

"Influences of Earlier Italian Architecture"

First of a Series of Rice Lectures by William Ward Watkin

On Friday afternoon at 4:30 o'clock in the lecture amphitheater of the physics laboratories of the Rice Institute William Ward Watkin, instructor in architecture in the institute, read a lecture on "Influences of the Earlier Italian Architecture," which was the first of a series of three Friday lectures on "Some Phases of Historic Architecture Expressed in the Buildings of the Institute." The fifth of the series of six Monday lectures on "Studies in Modern Drama" will be given on Monday, March 20, by Stockton Axson, professor of English literature in the institute, when he will speak on "The Irish Playwrights." The several courses of lectures are open to the public.

There is given below an abstract of Mr. Watkin's lecture.

The more recent development of American collegiate institutions has been along lines suggested by the English universities of Oxford and Cambridge and carried

out in the forms of medieval architecture as expressed by the architecture of the Gothic periods in England.

Previous to that time American institutions of learning had been more or less floundering in a mixture of various unrelated historic styles, frequently interspersed with meaningless modern buildings possessing neither artistic quality nor the influence of architectural history.

When the problem came to us of designing a suitable plan for the ultimate development of the Rice Institute, we looked upon the problem as of the utmost interest. In practically all of our previous history in the building of colleges we had the incumbering circumstances of numerous old buildings of miscellaneous styles, problems of compromise and of attempts to harmonize those elements which were possible of harmonizing and of eliminating those impossible elements for which there was no architectural hope whatever, there being consequent limiting circumstances of dimension and of position incurred by the none too happy placing of buildings in the absence of a definite preconceived plan of university growth.

All of these conditions were absent from the problem of the Rice Institute. There was available practically 300 acres of almost absolutely level land. The nature of the boundaries of the land were interesting in that they formed an irregular polygon, inviting a major axis extending practically east and west and minor axis to the north and south. There lay near the western end of the tract a small water course, with lower surrounding contours, which necessarily eliminated this portion of the tract from the placing of buildings of major importance. Otherwise the tract was uniformly suitable to the development of its entire area.

Let us consider first the lines of reasoning along which we attempted the solution of the architectural development of the institute.

Houston is located south of the center of the temperate zone. Its climatic conditions, influenced by the Gulf of Mexico, are almost semitropical. It is a climate, therefore, in which the conditions of South European architecture are much more suitable than those of the architecture of Northern Europe.

If you will recall briefly the development of historic architecture, you will remember that its first traces lie entirely in countries which are south of the center of the north temperate zone, and, with the exception of the architecture of Chaldaea and Persia, the traces of early historic architecture lie in those countries bordering on the Mediterranean.

In these countries there were developed two distinct and separate systems of architectural construction: the one characterized first by the buildings of Egypt and later to a more refined and beautiful extent by the buildings of Greece; the other a type of construction prevailing throughout the peninsula of Italy.

The later historic styles of architecture continued in the later civilizations of Northern and Western Europe, the greatest manifestation of which was embraced in the Gothic period and comprised the work in Northern France and in England. This latter style was the style in which the English colleges were developed and the style which has had the greatest influence on American collegiate building. It was a style entirely suited to the northern portions of the United States, where gray rather than sunny skies predominate, where steep roofs may shed the snows of winter, whose small clustered openings give adequate ventilation, and where small courts and closely placed buildings invite the charming con-

tinuance of that beautiful architecture of England in the Gothic period.

When we first considered the solution of the problem of the Rice Institute we felt instinctively that the architecture of Northern Europe was not suited to use under the climatic conditions prevailing in Houston. We felt that we must turn to those earlier sources of historic architecture existing along the shores of the Mediterranean.

Of these architectures, the architecture of Greece represented the highest refinement of one type; that is, the type of post and beam construction. It was a style with exquisite refinement—the very refinement of which required, to be truthfully expressed, buildings of marble and consequently of very great cost. In it, undoubtedly, the Greek had developed all of the rich possibilities. It lay therefore rather in the field of archaeology than in the field of constructive design. As such it appealed to us less than did the possibilities of the Italian peninsula.

It is of this architecture of the Italian peninsula that I wish to speak to you today.

As we formulated our thoughts in the design of the institute buildings, we took this position, that we would design them in a period of architectural style which in our opinion had not reached its complete artistic development, but had been interrupted in that development by political and social conditions prevailing in Italy and by the combination of the northern or Gothic influence into Italy. We therefore assumed a position of this character, that the buildings of the institute should be developed in an imaginative style, one which assumed that the round arch architecture native to the Italian peninsula had been allowed under favorable circumstances to reach its ultimate development, assuming for a working basis the most attractive individual expression in this architecture, as found in isolated buildings of the Romanesque period throughout Italy and Dalmatia.

In view of those who are students of the history of architecture, the thought may come that this was a rather presumptive decision, in view of the wonderful development of round arched architecture in the style of the Eastern empire commonly known as the Byzantine style. But if you will analyze our thought a little more in detail, you will see that we felt that in the Byzantine style there existed, as there certainly did, a very powerful influence of Oriental art.

The Romanesque style in its various expressions throughout Italy and Dalmatia possessed these desirable qualities to begin with:

It was an arched form of construction—a style in which the round arch predominated; an architecture therefore full of interest.

It was a southern style—most suitable and most adapted to southern climates.

It was a style that was full of color.

It was a style that was possessed of a quality of economy, which gave to its better examples both modesty and simplicity.

It was the historic style in which brick had been used in a masterly way.

It was a style in which broad open courts prevailed—in which sheltered cloisters gave protected circulation in the heat of noonday.

And above all, from the architect's point of view, it was a style in which few of the moderns were working and in which there was invited an opportunity of individual expression and individual design which was fascinating.

It was upon these premises therefore that we began and with them in mind felt that our solution lay in the careful study of many of the isolated works of the Romanesque in Italy and Dalmatia and of the associated works in other countries along the Mediterranean in which there existed expressions in Romanesque architecture as yet uninfluenced by Gothic building.