

AN ARCHITECT IN THE CLASSICAL LANDS

THE CLASSICAL lands hold a glamor for architect, archaeologist and traveler. The archaeologist digs among ruins and seeks to restore ancient buildings upon paper or in models and, again on paper, to repeople them with the individuals of contemporary society. He digs among graves and tombs and deciphers inscriptions and hieroglyphs to determine the status of the art, religion, philosophy, customs and manners of bygone days. But the contemporary architect created the reality and, because of spiritual insight into contemporary life, was able to give it definite expression and interpretation in the material, thus creating and constructing buildings which, even in ruin, remain vital records of the civilization of his time. As the modern architect is at one in sympathy and understanding with his ancient brother, performing for the present what his ancient brother did for the past, he has, or should have, a very fair conception as to how these architectural records of great civilizations came into being.

CLUB PAPERS

Therefore the figure of the architect may well be in the picture in a vision of the classical lands!

The classical lands! Greece and the Isles, far Spain, North Africa, Asia Minor, the Near East; Constantinople of the Christian era as well as the Athens of Pericles. The impulse which flowed in rhythmic vibrations through the life in all these lands in ancient days and which unifies the varied pictures — an impulse which is not totally lost even in the hubbub and hurly-burly of our Western Civilization — this impulse emanated from that section, small in area, immense in realized potentialities, called Greece; and at its center was Athens and at the center of Athens, the spiritual center, was the Acropolis. It is the spirit of Greece which makes lands classical, works classical and forms classical, and which animated the past from which we sprang; a past of which we are still a part.

I shall deal herein, in not too pedantic mood, with the reactions of a present day architect, none other than myself, to sights seen and sounds heard in lands made classic by the persisting vitality of this spirit of Ancient Greece. Within the forms of Greek architecture, as I had known them in lifeless copies, in books, plates, photographs and models, I sensed an animating spirit. I tried to set this spirit free and to take it to myself as guide and counselor. The intrinsic difference between the architectures of Greece

and Egypt became clear to me and I felt sure that, contrary to a widely promulgated theory, Greek forms were not borrowed from Egypt; that Greek architecture no more evolved out of Egyptian architecture than did the Greek evolve from the Egyptian, or the Caucasian from the Negroid. It was partly to satisfy myself as to the validity of my own theory that I took the journey which led me through the classical lands and into the presence not only of the Egyptian temples, but of that wonderful manifestation of the clarity and logic of Greek thought, Hagia Sophia at Constantinople; and on to the well-springs of inspiration in the shadows of the Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis. I use the term Hagia Sophia — the Divine Wisdom — that the mind may not hold a misty image of the material body of a nonexistent female saint but, rather, be bathed in a pure spiritual essence.

It is with some trepidation that I say that the Greeks did thus and so, or thought thus and so; or that I suggest that my individually developed theory embodies the spirit of Ancient Greece. I well know what numerous misshapen and fantastic burdens have been foisted on the Greeks, ancient and modern. If one evolves out of the recesses of nowhere in particular a theory of dynamic symmetry, he foists it upon the innocent Ancient Greeks. If one, after a period of arduous labor, concocts some

CLUB PAPERS

mathematical theory of design which will fit many a two dimensional and now and then a minor three dimensional work of art, he, too, proceeds to foist it upon the Ancient Greeks who, being dead but surely not forgotten, have no material means of defending themselves. They are defended and exonerated in the minds of all sensitive beings who know the difference between art and the application of mathematical formulae; who know the difference between a mathematical series and the rhythmic play of vibrant emotion. I have no quarrel with that rhythmic and admirable science, mathematics, abstract or applied; my quarrel is with those who would make a wrong application and bring art and life down to the terms of an algebraic equation in which there is but the one and inevitable value of X and the one and inevitable value of Y. Life, and art — the spiritual expression and interpretation of life in the material — are replete with variations from the norm; with accidentals which give interest and color, and give room for that play of individuality and personality which would vitiate a problem in geometry. So, again I say that it is with trepidation that I advance my theory as one acted upon by the Ancient Greeks in developing their art. My theory has nothing to do with mathematical formulae nor with geometrical forms, but solely with the spiritual and physical reactions of a man faced with the condi-

tions incident to living, to real living, in any or all localities, in any or all periods of time. Scrutinizing my own reactions and reading myself into the life of the Greeks, as interpreted to me by their philosophy, their literature and drama, their sculpture and architecture, I am constrained to believe that they acted upon a very concrete impulse or theory. I know that they acted and reacted as sensitive and sensible men of their sort would have been likely to act and react to similar stimuli under similar conditions; only perhaps their actions and reactions were finer because of their demonstratedly finer aesthetic perceptions. One who can feel asks no further demonstration of the super-refinement of the Greeks' aesthetic perceptions after he has bowed in reverential awe under the all space encompassing dome of Hagia Sophia or has bathed his spirit in the charm which emanates from the ruined yet living Parthenon which crowns the Athenian Acropolis.

However, in talking of the spiritual aspects of Hagia Sophia and the Parthenon before we have traversed the material paths which lead up to them, we seemingly have plunged into the middle of things. Let us orient ourselves and enter the Mediterranean, that great sea bordering the classical lands, from the Western ocean between the Pillars of Hercules, those far outposts of the antique world. On

our left is Spain, a land which, if not decorated too profusely with the flowers of classical mythology, shows still the fruits of Roman Civilization. Where Rome was, pure water flowed, and was enjoyed. Tarragona, once the center of Roman power in Spain, is rich in Roman remains and in Roman traditions. Spain to the west and north is similarly rich; in the south, Moorish and Arabian life and culture wiped away all trace of Rome except as it may appear in fragments in the Moorish structures.

Rome, with her temples, baths and aqueducts, was not only a good builder and water carrier, she was a good locator and in no instance was she happier than in surveying that rich high valley to the south of the Tell Atlas and in establishing therein the City of Thamugas, now called Timgad, which lies over the mountains a hundred miles or more from the sea, near the far eastern border of Algeria; it is reached from Batna over smooth roads winding higher and higher toward the snow peaks which furnished the life-giving waters to the town. Flocks, herds and droves were grazing in the rich upland pastures. Grain fields lay spread out in the sun as far as the eye could reach, away over southward to where the desert begins or, better, where the progress of the desert northward is halted by a range of low hills. The valley, most austere in its beauty,

is reached through groves of olives and almonds in blossom and forests of cork trees. At the head of this valley lie the bare, comely, and the but recently uncovered bones of long buried Timgad. The guide books will tell you that the city was founded at the order of Trajan by the Commander of the Third Legion, but I need only tell of the beauty which lies there on the fertile plain in appealing ruin for your inner and outer eyes to feast upon. With none of the sophistication of Pompeii the ruins of the theatre, the forum, the arch and the capitol stand in monumental grandeur, while the remains of multitudinous bathing establishments tell to what use some of the water from the nearby mountain springs was diverted.

Two or three days eastward lies Carthage, redolent of Rome. Again aqueducts and cisterns; again remains of theatres and circuses. I was not so much impressed by being in the home town of St. Cyprian and "best Augustine" as by being where Dido had been; and Hannibal, who crossed the Alps with one hundred thousand men and forty elephants. The ratio between men and elephants amuses us moderns. One hundred thousand men is, for us, a restricted ration of cannon-fodder, while the number of elephants seems also small. We remembered that the Ringlings were wont to cross twice yearly a vast con-

continent and two mountain ranges with twelve hundred men and forty elephants. To have been in the Ringling class, Hannibal should have had with him three thousand, three hundred and thirty-three elephants and one-third. Then, as a flippant person might say, his show — of taking Rome — would have been better.

Off to the eastward of old Carthage, and a few points to the north, Italy has booted little Sicily out into the sea nearly making Siamese twins of the Mediterranean. Near the southeastern extremity of this much buffeted island — for Sicily down through the ages has been buffeted not only by warring winds and waves, but by warring tribes and races — lies Syracuse. We are taken ashore in tenders. Near the landing stage lies, bordered by papyrus plants, a pool of limpid water known as the Fountain of Arethusa. Now we know that we are in the truly classical lands rather than in what we may call the pseudo-classical lands which we have been visiting. The Roman engineering and structural forms which we have viewed so far were creative expressions, but not rightfully to be called classical. Classical has to do with form which functions rightfully, truthfully, and beautifully. Forms intrinsically Roman functioned rightly, generally truthfully, always powerfully; and might have been made to function as beauty had the Romans had a

deeply aesthetic nature. The Roman, however, did not see beneath the surface of beauty. He saw beauty in the superficial aspect of the Grecian Temples. That surface beauty he applied to his great engineering works in the expectation of making them beautiful. But he confused issues, combined systems, and created an active restlessness which was the antithesis of Greek poise and self-control. He was sincere, but his nature lacked that poise and sweet constraint which was in the Greek mind. Power and mixed motives showed always through his architecture and robbed it of a truly classical quality. So we may be justified in calling the Roman lands pseudo-classical lands.

Roman influence was felt in Syracuse, as witnessed by the remains of the amphitheatre. Sports were always a star feature on the Roman programme and the amphitheatre setting was omnipresent. But the Roman amphitheatre in Syracuse is overshadowed in the mind of the architect by the Greek theatre; both in the beauty of the latter's plan and environment and in the performance which took place therein. The tragedies of the stage were subjective and intellectual; those of the arena were objective and sensual. But real tragedies were objectified in the great cavern not far from the site of the theatre. This cave is known as the Ear of Dionysius, where even a whisper was conveyed

throughout its vastness to the concealed though listening ears of the tyrant. It was not safe for a prisoner in that cave to whisper other than compliments for his tyrantship. Underground Syracuse is interesting, and not the least of the interest is centered in the Catacombs of San Giovanni which, we are told, far exceed in extent those of Rome. Here in the subterranean chambers Paul, the great Apostle, was said by our guide to have preached. I missed the service by nearly nineteen hundred years. I ran across Paul's tracks again some weeks later up on Mars' Hill in Athens; of which more anon.

In the underground corridors beneath the Capuchin Monastery in Palermo, burials have been the order up to quite recently. Bodies are exposed in grotesque and humorous attitudes; at least they seemed humorous to me. The forms and faces were as remote in my mind from anything that ever lived as are the marbles, bronzes or wax figures in museums. If we could be sure that at some future time we were to be as amusing and interesting to posterity as these chaps are to us, we might well feel that we had not lived altogether in vain; though, perhaps, consciously being a messenger of joy rather than being the unconscious object of mirth lies at the root of satisfaction in living and dying.

The narrow crooked streets of modern Syracuse were teeming with life. Four and five storied build-

ings flanked the lanes. Every window had a balcony and every balcony had from one to five occupants who smiled down upon us as we passed beneath. Perhaps we were interesting to them in life as the remote ancestors of their neighbors in Palermo were to us in death; and perhaps after the same fashion — that is, as something though somewhat resembling humans yet far detached from their own manner of life and thought. And, indeed, if our party of tourists looked to the native Algerians, Tunisians, Syracusians, Turks, Athenians, and so on, as conducted parties of my own countrymen looked to me as I saw them hurried through galleries and churches and museums, when I was a leisurely student of architecture in foreign lands fifty years ago, I can quite understand why these peoples should regard us — as all but the most enlightened of us still regard them — as an altogether inferior race of beings. As for us, the mere fact that we are so assiduously seeking culture would seem to prove that we possess it not.

With all their cultural seeking, and whatever their cultural background, there are tourists who, if they knew that Hagia Sophia existed, did not and, having seen it, still do not know wherein it differs from St. Mark's or the Baths of Caracalla; or wherein the Parthenon differs from the Christian Science Church or the Carnegie Library or the

CLUB PAPERS

bruised or broken Bank of their home town. What is the reaction of such in the presence of the great buildings of the world or of the great facts of history! Does the blank mind remain a blank in spite of the shadows thrown athwart it by realities great or small? I am quite convinced that it does so remain. I am at heart an Ancient Greek; I feel the inevitableness of fate. I feel that the mind which was blank at birth will forever remain blank; the mind which was imbued with imagination at birth will feed and thrive upon the imaginative; the mind which was stolid at birth will remain stolid; the mind which was receptive at birth may develop receptivity; the mind which was creative will continue under normal conditions to be creative. To culture must be added experience. I would not say that in order to get the most out of an object or experience the mind previously must have been saturated by all knowledge concerning it; but through knowledge the mind may be delicately sensitized so that impressions of reality shall register clearly and cleanly. Certain it is that no one can know all that is to be known of an aesthetic experience or of a work of art until he has undergone the one or beheld the other. All the descriptions in the world or all the pictures in all the galleries cannot take the place of reality even to the sensitized mind. It was acting, too, on this assumption that I visited Hagia Sophia

and the Acropolis as well as the Temples of Egypt and other great monuments. These, even in ruinous state, must be seen, must make their own direct appeal if ever I were to know them; for seen even in ruinous or unkempt condition they would help the imagination to paint them as they really were and are.

What is the connection between Hagia Sophia and the classical world other than the mere fact that a Roman Emperor had a church built to embellish his eastern capital. The connection lies deeper than that; it is not Rome carried over into Byzantium; it is the spirit of Ancient Greece touching to life forms intrinsically Roman. It is an actual demonstration of what Rome might have produced had she been able to see beneath the superficial aspect of Greek beauty. It is a demonstration of what Greek aestheticism might have done for the Roman system had Rome desired her Greek artisans to do more than to apply Greek forms decoratively to the surface of Roman structures. Lisle March Phillipps called Hagia Sophia "the Greek criticism of Roman construction." In its structure the arch and vault function perfectly. Thrust counterbalances thrust in living structure rather than being absorbed in immense and inert masses of masonry. Outside the purely engineering structures like the aqueducts, the Roman arch and vault functioned merely as form.

It was as though the form were carved out of solid masses of integral masonry so bulky that structural stresses were absorbed and entirely lost. But in Hagia Sophia vault springs from pier or sustaining vault in a system instinct with life. One within the enclosure is not depressed by dominating mass bearing down upon him; but, rather, the spirit is lifted by soaring surfaces which have encompassed space and which through a subtle art have made vastness more vast — immensity more immense. One might almost say that Hagia Sophia did for structural space what the telescope has done for astronomical space. It is the cool, calm, inevitable logic of the Greek aesthetic mind directed into emotional channels and applied to Roman forms which links Constantinople indissolubly to the classical world.

In miles and hours, as measured by modern means of transportation, Constantinople is not far remote from Athens, Hagia Sophia from the Parthenon. But though short the distance in time and space vast is the difference in forms; though vast the difference in forms single is the spirit which animates. The Oriental cast of Hagia Sophia and of its environment, contrasting with the Occidental cast of the Parthenon and its environment, seems upon superficial glance to cloud the unity of spirit; but penetrating thought will bring the picture into focus, and the basic principle underlying both will be seen

to be the development of character through the interplay of internal and external forces — the interpretation of human character in terms of structural stress and strain. The philosophy which underlies is different in the two, the aims or ideals to be achieved are diverse, but the spiritual medium is the same. Never had it manifested itself on earth, according to the best of available data, until given substance by the Early Greek. It was not to appear again, in the West at least, until the downfall of the Roman Empire; until the collapse of a system which expressed itself in terms of power and luxury, and which sought, as already indicated, to mask its perhaps unconsciously acknowledged aesthetic impotence in the applied, and generally misapplied, forms of Greek Art.

Egypt and Greece had the same structural system — the post and beam — and there the resemblance ended; for the idealism and philosophies of the races were different, and the expression in a sincere and single minded people, such as both were, had to be different — and in consonance with the racial and national life. There is not a particle of structural symbolism in any Egyptian temple; in the Parthenon there is nothing else, except as the sculpture goes to enforce the lesson which the structural symbolism teaches. In Hagia Sophia we have, expressed in structure, the soul of humanity lost in the unity

CLUB PAPERS

of the Infinite. In the Parthenon we have, expressed in structure, the individual developing the highest character possible to man become a god in his calm, measured resistance to a down-pressing fate which never masters him, but which he himself finally masters through the attainment of character made perfect — made perfect not through outside ministrations or external aid, but through indomitable selfhood. In both cases — in Hagia Sophia the merging of the soul in the Infinite, in the Parthenon the battle of the individual, body, mind and spirit, with fate — the expression is in terms of rarest beauty; otherwise it would not be Greek. It was the Greek who formulated his universe in terms of the Good, the True and the Beautiful; indulging in no anti-climax in placing beauty last. Beauty is the soul of Art; goodness and truth are its body — its media.

As I have already indicated I am at heart an Ancient Greek. For that reason I feel inclined to question the validity of the remark interjected by the reporter who supplied us with the text of Paul's sermon on Mars' Hill. That remark, which makes up Verse 21, Chapter XVII of "The Acts" in the New Testament, King James Version, is as follows: "For all the Athenians, and strangers which were there, spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing." Leaving out of

count the development of Greek Art from the archaic forms to the perfection of the Parthenon, that statement does not tally with the facts which called forth Paul's oration. The Greeks were assiduously worshipping Gods which they had been worshipping down through the centuries. These Athenians must have been spending some of their time at that or they would not have so stirred Paul. But Paul's first words, found in verses 22 and 23 of the same Version, show the Oriental's lack of comprehension of the Greek character and idealism — that is if the words have been properly translated and handed on to us, which possibly they have not. As in the case of his preaching in the Catacombs, I was on the ground too late to get the words from Paul's lips and to catch the expression of his face as he uttered them. King James's translators made him say: "Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you." It is with the words quoted, and then only insofar as they misinterpret the Greek character, that I am at present concerned. The new Version substitutes or permits the substitution of the word religious for superstitious; but I hardly believe that Paul used either. Nothing could be too

religious for Paul, while degrees of superstition would not have worried him. What he did perceive in the Greeks, if he perceived anything at all out of the ordinary, was an intense intellectual inquisitiveness. Had he understood the Greeks, and I imagine he understood them better than his reporters and their translators did, he could have said something like this: "Ye men of Athens, I perceive that toward all things you display a deep intellectual curiosity and, I may say, a rare breadth of mind. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription: 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.'" (So the new Version has it — AN UNKNOWN GOD.) Had he really known the Greeks he would not have continued; "Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you," for he would have known that that altar to an unknown God was the shrine at which the stranger within the gates was at liberty, without let or hindrance, to worship his own individual deity who, being unknown to the Athenians, was not worshiped ignorantly or otherwise by them. The setting up of that shrine in Athens was characteristic of the Greeks' broad-minded tolerance and liberalism. What they found of the good, the true, and the beautiful in the religion or philosophy of these strangers they adopted, having filtered it through the alembic of their own thought; but they did not

coerce the stranger or force their ideas upon him. The so-called Christian religion and the Moham-
medan forced their dogmas and doctrines upon non-
conforming sects within, and upon the stranger, by
fire and the sword, by the inquisition and torture.
St. Paul and his followers had little of sweetness and
light to bestow upon those Athenians who "igno-
rantly worshiped! "

Even the colors and the contours of the classical
landscape induce philosophical reveries on art and
life; and, paradoxically enough, the classical land-
scape draws one away from the contemplation of the
abstract and sets up before him the image of the
concrete in such alluring fashion that his eye through
sheer and sensuous delight must needs dwell upon it.
The golden rose tints of the columns of the Parthe-
non, as one stands within that ruined edifice, draw
the mind's eye from the life and thought of a far
off day and focus the eye of flesh on the purple hills
beyond and on the distant silver sea. The marbles
of the entablature are projected in almost translucent
mass against the limpid cerulean of a sky which is
flecked with wisps of cloud truly translucent, edged
here with fleeting gold and there with purple and
again with shimmering silver as if to bring into rare
harmony the elements — Sea and Earth and Sky.
These are given meaning and worth by the presence
of the works of man. The eternal rhythms of the

Universe are meaningless and incomprehensible to man until fixed in forms of Art through the workings of the human hand and brain impelled by those eternal and vibrant rhythms; until man through Art has encompassed space as in Hagia Sophia and fixed the limits of spiritual expansion as in the Parthenon.

As the sky we saw beyond and above the columns on the Acropolis was flecked with clouds, so the sea was flecked with islands, misty and unreal in the distance, solidifying without loss of mystery upon approach. These islands of the Aegean and also of the Western seas have been the subject of song and of romance ever since song issued from human lips or romance entered the human breast; and both happened very long ago. All this glamor of romance casts a spell over the traveler from the West and he yearns to transplant this beauty of landscape and building to his home land. But there the skies are not the same and the purple shadows do not so blend into the misty amber of the atmosphere. The importation of Egyptian or Oriental forms or spirit into our own land with all its Occidental background is inexcusable; the introduction of Greek forms is, in the light of our past, understandable; the introduction of the Greek spirit would be beneficial, perhaps would be our salvation in Art and help us to solve that inferiority complex which, whether we

are conscious of it or not, we, as shown by our works, permit to govern and control us. As a man does so is he — not as a man says. If we are a superior race we will show it by freedom of thought, of life, of expression; freedom not from the good in others, from that truth in others which is applicable to us, but freedom from conventions which have grown up around an unintelligent use of forms, an unintelligent application of formulae.

A visit to the classical lands will be an inspiration to one who knows the past and can view not only the past but the present in the light of that knowledge; to one (and there may well be such) whose spiritual insight will permit or compel him to see beneath the surface into the heart of things; to comprehend why a Greek was a Greek, why an Egyptian was an Egyptian, why a Roman was a Roman; and why and how he, himself, can be himself. I am loath to believe that there are not many to whom such understanding has come in the course of every day cultural experience. I am forced to believe that there are many among those who have made a tour of the classical lands, including even some who have made intensive study of classical architecture, to whom such understanding neither will nor can come. But to him who is possessed of a native understanding and a native instinct for beauty a tour of the Classical Lands,

CLUB PAPERS

culminating in a visit to Athens and the Acropolis, will enlarge that understanding and will enhance the native capacity for the perception and apprehension of beauty both in its physical and its spiritual aspects.