A CLOISTER ON THE RHINE: ITS BEAUTY AND ROMANCE: BY HUGO ERICHSEN

Next to the frowning castles that dominate the Rhine and its tributaries, in point of romantic interest, are the vaulted monasteries that link the present period with the Germany of the Middle Ages—a constant reminder of the stirring times when abbots, like as not, were men of strife, and the authority of the church, not infrequently, was enforced by the arbitrary power of the sword.

In the monastic life of those early days, supposedly based upon a renunciation of all things mundane, it is strange to come upon evidences of a high state of luxury which was intimately associated with a cultivated taste for art in its various forms. To this, several German cities, notably Stein on the Rhine, owe much of the beauty for which they are justly celebrated. Moreover, we are indebted to these enterprising monks for the preservation of some of the best examples of Medieval art and architecture. This was mainly attributed to the intelligent activity of one order, the Benedictines, who have maintained their artistic reputation down to the present day.

According to tradition, the Benedictine cloister of St. George was founded by Hadwig of the Hohen Twiel, the romantic noblewoman whom Victor von Scheffel immortalized in "Ekkehard." At the death of their patroness, the orphaned monks petitioned her nephew, the Emperor Henry, surnamed the Holy, to assign them another place of residence. A new monastery was the result, erected at Stein, on the northern bank of the Rhine in ten hundred and five. The interesting structure remains to this day in practically the same state in which it was vacated by the monks at the time of the Reformation. Resting upon eleventh-century foundations, it juts boldly out into the Rhine, its red roof and flattened gables flanked on either side by venerable poplars. The construction reminds one of Elizabethan architecture, with its exposed beams and squares of cement, although that dates from a much later historical period, and suggests the thought that the architectural style that bears the name of the great queen may have emanated from Germany. For artistic purposes, however, nothing more suitable could have been chosen, as the style is entirely in harmony with the surroundings, although the contrast between the green of the trees and the whiteness of the stucco is marked. The buttressed bay window and massive garden wall indicate that upon occasion the monastery wall was intended to serve as a fortress, although there is no historical evidence to the effect that it ever did so. The doorway leading down to the water's edge strongly reminds one of Venice and all the romance and adven-
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ture which that name implies. It takes no great stretch of the imagi-
ation to fancy the boats that came down the great river in times
of stress, silently propelled with muffled oars and swiftly bearing
some mighty statesman or ecclesiastic or soldier to the cloister for a
midnight conference. The doorway is an evidence of the wisdom
of the abbot who caused it to be built, for at all times it afforded a
ready means of egress from the monastery if that stately pile should
be beleaguered on the land side.

In the rear of the east wing, erected by Abbot Jokodus Laitzer
in fourteen hundred and eighty, we come upon the ban yard, a gar-
den that was originally enclosed and in which the good people
of the adjoining city and surrounding country used to gather once
a year to partake of the ban wine, under the supposition that it would
render them proof against all manner of evil. Even now the towns
folk come here occasionally to enjoy the fine view of Burg, a pictur-
esque suburb of Stein, on the opposite shore. The garden still bears
evidence that the monks possessed considerable horticultural and
floricultural knowledge and skill. It contains many of the orna-
mental shrubs that are indigenous to southern Germany, and a num-
ber of venerable pear and apple trees that have developed into splendid
specimens, and bear abundantly despite their great age.

The buildings of the cloister are arranged in the form of a square;
the chapel—a many columned basilica of the twelfth century—
lies to the north, the monk’s quarters and abbot’s residence
facing to the southeast, and the kitchen and various other buildings
with a western exposure. The ambulatory, or covered way, in its
present form probably dates from the late Gothic period, and the
beautiful network of the southern wing is commonly ascribed to the
eventful administration (fourteen hundred and ninety-nine to fifteen
hundred and twenty-five) of David von Winkelsheim, the last abbot.
The ivy twining about the ambulatory windows and the ferns grow-
ing at their base invest this part of the monastery with an exceedingly
picturesque character. Even though it has grown somewhat dilapi-
dated in the course of time, the interior of this covered passageway
still conveys an adequate idea of the beauty and usefulness that were
its main characteristics when ecclesiasticism was in flower and the
prosperity of this cloister was at its height. Here, we may well
imagine, the portly fraters took their after-dinner promenades when
inclement weather prevented them from indulging in outdoor exer-
cise, and probably many an ascetic novice paced restlessly up and
down over the worn flags, deeply absorbed in the gloomy reflections
peculiar to his kind. The unusual construction of the vaulted ceil-
ing is noteworthy and might be applied with benefit to modern ecclesiastical architecture.

As we enter by the staircase leading to the abbot’s apartments, we come face to face with Mediaevalism; it confronts us in every nook and corner and meets us at every turn. The one thing that impresses us most about the abbot’s stairway is its extreme simplicity, and this always coupled with utility, for even the eaves are made to serve a purpose, and supported by an oaken framework constitute the roof of an outdoor gallery that affords ample protection against rain or snow.

The private dining room of the abbot, with its paintings of sacred and secular history, is particularly interesting. Most of the furniture is exceedingly plain, and may well have served as the prototype of our modern mission style, although some of the chairs remind one distinctly of those now in vogue throughout the Bavarian highlands, the origin of which is thus definitely traced. The one exception to the rule is an elaborately carved cabinet, with massive brass hinges and locks, that was fashioned by a master craftsman. The ceiling is divided into squares and triangles by means of moldings that are bound together here and there, as it were, by hexagonal shields with an ornamental device. The bay window of this room is of a sufficient size to accommodate a small dining table that is surrounded by benches under the windows, and here on clear days the abbots, in succession, were wont to take their noonday repast and give themselves the pleasure of looking out upon the rippling stream that flowed by underneath on its way to the sea and far-away Dutch coast. One of the two bedrooms of the ruling dignitary of the cloister also commands a splendid view of the Rhine and is richly ornamented with a frieze of the year of fourteen hundred and eighty-one, that commemorates the foundation of the monastery and incidentally perpetuates the memory of Abbot Jokodus.

Gastronomy seems to have been popular in the cloister, for, in addition to the refectory of the monks, there is a magnificent festival hall, where guests of honor were banqueted upon occasion. Here tapestries and paintings lose the ecclesiastical character that distinguishes their counterparts in the abbot’s apartments, and are representations of scenes of warfare, life at the courts of kings and knights in armor on horseback. There are also a number of fine paintings of beautiful women in the old picturesque costumes. The marquetry of the wainscoting is a notable example of the advanced state of German woodwork in the Middle Ages, and the metal sheathing between the exposed and decorated beams are evidence that this branch of interior decoration was in the hands of capable artisans.
ENTRANCE TO THE ABBOT'S RESIDENCE, ST. GEORGE'S CLOISTER, STEIN ON THE RHINE: "IT TAKES NO GREAT STRETCH OF THE IMAGINATION TO FANCY THE BOATS THAT CAME DOWN THE GREAT RIVER IN TIMES OF STRESS, BEARING SOME MIGHTY STATESMAN OR SOLDIER TO THIS CLOISTER FOR A MIDNIGHT CONFERENCE."
"THE IVY TWINING ABOUT THE AMBULATORY WINDOWS, THE FERNS GROWING AT THEIR BASE INVEST THIS PART OF THE MONASTERY WITH AN EXCEEDINGLY PICTURESQUE CHARACTER."

"HERE WE MAY WELL IMAGINE THE PORTLY FRATERS TAKING THEIR AFTERNOON PROMENADES": THE UNUSUAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE CEILING IS NOTEWORTHY.
"THE THERE IS A MAGNIFICENT FESTIVAL HALL IN THE OLD ST. GEORGE CLOISTER WHERE GUESTS OF HONOR WERE BANQUETED UPON OCCASION."

"THE WOODWORK OF THE REPECTORY IS EXTREMELY INTERESTING, THE PILLARS SUPPORTING THE CEILING SHOWING A DECORATIVE EFFECT."
THE STAIRWAY LEADING TO THE ABBOT'S APARTMENT, THE ROOF OF WHICH CONSTITUTES AN OUTDOOR GALLERY: THE WHOLE MOST PICTURESQUE AND PLEASING.
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The deeply recessed casements, with their broad window seats, may be said to accentuate the quaintness of this banqueting hall, but the one feature that attracts more attention than any other is the heavy oak door with its curious panels, ornamental iron hinges and locks and the elaborate fresco painting in which it appears to be framed.

The refectory by its very plainness forms an agreeable contrast to this luxurious apartment. And yet it is not so severely plain as to destroy the evidence of the artistic perception of the master mind that conceived it. The beamed ceiling and woodwork are nearly devoid of ornamentation, but the treatment of the pillars supporting it shows that even here the architect was not unmindful of the decorative effect that is produced by an expression of simplicity in art. The Latin inscription above the serving window, the stained-glass representations of the sainted martyrs and the images of the Madonna prove that the monks did not neglect their religious obligations even when partaking of good cheer; while the bare walls are suggestive of that monastic abnegation that was not always observed in practice. The expanse of leaded glass above the long window bench floods this large dining hall with light and renders it cheerful at all times.

The claustrum, or cell, bears some evidence of refinement, and even the furniture, although substantial and plain, shows the skill of the craftsworker in these products of the Mediæval cabinetmaker. The simple frieze in fresco-painting, consisting mostly of ecclesiastical coats of arms, differentiates these rooms from all the rest, a fact that applies as well to the mosaic flooring.

Curiously enough, the sanctuary in the second story, ever a refuge of the persecuted, became the prison of David von Winkelsheim, the last abbot. He had entered into a compact with the Lords of Zuerich, then engaged in introducing the reformation of Zwingli, in their possession (including Stein), by means of which he agreed to give the abbey up to them, provided that two rooms should be reserved for himself and that he and the few remaining monks should be well cared for. But the grand seigneurs mistrusted him, and suspecting that he was about to deed the cloister to Austria, they placed him under guard. Four men were detailed to watch him day and night. Nevertheless, he managed to escape and to resume the dignity of his office at Radolfzelle.

It is of interest to note the remarkable effect produced upon the town of Stein by the artistic proclivities of St. George’s abbots. This is particularly noticeable in the exterior ornamentation of the houses, many of which are lavishly decorated with paintings of Biblical and mythological subjects. Although naturally of an evanescent nature, some of this work is exceedingly well done.