THE MOGHUL MESSAGE OF BEAUTY

NOTHING in François Bernier's famous book throws a stronger light on his character than the passage in which he expresses his admiration for the Tâj Mahall and the naivety of this declaration of artistic faith.

"I was in the company of a French merchant," he explains, "who, as well as myself, thought that this extraordinary fabric could not be sufficiently admired. I did not venture to express an opinion, fearing that my state might have become corrupted by my long residence in the Indies; and as my companion was come recently from France it was quite a relief to my mind to hear him say that he had seen nothing in Europe so bold and majestic."

Thus supported, Monsieur Francois takes heart to talk, (and he talks well) about the Tâj ; until near the end of the discourse another cold fit seizes him, and he adroitly postulates,—"It is possible I may have imbibed an Indian taste ; but I decidedly think that this monument deserves much more to be numbered among the wonders of the world than the pyramids of Egypt[1]."

The clever Paris doctor had made his point, one notes, —and without the possibility of giving serious offence to his fellow subjects of King Louis. Bernier at the Tâj was a man under the spell of a revelation, and the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, was inevitably drawn from this canny foreigner. His tribute is worth reams of the facile admiration of people who have nothing to lose by praising a work that has now long been proclaimed *hors concours* by the general voice.

To say that the Tâj is beyond criticism is not to say that it has no critics, and one meets people--architects sometimes—who will explain entertainingly how (architecturally) wrong Shâh Jehân was to allow the two lateral domes to nestle so close under the central canopy (like three leaves on the pîpal tree), how mistaken he was in

(1) Constable and Smith's edition of Bernier ; p. 299.

checking the minarets with black ; how much better indeed the whole would look if the minarets were away ; how 'Itimâd-ud-Daulah's tomb was in better proportion, and so forth.

But the Frenchman's modest statements are as epoch-making as the cry of Archimedes : "Eureka !—I have found it ! "

It is so much simpler to criticise than to create ; and, while the modern world has grasped that comforting truth and broadcasted it " not wisely but too well," the secret of the Moghul's Art sleeps—like Hermann Melville's Bartleby—" with Kings and Counsellors." Its like is not among us today ; no Architect of this critical Age would dare to write over the lintel of his buildings the vaunt which Shâh Jehân blazoned on the walls of his Hall of Audience in the fairest palace in the world, —" If there be a Heaven upon Earth it is this, it is this."

A great commentator—Fergusson—has said : " The Tâj may challenge comparison with any creation of the same sort in the whole world. Its beauty may not be of the highest class, but in its class it is unsurpassed[1]." But we should like to have heard Shâh Jehân's rejoinder to this. It would, I am sure, have been at least as interesting as was Whistler's when that painter conveyed to the Judging Committee in Munich, which had awarded him a second-class medal, his complete appreciation of the second-hand compliment ! Again Fergusson writes (and let us not forget that he felt and wrote as one illumined by the Moghul Message of Beauty) : " Though of course not to be compared with the intellectual beauty of Greek ornament, it (*i.e.*, the decoration of inlaid precious stones) certainly stands first among the purely decorative forms of architectural design." We may think with Horatio that to reason thus were to reason too curiously. One cannot classify in the cosmos of Art the exact comparative values of those atoms of taste which carbonised the Moghul stones and marbles so that they blazed with an even greater effulgence than the Moghul diamonds ! Who can tread the old Palace at Delhi wihout feeling acutely conscious that a unique point of view has been lost ; without asking despairingly with the poet :

" Whither is fled the visionary gleam ?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream ? "

It may bluntly be said that all Moghul Art is decorative,

(1) *History of India and Eastern Architecture*, Vol. II. Page 317.

and in this respect its architectural triumphs possess a consistency which even " the intellectual beauty of Greek ornament " did not always achieve. In the Moghul masterpieces a scheme of beauty is presented in which the component parts are so marvellously subordinated to the general weal that no single item is allowed to draw the spectator away from his contemplation of the whole building.

I well remember how, when I first saw the Erechtheum on the Acropolis at Athens, I received one of those galvanic shocks of artistic realisation which, being so rare in the course of a life-time, are to be ardently remembered. But this came—I feel assured—*not* from my first contemplation of the Erechtheum as a whole, but from the contemplation of its ornamental feature, the *Caryatides*. The magnificence of these statues of resplendent women supporting the cornice of the porch cannot be adequately described. They must be seen ; but, once seen, who can think of the Temple which it is their business to uphold on their noble heads ? Here at least, clearly, the phonetic art of the sculptor, though part of the building, makes a greater appeal to man than the purely technic parts of the structure ; it is a war of the members in the body corporate of beauty ; and in so far as there is strife for preeminence in the parts there must be unrest— even if it be a divine unrest—in the whole.

Who has not sympathised with the judge in the first of the world's chronicled beauty competitions ? Paris had to choose between the three goddesses,—Hera, Queen of Heaven, Athene, Queen of Wisdom, and Aphrodite, Queen of Love. What a bevy of immortal beauty, but how distracting ! And we cannot even now affirm unanimously that he chose the right one. In the Parthenon it is easy to feel a repetition of this rivalry of two at least of the immortal three. Aphrodite, as we may term Painting, would be there too, today, but she—the loveliest—is ever a fugitive, according to the laws of Art and Love. Were the halls of Delphi acclaimed for any architectural merits that could rival in public esteem their mural paintings by Polygnotus ?

We should not forget, moreover, that in discussing Greek decoration we do not properly know what we *are* discussing. There are comparatively few people who remember that the Frieze of the Parthenon was *painted*; fewer still who like the idea. In fact the Greek decoration which we see today, which enshrines for us the Hellenic

ideal, is—quite apart from the fragmentariness of the legacy—*not* the Greek decoration which Pericles and Phidias spread,—gorgeous and glowing with colours—before the enchanted eyes of the Athenians. The *forms* of decoration (though mutilated) are there, but where are the hues of life? And if we prefer (as many must) these pallid marbles to the lavish colours of ancient Athens, that taste is our own, but most emphatically not Hellenic.

Moghul Art on the other hand has survived for us in its entirety; we behold it, and see that in spite of—shall we say, *because* of its very limitations—there exists no strife of beauty in the component parts. A man may mentally visualise (as I do) the Erechtheum as a triumphal representation of "the human form divine;" he may recall the Parthenon by the vivid remembrance of those prancing horses[1] and the grand athletes that ride them; the whole of ruined Olympia may be to him succinctly summarised in his reminiscence of Praxiteles' Hermes; but when one thinks of the Tâj, it is the Tâj, and the Tâj only, that one remembers.

These distinctions are deeper than Moghul and Greek conceptions of ornament; they extend indeed to all the differences in all the ramifications of Indian and European Art.

In Indian Art, there was never any controversy between the three goddesses, for all three were united. I do not say that Paris was wrong to make a choice, or in the choice that he made; but once he did so he separated the Fine Arts of the West for all time.

Henceforth all combinations of the three have been (though ever so well disguised) in effect a competition, and the reason that this is not perceived is that very few people in the West have seen Indian Art in the only place in which it can be seen in its state of triple oneness—namely, in India itself. Still fewer have cared to follow up the Moghul message of beauty to the laws which have made it the simplest and most happily read artistic message in the world.

It was Diogenes who taught that happiness lay in learning to do without things, and himself learned to do without his last possession, which was a drinking bowl. The Moghuls did not drive the wedge so far home as this; but it was no common genius who restricted the marble

(1) The Frieze of the Parathenaic Procession, the slabs of which are partly in the British Museum.

sculpture—and what sculpture!—on the walls of the Tâj to flowers and arabesques only. When one begins to reflect on what those artists *might* have put in, one can grasp the greatness of restraint which had taught the lavish East *what to leave out*—ever the acid test for the artist. There was taste, but also scientific knowledge in these and many similar omissions by the Moghuls. They saw their objective steadily, and saw it whole. They are not to be deflected from their direct march to the goal by all the wealth of beauty that cried aloud to the Moghul artists.

Shâh Jehân and his sculptors saw around them on every side the decorative elephants they understood so well; the oxen with their wonderful dewlaps; the buffaloes with their curving horns. They saw, in troops, the exquisite women of one of the most exquisite periods Art has ever known, in all the panoply of gorgeous robes, Dakka muslins, and kinkob. The Peacock Throne itself was worth (says Tavernier who saw it) over twelve million pounds[1].

Shâh Jehân—Artist and Emperor—was responsive to all this to his finger tips—and yet he passed it over. He plucked a few flowers from the garden and these he gave to the sculptors to transmute into marble, or to serve as models for the inlaid jewels of the shrine. "A hint to the wise is sufficient," and the Indian Artist of today should not repine unduly at the difficulty of finding models! No doubt this is all far removed from the great Greek friezes and façades, those fighting reliefs of Amazons, Centaurs, and demi-gods. But all the same I know of no Art other than Moghul Art that has been able to achieve such sublime decoration by such simplicity of design. The calligraphist for the great inscriptions, the lover of gardens for the floral panels—that was all! And yet nowhere does the grandeur of the conception waver a hair's breadth towards the puerile or the small. This reticence was of course far removed from the barrenness of our modern building in India. The stark white walls which we are erecting on every side are not *reticent*, though they are naked; or if reticence they have, it is that of the man, who we all know so well, who has acquired some reputation for gravity simply because he has nothing to utter!

If only Shâh Jehân could enter the Cowasji Jehangir Hall in Bombay, or the boundless buildings of New Delhi,

(1) See foot note (p. 473) in Constable and Smith's Edition of Bernier.

would not the blank, empty walls rejoice like the desert and blossom like the rose !

No ; the Moghul message has failed to percolate through to New Delhi.

There is a corner in Shâh Jehân's Palace in the old Fort that I would advise the visitor to the new city to seek, after he has done his homage to the originality and independence of our modern builders in India. I would *strongly* advise him to hark back then to the Garden of the King ! The spot I have in mind is at the Eastern end of the Diwân-i-Khâs, or private Hall of Audience. Here, seated on a camp-stool by the edge of the marble bed of the "Stream of Paradise," which flowed sparkling through the centre of these Apartments, with one's back to the exquisite screen beneath which the translucent waters passed on their cooling mission, one has before one the bejewelled columns and arches of the Hall. Beyond and between these glow the coppery tints of the red creeper-clad wall of the little Pearl Mosque, the domes of which can be seen, showing between the distant foliage and the near angle of the Imperial Saloon. Right above, in front of us, the broad eaves of marble bathe the tops of the delicate arches in liquid shadows ; all above and beneath is the play of blazing sunlight over the white and gilt and inlaid surface.

From the angle at which we are viewing the building, the Kiosk at the South East corner of the roof appears in delicious perspective, its interior full of mellow shadows, its dome and finial sparkling like silver and gold against the immensity of the Indian Blue. How well the Moghul understood how to use that colour—the favoured hue which sweetens and dominates our lives—as the all pervading background for the intensely characteristic Moghul pattern ! It is all, you will perceive, a pattern—painted, as it were, against that background of celestial blue ; a picture of beautiful shapes in the first place, and these shapes filled, in their turn, with patterns of equal beauty, in gold and precious stones. It is a picture in two dimensions ; the third disappears as we look at the pieces of this intricate and lovely decoration. Blue, silver, gold, and copper, against the jade greens of the garden, and the whole united by the soft tints of the sharply drawn shadows : that is Shâh Jehân's colour scheme. The secret, though based upon a lowly view-point, is a mighty triumph of scientific artistry. Let us reverently peep into the workings of the Moghul mind.

There is nothing fortuitous in this majestic pattern of architectural design decorated with colours, chaste and rich. Every effect has been foreseen. The designers—the men who could humbly study flowers, and loved to reproduce their leaves and tender petals in jade, jasper, onyx, carnelian, or lapis lazuli—were of course worshippers of Nature, watched her every gesture, and learned to anticipate her every mood. They made this a place apart in which she would walk with them; and so she touches the palace walls with the illuminating points of her fingers, till they shine like burnished gold; she drapes them with the shadows of her veil, till they glimmer like a pale mirage. Everywhere the artists have *expected* Nature's co-operation and nowhere does she disappoint them. For the only way to build in India is to build with India; such was the message, such the secret of Moghul Art.

Once this perception has been fully realised the student, will begin to appreciate the basic qualities of Moghul Painting, for these differ in degree rather than in fundamentals from the Architecture and Sculpture of the period. We shall no longer be much disturbed by the human—one might say frankly, the "worldly" - limitations often attributed to Moghul Painting, and its want of imagination, of which we have heard so much. To lovers of Nature, like the Moghuls, it was natural to find in the features of the men and women around them all the aesthetic satisfaction they desired; and, living in an environment that they had converted into a Dream, they did not desire their artists (as a general rule) to attempt to depict one more ethereal.

Probably they would think that, if the Palace that has just been described and many other beautiful buildings were not sufficient to stimulate the artist's pencil to activity, the unseen mansions of the next world could scarcely suffice to do so; or would it be truer to say that the splendour of the Moghul environment symbolised for them *all* Beauty whether sacred or profane? I can imagine that genial, art-loving patron, Jehângîr, with his Empress Nūr-Jahân, and their superb retinue, saying to the artists, —"Here we are: paint *us*!" Remember that such pageantry was the kind of thing which the painters of that western city "that held the gorgeous East in fee," were always endeavouring to project upon their glowing canvases, whether it was a Veronese painting "The Marriage in Cana of Gallilee," or a Tintoret portraying "Paradise."

The themes—religious or ethereal—of the Venetians were vehicles for the pageant of riotous colour, of fine women, and fine fabrics, of Palladian palaces, of knights be-furred or glittering in armour, of pawing chargers, and black slaves, which their imagination had delighted in; but which, magnificent though Venice was in that age, their eyes could never have seen in full Moghul opulence. When Titian painted Saint Mary Magdalene, he certainly painted no saint; and Paul Veronese, or Palma Vecchio are decidedly more convincing when they paint the all-triumphant Venus in her own alluring image than when they "camouflage" the eternal charmer under the guise of a Christian martyr. One may make a journey to Parma to prostrate oneself before Correggio's Madonnas—but it is not to Correggio's portrayal of the Virgin Mary that we bend but to his triumphant painting of erring humanity. Let us be perfectly frank, and realise how rarely it has been given to the greatest artist to paint with sincerity the superhuman, and then do justice to the honesty of the Moghuls (surrounded in actuality by the splendours which the brilliant Venetians saw only with the eye of imagination) in painting—*themselves*.

But I cannot consider that for this the Moghul message of beauty was wholly "of the Earth, earthy." Does not the symbolism pervading the sensuous Art of the period give such an idea the lie?

The streams of rose water that perfumed Shâh Jehân's palaces were as those other streams that irrigated the Paradise of Milton's sumptuous imagination when he wrote:

> "How from the sapphire font the crisped brooks,
> Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold,
> With mazy error under pendant shades,
> Ran nectar."

And what is there of difference between the Elysian streams of the Grand Moghul and the Puritan poet, except the difference between the tangible, and the word image?

I am of course dealing here with Art, not with ethics, and am merely concerned to show that the limitations of Moghul Art were pretty wide. Moghul Painting, which comprises "the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time," cannot be understood properly if divorced from its association with Architecture and Calligraphy. The eclectic influences which were absorbed by this art need not

trouble us here; and to realise its healthy, wholesome joyousness, its frank delight in all the good gifts of Providence, we must learn to know the Moghuls.

Well! if one would breakfast with Akbar and sup with Shâh Jehân, one will hardly find them in books! "By their works shall ye know them."

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