History

The following general sketch of the history of sculpture is confined mainly to that of the middle ages and modem times. The philosophy and aesthetics of the subject—the relation of sculpture to the other arts and the nature of its appeal to the emotions—are treated in the article Fine Arts. What is known as “ classical ” sculpture is dealt with under Greek Art and Roman ART; see also, for other allied aspects, China, *Art;* Japan, *Art;* Egypt, *Art;* Byzantine Art; and articles on Metal-work, Ivory, Wood-carving, &c.: the article ARCHITECTURE and allied articles (e.g. Capital); and the articles on the several individual artists.

In the 4th century A.D., under the rule of Constantine’s successors, the plastic arts in the Roman world reached the lowest point of degradation to which they ever fell. Coarse in workmanship, intensely feeble in design, and utterly without expression or life, the pagan sculpture of that time is merely a dull and ignorant imitation of the work of previous centuries. The old faith was dead, and the art which had sprung from it died with it. In the same century a large amount of sculpture was produced by Christian workmen, which, though it reached no very high standard of merit, was at least far superior to the pagan work. Although it shows no increase of technical skill or knowledge of the human form, yet the mere fact that it was inspired and its subjects supplied by a real living faith was quite sufficient to give it a vigour and a dramatic force, which raise it aesthetic­ally far above the expiring efforts of paganism. Apart from ivories (see Ivory), a number of large marble sarcophagi are the chief existing specimens of this early Christian sculpture. In general design they are close copies of pagan tombs, and are richly decorated outside with reliefs. The subjects of these are usually scenes from the Old and New Testaments. From the former those subjects were selected which were supposed to have some typical reference to the life of Christ: the Meeting of Abraham and Melchisedec, the Sacrifice of Isaac, Daniel among the Lions, Jonah and the Whale, are those which most frequently occur. Among the New Testament scenes no repre­sentations occur of Christ’s sufferings;@@1 the subjects chosen illustrate his power and beneficence: the Sermon on the Mount, the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, and many of his miracles are frequently repeated. The Vatican and Lateran museums are rich in examples of this sort. One of the finest in the former collection was taken from the crypt of the old basilica of St Peter; it contained the body of a certain Junius Bassus, and dates from the year 359.@@2 Many other similar sarcophagi were made in the provinces of Rome, especially Gaul; and fine specimens exist in the museums of Arles, Marseilles and Aix;

those found in Britain are of very inferior workmanship.

Sculpture in the round, with its suggestion of idol worship which was offensive to the Christian spirit, was practically non-existent during this and the succeeding centuries, although there are a few notable exceptions, like the large bronze statue of St Peter@@3 in the nave of St Peter’s in Rome, which is probably of 5th-century workmanship and has much of the repose, dignity and force of antique sculpture.

Italian plastic art in the 5th century continued to create in the spirit of the 4th century, especially reliefs in ivory (to a certain extent imitations of the later consular diptychs), which were used to decorate episcopal thrones or the bindings of MSS. of the Gospels. The so-called chair of St Peter, still preserved (though hidden from sight) in his great basilica, is the finest example of the former class; of less purely classical style, dating from about 550, is the ivory throne of Bishop Maximianus in Ravenna cathedral. Another very remarkable work of the

5th century is the series of small panel reliefs on the doors of S. Sabina on the Aventine Hill at Rome. There are scenes from Bible history carved in wood, and in them much of the old classic style survives.@@4

In the 6th century, under the Byzantine influence of Justinian, a new class of decorative sculpture was produced, especially at Ravenna. Subject reliefs do not often occur, but large slabs of marble, forming screens, altars, pulpits and the like, were ornamented in a very skilful and original way with low reliefs of graceful vine-plants, with peacocks and other birds drinking out of chalices, all treated in a very able and highly decorative manner. Byzantium, however, in the main, became the birth­place and seat of all the medieval arts soon after the transference thither of the headquarters of the empire (see Byzantine Art). It was natural that love of splendour and sumptuousness in the Eastern capital found expression in colour and richness of material rather than in monumental impressiveness. The school of sculpture which arose at Byzantium in the 5th or 6th century was therefore essentially decorative, and not monu­mental; and the skill of the sculptors was most successfully applied to work in metals and ivory, and the carving of foliage on capitals and bands of ornament, possessed of the very highest decorative power and executed with unrivalled spirit and vigour. The early Byzantine treatment of the acanthus or thistle, as seen in the capitals of S. Sophia at Constantinople, the Golden Gate at Jerusalem, and many other buildings in the East, has never since been surpassed in any purely decorative sculpture; and it is interesting to note how it grew out of the dull and lifeless ornamentation which covers the degraded Corinthian capital used so largely in Roman buildings of the time of Constantine and his sons.

Till about the 12th century, and in some places much later, the art of Byzantium dominated that of the whole Christian world in a very remarkable way. The spread of this art was to a great extent due to the iconoclast riots which not only led to the destruction of images and works of art, but threatened the very life of the artists and craftsmen, who thereupon sought refuge in foreign countries, especially at the court of Charlemagne, and for several centuries determined the course of European art. From Russia to Ireland and from Norway to Spain any given work of art in one of the countries of Europe might almost equally well have been designed in any other. Few or no local characteristics or peculiarities can be detected, except of course in the methods of execution, and even these were wonderfully similar everywhere. The dogmatic unity of the Catholic Church and its great monastic system, with constant interchange of monkish craftsmen between one country and another, were the chief causes of this widespread monotony of style. An additional reason was the unrivalled technical skill of the early Byzantines, which made their city widely resorted to by the artist-craftsmen of all Europe—the great school for learning any branch of the arts.

The extensive use of the precious metals for the chief works of plastic art in this early period is one of the reasons why so few examples still remain—their great intrinsic value naturally causing their destruction. One of the most important existing examples, dating from the 8th century, is a series of colossal wall reliefs executed in hard stucco in the church of Cividale (Friuli) not far from Trieste. These represent rows of female saints bearing jewelled crosses, crowns and wreaths, and closely resembling in costume, attitude and arrangement the gift-bearing mosaic figures of Theodora and her ladies in S. Vitale at Ravenna. It is a striking instance of the almost petrified state of Byzantine art that so close a similarity should be possible between works executed at an interval of fully two hundred years. Some very interesting small plaques of ivory in the library of St Gall show a still later survival of early forms. The central relief is a figure of Christ in Majesty, closely resembling those in the colossal apse mosaic of S. Apollinare in Classe and other churches

@@@1 A partial exception to this rule is the scene of Christ before Pilate, which sometimes occurs.

@@@2 See Dionysius, *Sac. Vat. Bas. Cryp.,* and Bunsen, *Besch. d. Stadt Rom* (1840).

@@@3 There is no ground for the popular impression that this is an antique statue of Jupiter transformed into that of St Peter by the addition of the keys.

@@@4 Various dates have been assigned to these interesting reliefs by different archaeologists, but the costumes of the figures are strong evidence that they are not later than the 5th century.