AUGUSTE CHOISY,
Inspecteur-Général honoraire des Ponts et Chaussées, Paris.
ROYAL GOLD MEDALLIST 1904.
THE ROYAL GOLD MEDAL.


ADDRESS BY MR. ASTON WEBB; R.A., PRESIDENT.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—

I t is, I think, a happy custom of the Royal Institute of British Architects to wind up its session by the most interesting event of its year, viz. the presentation of His Majesty's Gold Medal; and when (as to-night) the recipient attends in person to receive it the interest and distinction of the occasion is further increased.

This Medal, as you all know, is given by His Majesty, who graciously allows the Institute to recommend a recipient for His Majesty’s approval, and it has become a custom to select one year an English architect, the next a foreign architect, and the third a literary man whose work has made for the advancement of architecture. This year, accordingly, we considered the claims of literary men for this high honour, with the result that the Council and the general body of members of the Institute unanimously decided to recommend to His Majesty M. Auguste Choisy as the recipient of the Medal; the royal approval was graciously granted, and M. Choisy is here this evening to receive the Medal at our hands. There are no such things as politics recognised in this Institute, but I may perhaps be allowed to say that it is an event of happy augury that our choice should have fallen upon a Frenchman at this particular moment when our relations with that great and illustrious country are so friendly, and also that we have been able to come as unanimously to an agreement on the selection of a Royal Gold Medallist as France and England have recently been able to do on matters connected with the highest State interests of these two great countries.

We are further honoured this evening by the presence of a distinguished representative from the French Embassy in London, the Comte de Manneville, placing as it were the official seal of approval of that country on our choice; and I cannot as your President let this occasion pass without expressing on your behalf, and my own, our unbounded admiration for the great band of artists in that country and the works they have produced in all materials for centuries. In architecture we recognise that they are still working on traditional lines, but at the same time in the modern spirit, and the close alliance of architecture, painting, and sculpture, as shown in their buildings, fills us with sincere delight and the highest respect and esteem.

It is, as you know, by no means the first time that we have recognised the genius of a Frenchman. This Medal was awarded, in 1855, to M. Hittorff; 1861, M. Lesueur; 1864, M. Viollet-le-Duc; 1867, M. Texier; 1876, M. Duc; 1879, the Marquis de Vogüé; 1886, M. Charles Garnier; 1892, M. César Daly; but none, I think, has done more towards elucidating the
modes of construction employed by the ancients than our guest of to-night, M. Auguste Choisy.

I could wish that the honourable duty of laying before you some short account of the work of M. Choisy were in more capable hands than mine, for I can make no claim to archaeological learning which would justify me in presuming to review his work. It lies before you on this table to-night—seven volumes, small in bulk, gigantic in labour, thought, and result. The names of these works have made M. Choisy famous wherever interest in such subjects is taken. They are L’Art de bâtir chez les Romains, 1873; Le Sahara, 1881; L’Art de bâtir chez les Byzantins, 1882; Etudes Épigraphiques sur l’Architecture Grecque, 1883; Histoire de l’Architecture, 1898, and L’Art de bâtir chez les Egyptiens, 1903, together with other smaller works. The first of these great works therefore was L’Art de bâtir chez les Romains, published in 1873; the last, L’Art de bâtir chez les Egyptiens—which, as one may say, has put a crown to M. Choisy’s life work—was published so recently as last year.

In the Art of Building among the Romans, M. Choisy (and I am indebted to Professor Aitchison and to our Secretary, Mr. Locke, for much of this information) first introduced us to the Roman search for an economical method of building vaults and domes. Alberti had already discovered how walls were built by the Romans, but he went no further, and the great marvels of the building of vaults and domes were still undiscovered. He has shown us, amongst many other things, how experience enabled the Romans to abolish the open net-work which kept the green centering in place, and how to adapt a single brick for the thickness of these great vaults of eighty feet span by inserting pieces of a second course to secure the corners at the junction, and by using the rubble or concrete filling in horizontal courses, the means probably adopted to equalise the pressure in the dome of Hadrian’s Pantheon; all this is clearly shown in M. Choisy’s illustrations. In his Art of Building among the Byzantines he shows how the Romans, with diminished means, were enabled to build vaults without centering.

M. Choisy’s great work, the History of Architecture, is a masterly exposition of the treatment of a subject from a single point of view. The result of fifteen years’ strenuous labour, it is the history especially of architectural construction from the earliest times to the present. The innumerable line illustrations are nearly all the work of his own hands, drawn for the most part in isometric perspective in the inimitable manner of the French draughtsman.

In his Art of Building among the Egyptians he has developed the theories set forth in the Egyptian section of his history, and concludes his researches into the methods employed for centering their great arches and in lifting their great monoliths.

His work on Greek Inscriptions contains a series of studies in Greek inscriptions in the Arsenal of the Piraeus, and the walls of Athens, and the Erechtheum. A marble slab was discovered with a complete specification for the building of the Arsenal.

A noticeable point in M. Choisy’s work is the clearness and conciseness of his style; for M. Choisy puts in three lines what many would have taken three pages to describe.

From this necessarily brief and incomplete account of M. Choisy’s works, you will see that they are not merely historical accounts and records of buildings, but are the result of entirely original research and thought; and are, I take it, intended also to make the reader think out things for himself. They should be especially interesting to us English architects who are about to consider the question of architectural education, especially in connection with construction as the basis of design. For it is on account of these invaluable scientific researches into the history of architectural construction contained in these volumes that we are here to present M. Choisy with the Royal Gold Medal to-night.
Perhaps M. Choisy will permit me to give a few personal details of his career. Born at Vitry-le-François, 7th February 1841, he early derived his taste for architecture from his father, an architect; and he was from the first struck by the relation between the scientific study of construction and the art of architecture. He entered the École Polytechnique and studied under Leonce Reynaud. In 1863 he joined the Government Department of the Ponts et Chaussées, where he was for many years Engineer-in-chief, but has now retired with the title of Inspecteur-Général honoraire des Ponts et Chaussées. After the publication of his first book, The Art of Building among the Romans, his conclusions were felt to be so startling that, through the medium of Reynaud and Viollet-le-Duc, he was sent on an architectural mission to apply the same system of investigation to the architecture of the Byzantine Empire.

For many years M. Choisy was a professor at the École des Ponts et Chaussées and at the École Polytechnique. In 1870, M. Choisy fought for his country in the terrible war of that time. In 1889 he was elected an honorary member of this Institute.

M. Choisy, allow me, on behalf of my colleagues of this Institute, myself to congratulate you on the production of these epoch-making works and the honours you have received, and at the same time, as President of the Royal Institute of British Architects, to present to you this Gold Medal conferred by His Most Gracious Majesty the King on the unanimous recommendation of your British confrères.

I trust that you may long be spared to enjoy the honours which have been the result of your loving and unsparking labours in the exposition of the great art of architectural construction.

M. CHOISY'S REPLY.

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES, AND GENTLEMEN,—

I SHOULD be happy to express to you my gratitude in the language of your great nation, if I felt myself equal to it; but, unfortunately, I do not feel competent; so I shall ask you to allow me to give it in French.

La récompense que j'ai l'honneur de recevoir de vos mains, Monsieur le Président, dépasse toutes mes ambitions, et les témoignages de haute sympathie dont vous avez bien voulu l'accompagner me la rendent plus précieuse encore. L'annonce d'une telle distinction m'a semblé un rêve. Il m'a fallu relire le vote si bienveillant de l'Institut Royal, relire la sanction suprême dont Sa Majesté a daigné le revêtir; il m'a fallu vaincre le profond sentiment de mon insuffisance, pour arriver à me convaincre que je pouvais être le titulaire de la Royal Gold Medal, pour penser que mon nom allait être inscrit à ce Livre d'or où figurent tant d'hommes illustres, la gloire de l'art britannique, et cette élite d'artistes auxquels l'Institut Royal tient une main fraternelle, sans égard aux nationalités et aux distances.

C'est un admirable trait de cette noble et libérale institution de savoir ainsi s'élever au-dessus des distinctions de frontières ou d'écoles, et grouper en une grande famille ceux que rapproche la communauté des aspirations et le désir d'agrandir le patrimoine de l'art.

En ma qualité de Français je suis doublément fier de l'honneur que je reçois: j'y vois un nouveau et éclatant témoignage des frémissantes sympathies qui règnent entre votre nation et la mienne; j'y vois l'expression touchante des sentiments que la population française a chaleureusement manifestées à Sa Majesté Édouard VII dans une visite à jamais mémorable: ce sont les sentiments mêmes dont témoigne par sa présence le digne délégué du Gouvernement français, que je suis heureux de saluer dans cette enceinte.

Mes chers collègues, si je ne craignais d'abuser de votre trop indulgente attention, j'aurais
plaisir à réveiller ici quelques souvenirs qui comptent parmi mes meilleurs, parce qu'ils font remonter bien haut les relations entre l'Institut Royal et celui qui lui exprime en ce moment son attachement sans réserve et sa profonde gratitude.

Avant tout, le souvenir de l'illustre et si regrette Penrose : J'ouai, devant sa tombe même, rappeler l'émotion respectueuse que je ressentis en apercevant, grâce à des fouilles postérieures à ses travaux, les courbes de la plateforme de ce Parthénon qui est l'impréssible monument de sa gloire. Mon premier mémoire fut un hommage à votre immortel architecte ; et aujourd'hui la récompense dont l'Institut Royal m'honore grandit encore à mes yeux quand je songe qu'un tel homme a comptée parmi ses titres.

Si l'Institut Royal fut le promoteur de mes recherches, un de ses membres dont l'amitié m'est chère en fut un des premiers confidents : M. Phené Spiers a bien voulu, dans votre Journal même, consacrer une allusion charmante à ces séances entretiens d' Athènes, où j'ai tant appris et puisé tant d'encouragement.

Un souvenir encore : Presque enfant, feuilletant les livres de la bibliothèque de mon père, j'eus la bonne fortune de rencontrer le Mémoire du Rév. Robert Willis sur les voûtes du moyen âge. Ce fut une révélation : C'est ainsi, me dis-je, que les formes doivent être analysées ; c'est ainsi que le dessin doit exprimer la structure. Et, lorsque j'essayai de résumer les procédés romains, j'eus sans cesse présent comme un modèle de méthode ce mémoire sans précédent, qui marque à la fois les débuts et le dernier terme de la critique architecturale.

Ainsi, dès mes premiers essais, c'est le mouvement imprimé par l'Institut Royal que j'ai suivi : l'impulsion était votre ; c'est à l'Institut Royal que je dois l'hommage des travaux dont il fut l'inspirateur.

Maintenant, Messieurs, l'honneur dont vous me combles m'engage, et je tiens à reconnaître devant vous les obligations qu'il m'impose : tant que mes forces ne me trahiront point, j'aurai à cœur de répondre à un tel encouragement. Je voudrais éclaircir quelques points de cette théorie de l'art antique dont Vitruve est l'interprète ; et, ici encore, pour mener à bien l'entreprise, je compte sur les lumières d'un maître pour qui Vitruve est l'objet d'un culte et dont les œuvres sont un reflet de l'hellénisme, M. le professeur Aitchison, mon éminent et vénéré ami.

Pardonnez-moi, Messieurs et chers collègues, d'avoir parlé si longuement de moi-même ; mais j'aurais cru manquer à la reconnaissance en négligeant de rappeler ce que je dois aux influences britanniques : aux membres de l'Institut Royal qui m'ont ouvert la voie, à ceux qui veulent bien m'y soutenir et m'y guider.

La distinction que je viens de recevoir couronne avec un éclat inespéré la plus longue partie de ma carrière ; dans le chemin qui me reste à parcourir je crains moins les défaillances : il me suffira de lever les yeux sur la Royal Gold Medal pour me rappeler jusqu'à la fin qu'il me reste de sérieux devoirs à remplir, de nouveaux efforts à tenter si je veux parvenir à en rendre moins indigne.

Monsieur le Président et mes chers confrères, encore une fois et de tout cœur, merci.

Professor Aitchison, R.A.—Our accomplished President has asked me to say a few words about my friend M. Choisy. In the year 1873, M. Choisy's Art of Building among the Romans was published. I then belonged to a small Architects' Club called "The Foreign Architectural Book Society," best known by its initials, and called F.A.B.S. I read through this treatise of M. Choisy and said to myself, Here is the Columbus of Roman building, who, after examining all the Roman work within his reach, has formulated a clear exposition of the methods of Roman construction, and, to some
extent, their causes; and I determined to make the acquaintance of the author. And so I found our friend M. Chas. Lucas knew him, I invited him to see me, and found him one of the most polite of French gentlemen, though politeness is a common gift of our friends the French. What was so extraordinary was the case M. Choisy had taken to carefully observe all the facts and to deduce all the results from the causes observed. The spans of the great Roman vaults are generally eighty feet, and it was necessary to make a frame-work of rigid material before the centering, which was green, shrunk and twisted; and this was at first done by a layer of Roman bricks stiffened by upright bricks, making coffers, and filling them with concrete or small rubble; but after some experience it was found that one brick laid flat with pieces of brick over the angles was enough, and that the concrete could then be safely laid in horizontal courses from both sides, and the thickness of the concrete when finished was from five to six feet. If rapidly done there was an outward pressure, which was resisted by flying buttresses of brick at the Basilica of Maxentius. There was still the enormous dome of the Pantheon, 148 feet in diameter, to consider—at least as old as the time of Hadrian; for M. Cheidi, found, from the foundation to the summit of the dome, that the bricks had the stamp of Hadrian upon them. Apollodorus of Damascus, the Architect of Trajan, was probably the architect, and owing to settlements in the green work discharging arches had to be introduced. I need only point out that the Roman methods had not been found out by the perceiving intellect of Alberti, and we know from the debates about the dome at Florence, as given us by Vasari, that it was commonly believed that the dome of the Pantheon had been built on a mound of earth, in which pieces of money had been left, so that the earth might be carried away without expense. There are no devices still used in primitive countries that have escaped M. Choisy's vigilant eye. He has published, besides his professional works, a charming book on the Sahara, the African desert, and on Asia Minor. I think we ought not to forego our thanks to our accomplished President for enrolling M. Choisy at last among that brilliant list of the distinguished architects and archaeologists of all the civilized countries of the world; and I tender my warmest congratulation to M. Choisy on the honour of receiving H.M. the King's Gold Medal, which he has so well merited, and hope he may live long to enjoy it, and to give us and the world still further proofs of his industry and penetration.

Mr. R. PHÈBES SMITH —I did not know I should be called upon to speak this evening; but it is a very great pleasure to me to know that a conférence whom I met, I am afraid, nearly forty years ago, and who at that early period had already shown extraordinary proofs of his genius, should come forward to receive the Gold Medal at the hands of the Institute. I remember distinctly the first time I met M. Choisy. It was intensely hot weather, in August, in the Theatre of Bacchus, and it was very dry work. The Theatre had only lately been discovered. For years all the archaeologists had pondered over its possible position, and it was not, I think, till a year and a half or two years before I was there that some excavator happened to light on the pavement. I recollect this more especially because when I brought my drawings over here they were exhibited downstairs, and one of our older members, Professor Donaldson, saw for the first time that which he had dreamt of in his youth—that is to say, my drawings were the first drawings of the Theatre of Bacchus, for which he had long sought the traces. It was in this Theatre in 1866 that I first met M. Choisy. I was measuring the plan, and he was making researches; we discussed various theories, and I found in my note-books when I looked at them years afterwards an entry to the effect that I met—I did not know who he was then—a French gentleman on the site who seemed to have the most wonderful theories on every possible subject. On the following day I met M. Choisy again, and then I found he was a member of the French School at Athens, and we then had long talks about the acropolis. I know M. Choisy's works very well, and value them greatly. L'Art de Bâtir chez les Romains I have studied with the greatest possible interest. It was followed by the Byzantine work, but I think the one which filled me with the most delight was his clear and exact reading of the specification of the Arsenal at the Piraeus. One of the subjects of which we know very little, unfortunately, is the method by which the Greeks constructed, their timber roofs. We have only the sinkings which the joists or beams ran into to guide us as to the size of these timbers, and as regards their construction we know scarcely anything. But that specification was discovered in 1882, when M. Choisy translated.
it, and made a conjectural restoration. It is open to anyone to compare M. Choisy's translation, or translate it himself if he likes, and then see his interpretation of it in the admirable restoration he has made. It is plain to everyone; no one has contested it, and it was accepted at once as the only true interpretation. His studies on the roofs of the Brechthäume are also of extreme value and interest, and for all these subjects we are greatly indebted to M. Choisy. But he has, in addition to that, published a work which it takes a very long time to follow and to understand, because of the enormous range which it covers. His History of Architecture, ranging from the earliest times down to the century before last, is a most extraordinary work. In these two modest volumes he gives a history which might have taken thirty or forty volumes. It is a most astounding work, and I sincerely hope it will be translated into English; it will form a standard of exceptional value, because at every moment it sets the student reasoning for himself in order to follow his conclusions. That is one of the chief values in education; we want men to reason for themselves and not simply to accept theories and formulae.

Sir L. Alma-Tadema, R.A.—Mr. President, Ladies, and Gentlemen: It is difficult to avoid looking back at the experience of one's life. Already, three years ago, I could say that I had exhibited my work to the public for half a century, and such a long period of observation leads one sometimes to think matters over, formulating opinions. Thus I have often thought of that great dispute between theory and practice, which was so acute in the years of my beginning, but was still more acute in the time of Goethe, who used to say: 'Grün ist der Lebensbaum, grau ist alle Theorie.' It was then believed that practice was practice, and that theory was profession. (Laughter.) Well, I am happy to say that those days are past, and that theory without practice, and practice without theory, are no longer considered possible; indeed, we see in this country that technical education is gaining ground, and that no theoretical principle can be kept up if it is not supported by practical experience. This state of things has been reached little by little; men have come forward, such as Quatremer de Quincy in the beginning of last century, who, starting from a basis of practical experience, explained the chryselephantine sculpture, and reconstructed Phidias's Jupiter Olympus, opening the field to a better understanding between practice and theory. Then came Viollet-le-Duc; and then, finally, our friend here, who never proposed a theory that had not sound practice at the back of it; and that is the reason why all the theories he puts forward are reliable ones, because they are practical. I have profited much by his books, and especially his L'Art de Bâti chez les Egyptiens, and I find it simply delightful, because it is so clear and so thorough that at every word I said to myself: 'Well, why on earth didn't you think of it yourself?' (Laughter.) Do not you know that is the best proof of the value of a book? Well, Mr. President, Ladies, and Gentlemen, I cannot say anything more than that I am grateful to M. Choisy for all that he has done for us, and that I hope there is still another volume in store. I am greedy! (Applause.)