

## GREEK OR ROMAN?

BY ERNST JONSON

**I**T is a curious fact that while the aestheticians extoll Greek architecture, our architects follow the Roman tradition. Students of Classical Antiquity, who are not architects, generally persuade themselves that in the Greek temple architectural form reached its highest development, and that wherever Roman architects departed from the Greek precedent, there degeneration occurred. It is not difficult to understand how this predilection arises. The ordinary merits of the Greek art, especially in the fields of sculpture, drawing, poetry, and drama, together with the high achievements of Hellenic philosophy, naturally induce a tendency to surround all the products of the Greek mind with a halo of perfectness. The sculptors of Rome never attained a degree of mastery equal to that of the Greeks. Nor has any school of painters drawn the human figure, or animal forms either, with such force, and with such fullness of life, as the craftsmen who painted the Greek vases. Why, then, do modern architects, with few exceptions, follow the Roman tradition rather than the Greek? Why does the practical worker, who has not come under the spell of the highest achievements of the Greek mind, invariably choose the Roman tradition in preference to the Greek? And why have the best schools of architecture been those based, directly or indirectly, on the art of Rome? Evidently there is something in the character of Roman architecture that makes it more congenial to the modern mind than the architecture of Greece.

During the centuries which separate Greek and Roman architecture, a great progressive change occurred in the Hellenic world, a change most fundamental in character and involving far-reaching consequences; for it was a change in man's attitude toward the universe.

To the Greek mind, destiny was final. From its rule there

was no way of escape. The common, every-day destiny of man might indeed be foiled through the spell of magic, but beyond this destiny—and beyond the reach of the sacred word—was another, a higher destiny whose spell neither man nor god could break.

Then a new light dawned on the Western world. Perhaps it came out of the East, perhaps not. Man discovered in himself a hitherto unsuspected power—the power to transcend all destiny. There was born in man a sense of dominion, through which he might rise superior to even the highest destiny. Spiritual religion superceded magical religion in the Western world. In the East this change had occurred many centuries earlier. The new attitude toward the universe found its chief expressions in Christianity, Neo-Platonism, and a host of other religions, the dominant note of which was man's dominion over destiny.

If man, through an act of supreme self-assertion, can renounce the world for but an instant, and thus wrench himself free from the grip of destiny, and be one with the Creator, human life assumes an aspect radically different from that which it had, when destiny seemed final. We who feel, most of us in a rather inarticulate and even confused way, that whenever we choose, we may break through these surface phenomena which we call the world, and sink ourselves into the depths of the underlying essence, and come in contact with the source from which flows the external world, to rise again into the world invested with greater fullness of life, and added dominion over nature,—we can enter into the Greek attitude of mind only through a supreme effort of imagination. We find in the universe an element of tenderness foreign to the Greek, and we have even acquired some of that sense of mastery achieved long ago by the sages of the East.

In this change of attitude seems to lie the reason why Greek art, especially its drama, architecture and decoration, seems barbaric when compared with the more human art of Rome. There is, in the extraordinary refinements of Greek form, a coldness, and a sense of the inmedicableness of destiny, which repel us. The sometimes cruder work of the Romans gives us a wholly different feeling, a feeling of human power, which, in the Renaissance adaption of Roman form, rises to the pitch of positive cosmic tenderness. This difference is felt in every detail: in the profiles, in the ornament, and in the proportions.

Besides this intrinsic difference between the two styles, there is also a difference of association. Our culture, the bulk of it, is a continuation of the culture of Rome. In a general sense, this is true of the entire body of European culture, except our philosophical and mathematical traditions, but it is more immediately true of that phase of our culture which resulted from the revival of Classical learning in the thirteenth century, and the artistic revival which followed it, and which we now know as the Renaissance. For seven centuries we have lived under this predominatingly Roman tradition, with a mental and social equipment predominatingly Roman, so that the general cast of our minds has become Roman. And for three centuries the Roman tradition dominated all the arts, and these were centuries of high achievements in architecture. In this heritage we find another ground for the preeminent congeniality of Roman form, a congeniality so obvious that it makes, by comparison, the specifically more Christian art of the Middle Ages seem foreign to us.