

Belgium IV.

Contrary to the case of my former reports - on Scandinavia, Baltic Provinces of Germany and Holland, I need offer no explanations why an architectural student should visit Belgium. For although the country is said to be a "mere province of France" in building arts, when we consider that most of her monuments date from the Gothic period or earlier years of the Renaissance such an intimation should tend rather to increase than diminish the interest in Belgian architecture. The only question that may arise is, in what particular class of buildings did the Belgians excel, and where are these buildings to be found. This question is easily answered, for the Town Halls of Belgium are famous, and scarcely in a second place, the many Belfrags. As a rule we may assent to the statement that Belgium has followed France when we examine the Gothic buildings, for we find but few differences in plan or detail, but the Renaissance work I think should be placed with that developed in the Lowlands, which it resembles in many respects.

My tour began in ~~Antwerp~~ and extended through Malines, Ghent, Bruges, Ypres, Courtrai, Tournai, Brussels, Louvain and Liege, which included nearly all the buildings of note, although by some strange oversight I neglected to visit Audenaerde and its beautiful town hall until it was too late to retrace my steps.

We meet with but little Romanesque architecture in Belgium, why it is a little hard to say, for only a few miles further east, when we reach Aix-la-Chapelle and Cologne the most striking architecture of the country is in that style. Of the few examples that we meet, by far the most important and interesting is the beautiful Cathedral of Notre Dame at Tournai. Here the nave and transepts are Romanesque, the latter built on Cologne models, while the lofty choir - 107 feet - is in Gothic. The west facade, originally Romanesque, was changed somewhat by the addition of a pointed arcade along the lower part which serves as a porch, but the galle of the nave flanked by round conical roofed turrets and embellished with an open arcade along the ramp still retains the Romanesque feeling but with a refinement that calls to mind the churches of northern Italy. Over the crossing rise five towers, a huge square tower over the vault covered by an octagonal roof and supported at its four corners by tall square towers ending in square spires. This feature

If the building was interesting on account of its similarity to the design of Potter and Robertson for the New York Cathedral, there ~~can~~ ^{can} be no doubt that the grouping of so many towers at the central point of the building has an imposing effect, but it is a question whether, if the great central tower, present in this building, were left out, the result would not be unsatisfactory and the corner spires appear too far apart. In this case however the effect is very good and the imposing group, whether seen closing the vista of a narrow street or from the other side of the river, crowning the old city, is the most striking feature of the place. The interior is marred somewhat by the lack of unity, brought about by the abrupt change from the severe Romanesque of the nave and transepts, to the light and rich choir built in pure Gothic. The nave and transepts show four horizontal divisions: the great arches of the nave-aisle; a gallery story lighted at the back by round-arch windows; the triforium - two round arches to each bay. - and finally a tall clerestory. The transepts show semicircular terminations and the excellent proportioning of the parts with the noble domical termination aid in making this the most beautiful part of the building. I met with a few other Romanesque buildings - for example the churches of St. Barthelémy, St. Jacques and St. Paul at Liege, the church of St. ~~Jacques~~ ^{Willebas} at Ghent - with a noble facade - and the Staple House, headquarters for a Guild, of the same city, but none of them were of the importance or interest of the Tournai Cathedral.

When we come to consider the Gothic period, we find in it the golden era of Belgian architecture. Not only at that time were the most important of the churches and cathedrals erected and the characteristic city belfries, but it is in this style that we find all or nearly all of those beautiful town halls that are the boast of the country. None of all places in Europe, the idea that Gothic is a style suited only to ecclesiastical buildings has been completely refuted, and we see in the municipal halls of Louvain and Brussels buildings as beautiful and as well suited to their purpose as the cath-

edrales of France are to theirs. For the old Belgian builders erected town halls in the style of the cathedrals, and did not attempt to build a cathedral and adapt it to town hall uses. The result has been that both church and halls are independent not rivals, each beautiful in its own way, consistently planned and suited to its purpose.

The peculiarities of the Gothic churches of Belgium are as I have stated to be traced mostly to the work of a similar class in France, but we can without difficulty recognize features belonging to the Rhemish Romanesques. Such are for example the great central tower over the crossing as seen in St Jacques of Ghent, St Pierre of Louvain and the Cathedral of Antwerp, and the tendency to the use of round towers. Perhaps not much stress can be laid on these resemblances, however, since they are, in a way at least, the common heritage from all Romanesque work. A peculiarity that is more native is the appearance of the single west tower as at St Jean, Malines, the Cathedral at Bruges; the Cathedral of St Martin, Ypres; St Martin, Comtraai; St Jacques, Louvain; and several churches at Liege. But the double west tower is not entirely wanting for we meet them in St Jacques at Ghent; in the Cathedral of St Gudule, Brussels; and in the most important ecclesiastical building in the Kingdom, the Cathedral at Antwerp. In plan these churches follow the usual nave-aisle system, with radiating apsidal chapels in most cases although there are exceptions to this latter feature in the churches of Ypres, the Cathedral at Brussels - which shows only a lady chapel, - St Paul's and St Martin's at Liege. The Cathedral at Antwerp is peculiar - and in this I believe the only example in Europe - in having a nave and six aisles, but from appearances, I have not looked up the history of the matter, there were originally four aisles, the inner subdivided into two more at a later period. The aisles in almost all cases are one half the width and height of the nave, and often show chapels built between the buttresses. The apse is in most cases ~~rectangular~~, that is made up of five sides made up of five or seven sides of a dodecagon, although examples are not wanting in which it is five sides of an octagon or even in one case that I noted, St Jacques, Antwerp, of four sides of a hexagon, a peculiar arrangement that brings a pier in the axis, and gives a disagreeable shape to the exterior. In all cases, where there are apsidal

chapels, the aisle is carried around the choir as an ambulatory. As in most of the Gothic churches of the Netherlands and Germany, the choir screens, rood screen, altars and other furnishings ~~are~~ in the Renaissance of the 17th and 18th centuries, more notable for gorgeous gilding & colored marbles than for good taste. A noticeable feature in Belgian churches is the rich tracery used not only in the windows but as a screen before the triforium and as decoration to blank walls. This in part makes up for the lack of sculptured ornament, although the latter is not entirely wanting.

Not less imposing than the cathedrals in (comparative) size or decoration are the municipal Halls - I use that term to cover Hotels de Ville, Guild Halls and Warehouses - . And I might add that they are even more interesting to the student owing to their novelty and excellent design. Of the Town Halls, three stand preeminent and are close rivals for the first rank: Brussels, Audernade and Louvain. For my own part I am inclined to favor Brussels, perhaps it is partly on account of its very favorable location on a square surrounded by the most charming old mediæval Guild Houses. But in itself the well proportioned stories, rich ornamentation, supporting corner turrets, and great culminating central tower, a beautiful structure in itself go to make up a satisfactory and artistic design. Louvain is of a similar design but with much richer ornamentation and without the central tower (in Brussels it rises from the side of the building, which faces the square). Here the ends are treated with gables, richly sculptured, flanked and crowned by three great octagonal, open-work turrets each. Audernade, which I unfortunately did not see, resembles that in general design, is provided with a central tower and is rich in sculptured work. In most respects it seems to be quite the equal of Louvain if not of any in Belgium. Of less interest than the foregoing but rich and imposing buildings are the older parts of the Town Hall at Ghent - which rivals any in size and richness of its sculptured work; that at Bruges, smaller but of excellent design, and that at Contrain, all in fully developed Gothic. Preeminent among the so-called Halls or warehouses stands the famous Cloth Hall at Ypres, in some respects - to me at least - the most interesting building in Belgium. The facade, which faces the prin-

cipal square of the town, is 460 feet long, rendered the more
 impressive by the simple design - two stories of pointed arches
 running the entire length without any essential interruption. At
 the corners rise tall octagon turrets surmounted by spires, while over
 the centre rises the great Belfry, one of the largest in Belgium.
 The building encloses two courts, and is made up, on the ground
 floor, of great halls formerly, as the name implies, used by the
 merchants of Flanders for the storage of the wares for which the
 country was famous. Taken as an historical example of this
 class of buildings, for its instructive design or merely as a
 bit of colour - for I never saw such a display of lovely gables
 as are seen in its old slate roof - it is a building that
 should by no means be missed by a visitor to the Lowlands.
 Finally the Gothic Belfries, that rise in nearly every town of impor-
 tance. These are preeminently a Belgian institution important not
 only in the history of their architecture, but of their political life as well.
 Bells are an institution that plays an important part in the daily
 life of the people - as every visitor will remark who has spent
 any time in the country - and formerly it was the great city bell that
 sounded the alarm when their liberties were threatened. Through
 this the Belfries came to be the most important buildings and the
 centre of the city life. Those still standing are of two classes; those
 standing alone and those rising from some municipal building.
 Of the former we might mention the Belfry of Ghent or Tournai
 of the latter that at Brussels which rises from the Hotel de Ville;
 Courtrai the least interesting of all; Ypres, as before mentioned con-
 nected with the cloth hall; or the famous Belfry of Bruges
 which forms the crowning feature of the Halles or cloth warehouse.
 The designs of these structures are various; usually they rest on
 a square base, which changes to an octagon surrounded by turrets
 and terminating in a spire. The tower at Brussels is the most
 graceful rising as an open work spire to a great height; that
 at Ypres the most massive and taken as a whole perhaps the
 best of all; but the famous Belfry of Bruges although picturesque
 and pleasing in itself, so completely crushes the building over which
 it rises that the effect is anything but satisfactory from the
 square on which it stands.

An account of the Gothic of Belgium would not be complete without
 some reference to the private houses of the time, but as they are so
 completely eclipsed by the charming houses and compositions that
 followed no more than a passing notice is necessary.

The principal Renaissance buildings of Belgium are to be found in the Town Halls of Antwerp, the newer parts of that at Ghent and in such lesser importance as the Maison de l'Ancien Evêque at Bruges, the Salin d'Or and Maison du Diable at Malines and the fine Guild houses at Brussels and Antwerp. The Town Halls do not show anything strikingly original, for they are of the usual supposed order design, for the most part well proportioned and dignified, but somewhat cold and lacking in interest when placed so close to the rich and picturesque Gothic work of the same cities. But the Guild Houses cannot be said to lack in either design or interest. Nearly all are narrow and high - in this respect following their Gothic predecessors, and often are merely Gothic houses with Renaissance detail. Notable are the Halls of the Archers, the Coopers, Tailors and Carpenters at Antwerp; the houses on the Drai au Sel at Malines - charming in detail, both wood and stone, and above all the houses that surround the Grande Place at Brussels, where the Town Hall occupies one side, - the Guild of the Butchers, Hotel des Bourgeois, Hall of the Archers, Hall of the Skippers, of the Carpenters, Bakers and Tailors. All these are in excellent preservation, and there has been a general movement of late to restore to them their original colors and gilding - a somewhat barbarous destruction of the ancient appearance they formerly had, but nevertheless a restoration of the original design and effect when in their prime. Of the smaller private houses I can only say a word, and that is that they make up perhaps the spice of a trip through the low countries. More especially in Malines, Bruges, Ghent Louvain and above all in Ypres we continually run across the most charming details and picturesque designs that are a surprise and delight.

I should like to say more about the modern work of the country. The tendency is naturally all French, especially where the most important work is being done, in "little Paris", - Brussels in other words. Of late a number of important buildings have been erected, notably the Exchange, a rich building in French Renaissance, overloaded perhaps with decoration and useless pediments, triangular and round, and the famous Palais de Justice which occupies the most conspicuous location in the city. On first sight the visitor is completely overawed by the tremendous size and noble pyramidal effect - the designer is said to have been guided by study of the Indian Temples - but on closer acquaintance and the student cannot fail to be impressed by the coarse and in many places unmitigated details that destroy much of its dignity.

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