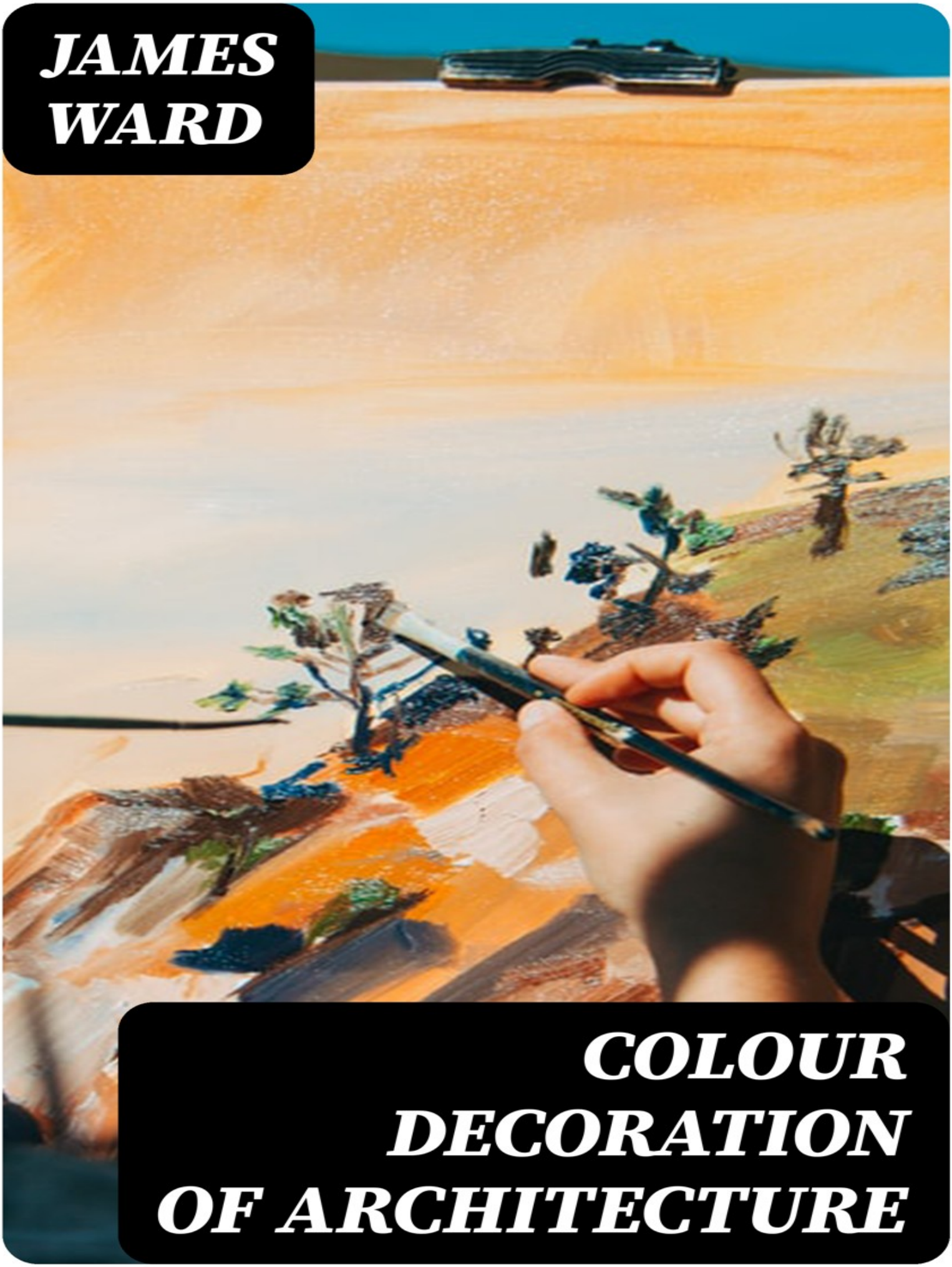
JAMES WARD



COLOUR DECORATION OF ARCHITECTURE

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PREFACE

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THIS book is written with the view that it may be of practical service to the decorator, student and craftsman, who may be engaged in the practice and art of colour decoration, as applied to the interiors and exteriors of public buildings, churches, and private dwellings. I trust also it will be of some value to all who take an interest in the decoration of their own houses. The people of our own countries have been so unaccustomed to coloured buildings for the last three or four hundred years that a strong prejudice against the use of colour in architecture has been developed and is maintained even at the present day. Though we may all love colour, there are very few amongst us who have the courage to advocate its use in the decoration of buildings. We visit Italy, France, Germany, and the East, and admire the many and beautifully decorated churches, palaces, city halls and other public and private buildings, but the lessons we may have learned are lost to us, for we come back to our country to still hug our ancient prejudice against the use of colour, and are contented with the greyness of life, and with the dreariness and drab of our great manufacturing cities.

It is fashionable just now for many of our educated classes to talk largely on art and decoration on public platforms, and to air their artistic views in newspapers and magazines, but when it comes to a question of the practical application of their preaching and writing, they are found wanting, their courage seems to evaporate, as they think

they have done their duty in the advancement of art by simply talking about it. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England there was a school of living art, and five or six centuries previous there was one in Ireland. Is it too much to expect these golden ages of art to return to us? We hope not, but before they do, art must become a common thought with the people, which can hardly be said to be the case at present.

I have included in this work some brief historical reviews of colour decoration in Italy, France, Germany and England, not so much on historical lines, but in order to offer to the decorator and student some account of the styles, methods and practice of the art under consideration in the countries named, and in hopes that what I have written in respect to these matters may prove of practical value to the readers of this book.

I desire to thank the Authorities of the Victoria and Albert Museum, The Dublin National Museum, the Dean of St. Alban's Cathedral, and Mr. William Davidson, L.R.I.B.A., Architect, Edinburgh, for their kind permission to use the illustrations acknowledged to them in this work.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

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“I cannot consider Architecture as in anywise perfect without Colour.”

Ruskin: *Seven Lamps of Architecture*.

THE History of Art testifies, in all its great periods, to the keen delight that artists, decorators, and architects have taken in the study of colour, and its expression in certain harmonious proportions and arrangements for the decoration of buildings. Colour was obtained for the adornment of a building by the use of marbles, metals, enamelled bricks and floor mosaics, which may be classed as permanent colouring, and structural in character, or it was applied, as in painting, wall mosaics, and stained glass. Architects were not content with leaving their buildings in grey and drab, for in such periods of the past, no building was considered complete without its final application of colour decoration.

Nature, for the solace of mankind, has made most of her works beautiful, by dressing them in coloured garments. Birds, insects, stones, gems, trees, flowers and “weeds of glorious feature”; the countless phases of the earth, the sea, and the sky with its clouds, when rosy-fingered at the dawn, when sunlit in noon-day beauty, or when fringed with the gold and crimsoned fires of the dying day, afford the clearest evidence that nature delights in rich and bright, as well as in quiet schemes of colour harmony. Therefore, if

true art is built on the solid ground of nature, colour cannot well be divorced from it, for although certain uncoloured artistic creations are legitimate enough, they come under the head of illustrations, or are portions of coloured schemes of decoration, for colourless art, like colourless nature, is almost a contradiction in terms.

Even a whitewashed wall, when left some time to the weather, will be eventually changed into a variegated surface having delicate tints or suggestions of almost every colour. We might also illustrate nature's dislike to monotonous uniformity of tone if we select any other colour, however brilliant or intense, instead of white. The doors and windows of a house may be painted, for example, in a uniform colour of the rankest and crudest green imaginable, but if left long enough to the effects of the weather, this harsh colour will be transformed to a beautiful and variegated harmony of numerous and closely related tones, varying perhaps from greys to emerald greens and peacock blues, or in other words the rank and uniform harshness of the original colour will be eventually oxidised and bleached into a colour harmony of variegated beauty.

From our knowledge of the changes in colour made by sunshine and storm on outside painting and on whitewash, it might be suggested that a country cottage with white walls should have the doors and other woodwork, such as window shutters and frames, painted in a strong and rich green, and the window sashes in vermilion. Such a cottage should have a roof of thatch, or failing that, a red-tiled roof. In a few months after the cottage was painted it would lose any supposed harshness of colour that it might have had

when first done, and would afterwards present a pleasant note of subdued richness of colour, that would be in complete harmony with the country or landscape around it. But if the cottage must have a slate roof, and if its walls are of red brick, then the doors, window shutters and frames should still be painted green, slightly inclining to yellow, but the window sashes should be painted white.

As regards the outside painting of the modern “concrete” cottages and villas, which are now contributing so much to the deepening of the grey and gloom of town and country, nothing short of the addition of inlaid panels of mosaic, or tile decoration, and the most brilliant colours imaginable on the woodwork will serve to relieve the dreary and leaden-hued monotony of the Portland cement walls.

If we love to see colours in nature and in pictures, why should we not also love to see a beautiful, a commonplace, or even any badly designed building decorated in pleasant schemes of harmonious colouring? We are quite prepared to hear the modern critic, as well as the modern “cubist,” reply to this, that “art is art because it is not nature,” that “it is absurd for an artist to worship, or to represent Beauty,” or they may use any other convenient shibboleth, to protest against the representation of nature in art either in form or colour.

The question may be asked, “Why are the outsides of our modern buildings practically colourless?” when we know that during the ancient, medieval, and the early Renaissance periods the exteriors, as well as the interiors of all buildings were strongly coloured, either by the means of using natural marbles, metal-work, tiles, mosaics, or by

painted decorations. Many notable examples of colour decoration, both exterior and interior, it is true, have been executed in modern times, but modern nations are still very timid in the use of colour, especially in regard to its application to the exterior of buildings. We are not yet quite emancipated from the white, grey, or drab effects, but we must at least be thankful for the note of colour in the red brick, and occasional red-tiled roof of the modern dwelling-house.

Our lack of colour appreciation has generally been laid to the charge of Puritanism, but this has been hitherto chiefly associated with the white-washing of church interiors. Cromwell, or rather his fanatical followers, have had a deal to answer for as iconoclasts, but at the same time it must be remembered that Cromwell was a friend of artists, and a patron of the arts in his day, and we certainly are indebted to him for the preservation of Raffaelle’s Cartoons, the masterpieces of that great painter, which he hid in safety in the cellars of Hampton Court Palace during the troubles of the Civil War. Since Cromwell’s time, however, colour decoration has crept into many of our public buildings, and some buildings in England were treated in colour thirty or forty years ago; but to-day, and we can hardly blame Cromwell for this, figuratively speaking, it may be said that a fresh colour-destroying wave of whitewash is sweeping over the country, which is now blotting out the former efforts of our old decorators.

The interiors of most of our public buildings are generally of an indescribable drab colour, if they are not painted white. It requires some courage to decorate properly in

colour, as well as experience and ability, but it is very humiliating to find that notwithstanding our plentiful supply of decorative artists, the majority of our public buildings are painted in the style which we find frequent in bathrooms. The white of the bathroom has certainly something to recommend it. It looks decidedly clean, when it is freshly done, and has an air of great humility. Many people advocate white because, they say, it is safe, that is, because it relieves them of the solving of a colour problem; some museum authorities recommend it because they say that it is the best contrasting background for the objects and examples. The palace and the ballroom people advocate it because they think that ladies' dresses and Court uniforms look best against it, but all these reasons are just the ones that an artist would put forward to prove that white is not the best background for museum objects, and should not be used for the walls of a state assembly-room.

Dark, or strongly coloured objects in a museum look doubly darker against white walls, so that often you cannot see the beauty of their forms or the modelling and colour value of their surface details unless you get your eye quite close to them, which is sometimes impossible. On the other hand, suitably coloured and decorated walls often bestow a certain charm on the objects and examples by enhancing their beauty and preciousness, and by linking them together with the decoration, avoiding that mechanical and cold effect of isolation which many objects present on the colourless and undecorated walls of some museums.

As regards ballrooms, or state assembly-rooms, white walls make the worst kind of backgrounds for dresses and

uniforms, as they afford too great a contrast with brightly coloured ones, and in the case of white dresses no contrast at all.

There is evidently a strong objection to the use of colour for the decoration of our public buildings; it is avoided as if it were an unholy thing, something desperately wicked, like the “scarlet and purple” trappings of the unhallowed lady of Babylon. Yet we see that the Almighty has clothed His glorious creation in thousands of tints of lovely colours, and on the other hand we find that Nature uses white very sparingly indeed. We moderns, however, live an artificial life, we are always in such a hurry that we have neither time nor inclination to learn the lessons we should learn from Nature; and besides, we are more or less obsessed with a puritanical pride, like the pride which apes humility, so in our indifference to the beauty of colour we seek for salvation in whitewash and plenty of it.

Perhaps, however, the Italian architect, Palladio, who flourished in the sixteenth century, was really more responsible than Puritanism for the fashion of colourless buildings, for he was one of the first who regarded colour as an evil thing, as he has said that “white was more acceptable to the Gods,” an absurd statement, if he believed that the Gods were responsible for the colouring of Nature. It may be safely stated that the fashion of colourless buildings had its inception in Europe in Palladio’s time, for previous to this date, which ushered in the decadence of the Renaissance, all the interiors and exteriors of buildings were decorated in colour from the earliest historic times. Any ancient building that had any architectural pretensions was

not only coloured, but treated in the richest and brightest colours known to the decorator, and such colours were applied in their full strength. In the present day we have got so much accustomed to the absence of colour in architecture that when we do see the rare example of a richly coloured interior—exterior colouring is out of the question—which is not often, we must admit, we may be shocked by the novelty of it, and though we may secretly admire the daring of the decorator, we should be accused of our bad taste if we ventured to give it our unqualified approval.

Much as we all love colour, we seem to be afraid to get too far away from white, or very pale and neutral tints, in decoration. We appear to be too timid, or anxious not to offend the Palladian taste of the public. On the other hand, in the matter, for example, of church decoration, we are extraordinarily inconsistent, for we tolerate and encourage the employment of the most daring combinations of colour in stained-glass windows, and yet, as a rule, leave the rest of the architecture colourless and cold, so that in the majority of our churches the walls and ceilings look more chilly and cheerless in contrast with the brilliant glories of their stained-glass windows. The majority of our churches are a kind

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[*National Museum, Dublin.*

PLATE 2.—FRESCOES IN THE CHAPEL OF ST. PETER MARTYR, CHURCH OF ST. EUSTORGIO, MILAN.

(From portion of the model in the National Museum, Dublin.)

of reflex of the present general aspect of many medieval ones that have had their former decoration sacrilegiously scraped off their piers, walls, ribs, and ceiling vaults, and so deprived of their former beauty and comeliness.

Architecture is the mother of the arts and crafts, and she certainly looks all the happier when accompanied by her children, Sculpture and Painting, but when they are absent from her, her dignity is not augmented or enhanced by her saddened expression of loneliness that accentuates the coldness of her isolation.

We suppose that no one objects to the fashion of filling church windows with coloured glass; on the contrary, we

should be thankful that in these modern times this reminiscence of ancient colour expression still remains to us, but why do we draw the line at coloured windows? Why are we not more consistent, and colour also the rest of our churches, interiors and exteriors as well, with coloured marbles, mosaic, or painted decoration? Seeing that we tolerate and admire colour decoration in stained-glass windows, there seems to be no legitimate reason why we should not have panels of coloured mosaic, enamelled terra-cotta or tiles, fresco, or coloured marbles as vehicles of colour decoration in churches as well as stained glass. Any of these materials or methods of decorative colour expression might well be used in the carrying out of designs for memorials of our departed friends, and would be quite as effective for such purposes as stained glass. But who has ever seen or heard of a fine mosaic, or a fresco executed or painted on the walls of a church to the memory of somebody in particular? If we adopted and employed mosaics or frescoes as memorials of the dead, as well as stained-glass windows, we would still be exercising a pious duty to our departed friends, and at the same time would be assisting to make the Temple of the Living God more comely and beautiful by adding some of the necessary colour finish to the walls of the church.

In a church at Birmingham there are a series of most beautiful windows in the chancel-end of the building, designed by Burne-Jones, that are magnificent in their glory of flaming crimson hues, and are superb examples of the artist’s composition and design. One regrets, however, to find that the decoration of this church is typical of the usual

embellishment of the modern House of Prayer, which generally begins and ends in the chancel windows.

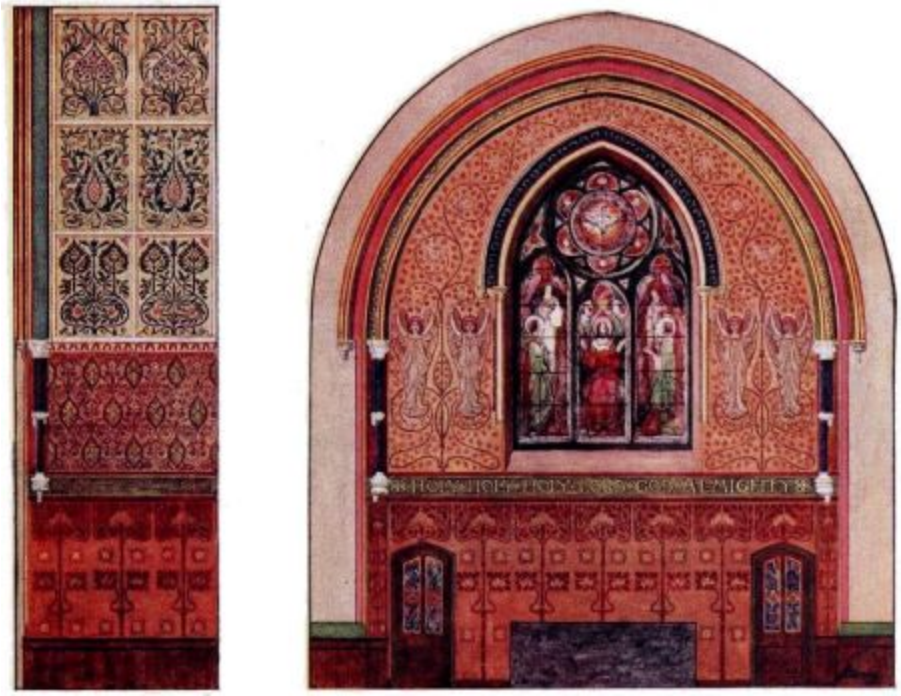

PLATE III

DESIGN FOR THE DECORATION OF PARK GREEN CHURCH, MACCLESFIELD

CHAPTER II

THE VALUE OF COLOUR AS APPLIED TO ARCHITECTURE

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IT has been said that Architecture may be compared to a book, and that Sculpture and Painting are the illustrations which serve to explain the text and decorate the volume. It might be argued, however, that the text of the written book may be in itself a work of art, and therefore not require any explanatory illustrations or decorations. To a certain extent this may be quite true, but on the other hand a book will be more valuable, more useful, and more complete, as well as being more beautiful, by having the additional interest of a well-designed and appropriate setting of artistic and explanatory illustrations to embellish the text. And just as the written matter of the book should not be regarded as a mere background for the illustrations and decoration, neither should the architecture be so designed as to appear only as a background for the sculpture and painting, for the building is the important thing, but sculpture, painting, and ornamental decoration should be certainly employed to explain the architecture, to symbolise the use of the building, and to give additional interest and beauty to the fabric.

Colour in architecture ought to be employed in a structural sense, that is, it ought to be so used that it may help out, or confirm, the logical and indispensable features of a building that give to it the essential qualities of repose