasts of burden, and drawn them laden with wine, corn, oil, stone, wood and other things needful to the maintenance of life or the construction of the church, even to the door of the asylum of Christ.”

Sitting in the quiet square in the shadow of the gray old towers, one can picture it all in imagination, the building swathed in scaffolding, the din and clatter of tools, the busy hum of voices, the energy and enthusiasm of many workers keyed to the same thought and idea. To the master builder came men of varying talents and abilities,
anxious to do their share, aside from a nucleus of paid assistants. There were those who were content to quarry the stone, mix mortar and carry burdens; “stone squarers” and journeyman workers from neighboring towns with their kits on their backs; “imagers,” as the carvers of stone were called, some of them craftsmen whose achievements were widely known, attracted from a distance by stories of building activity, or sent for by the master to co-operate with him in the planning; others were pilgrims, traveling from shrine to shrine, who had heard of wonderful miracles being performed and who tarried long enough to “carve a vote for God,” and then with another leaden token added to their caps passed on to other shrines. There were monks who carved the stone with a fervor of devotion that we deem fanatical in its intensity; and close beside their work appears the irrepressible humor of some fellow who must take a crack at the follies of the day in his own quaint fashion. And with these many workers plying mallet and chisel has come a tangled skein of deep symbolism and curious imagery that has sorely puzzled the scholars of later years.

Thus the building grew in a spirit of active coöperation; they were all workers together. There was no such word or profession as architect until the sixteenth century. In the subordination of the individual, or rather, in the unselfish way in which the individual contributed his part to the whole without thought of personal credit for which we are so insistent in these days, we may account for the unequal merit of the details and the surpassing beauty of the ensemble.

One cannot help noting, even in a casual examination of Mediaeval work, the intimate association, the close linking together, of many crafts on a basis of architectural forms. The same symbols, the same quaint imagery, the same architectural features appear again and again interpreted in terms of wood, iron, stone and glass. Infinitely varied are the versions given a comparatively few motifs. The goldsmiths in their chalices and censers, reliquaries and cro-
ziers, even in smaller articles of jewelry, wrought the same arches, buttresses and pinnacles that the masons used in the cathedrals. Tiny angels and saints appear in niches or under canopies of similar character to those that the "imagers" were chipping from stone. In Italy we find woven into cloth the same decorative motifs that were burned into tiles for the floor of the Baptistery in Florence. The locksmiths and cabinet-makers never tired of devising new forms of traceryed patterns for their panels.

They went forward hand in hand, all of those old craftsmen, each leading the other on to greater and finer achievements. They were experimenters together, each experiment profiting for something better. It is true that in the early days they were more or less bound to archaic formulæ; but one by one the crafts emerged with fresh ideals. And even in the early products there is the charm of individual interpretations, evidence of the same earnest thought that gives charm and strength to the finer things.

It is always necessary to note a clear distinction between the interplay of form and ornament common to many crafts in Mediæval times and the pilfering, or adaptation as we prefer to call it, of modern times. Those forms and symbols were all alive then; they were in the making, significant to all workers alike. The increasing skill with which the stone carvers worked at their sculptures owed quite as much to the goldsmiths and ivory carvers as did those craftsmen to the architectural forms which they so freely borrowed. Moreover, the versatility of some of the workers was remarkable; they were at home with the tools and materials of many crafts. Again, the arts all dated their traditions
back to the same monastic workshops. We generally misunderstand the character of those monastic institutions. In the days of their prime they were much like huge industrial colonies, somewhat akin to our own California Missions. To them came men from all walks of life heartily sick of the endless brawling and fighting. Each institution sufficed for its own needs. The inmates tilled the soil, owned their flocks, erected buildings and practiced in their shops many crafts which would otherwise have become lost. Then they became traders, built and maintained roads; their boats plied up and down the rivers and their agents were scattered through foreign lands, until in overmuch prosperity came their undoing. The master builders of most of the churches up through the twelfth century seem to have been monks. And when the practice of the skilled trades passed from the monasteries and gave rise to the craft guilds, the church still called for the best efforts of the workers and the character of its own structure continued to dominate through many crafts. As such things as Figures One and Two were intended for the church service their forms are quite consistent. The former, in which the worker has frankly borrowed the whole church for his purpose, is typical of the twelfth century; and in the latter, of the fifteenth century, the worker has naively purloined a chunk from the side of the church, buttress, pinnacle, windows and all, with a little saint perched atop of the steeple. Of similar character is the shattered fragment of a carved post in Figure Three. It was not from his tools or materials that the carver found the clue for the little canopy at the top; it was borrowed from the stonemasons with whom, doubtless, he was co-operating to give consistent beauty to the church and all of its furnishings. In the traceries of the door in Figure Four, of the lock in Figure Five, and the keys in Figure Six, there is the same intimate relation to architectural features. Up the center of the door are carved pinnacles, and at the bottom are miniature pier bases clustered together as we find them in the cathedrals. In
"THE LAST SUPPER": GOTHIC WOOD CARVING BY RIEMENSCHNEIDER IN THE JACOBSSKIRCHE, ROTHENBURG.
"CHRIST WITH THE TEACHERS": AN EXAMPLE OF GOTHIC WOOD CARVING BY THE BAVARIAN SCULPTOR RIEMENSCHNEIDER.
one key two tiny windows have been pierced through the iron; and
in the lock a scrap of red cloth was placed underneath the traceries,
suggested no doubt by the colored glass with which the glaziers
filled the church windows. It is such things as these that give to the
work that unique character which we call a “style” or “period,”
the shaping of many minds to the same thought. When Gothic
churches were built all things were Gothic; when Greek temples
were built all things were Greek; and we hope by diligently borrowing
from many styles to put a soul into our own work!

As tracery in one form or another plays such an important part
in Gothic craftsmanship, let us follow it back to its origin. We noted
last month the thickness of the walls in the early churches and the
fact that the window openings were small, the solids being very much
in excess of the voids (Figure Seven A). As the Gothic system
of building developed it was said that the window openings were
gradually enlarged until they eventually filled the entire space from
pier to pier. In the enlargement of the windows arose the necessity
for a subdivision of the space. For a time the glass was held in
place by heavy bars of iron often curiously bent to conform to the
main lead lines in order that their effect from the interior might not
be disagreeable. Then the logical expedient was devised of com-
bining two openings to form a unit throwing above them a single
containing arch. The clue to this device seems to have come from
the triforium gallery about the interior of the church where the
openings were necessarily broad and low suggesting a vertical
subdivision (B). The space left above the two smaller arches,
being relieved from any serious work, was pierced with an opening.
The same idea was applied to the window (C) with such result as
may be seen at Chartres and contemporary structures. From this,
together with the use of cusping in arched forms (D) the development of tracery is a series of logical steps. The circular opening at the top of the window was filled as in E, with flat slabs of stone pierced with smaller openings. The builders were alive to every suggestion that would give variety and beauty to their structural forms; and they soon began to experiment with other combinations and rearrangements of their openings. It is apparent that they worked from within the church; that is to say, they were intent upon the effect that would be produced upon the person looking up at the varied shapes of colored glass with which the openings are filled. Then came the happy thought of cutting out the superfluous solids within the containing arch, leaving only the lines of stonework (Figure Eight A). It was then seen that the relation of lines in such a composition as this was quite as important as the shapes and groupings of the openings.

Now with that close coöperation found among all the workers, the craftsmen in other materials were not slow to see the beauty and possibilities of tracery. The goldsmiths, locksmiths and woodcarvers soon adapted it to their own materials and tools, and relieved from the constructive problems of the stone masons, they carried the idea into forms of rare and intricate beauty. In the later flamboyant traceries of the builders one sometimes wonders if some of their windows were not suggested by the work of their brother craftsmen, accepted as a challenge to their own skill.