

XX.—*Letter from WILLIAM DYCE, Esq. S. A. to JAMES SKENE, Esq. accompanying Specimens of the Ancient Painting on the Walls of the Baths of Titus at Rome.*

[Read, January 25. 1830.]

SIR,

*Edinburgh, January 7. 1830.*

THE accompanying Specimens of Ancient Colours from the Baths of Titus at Rome will not, I hope, be an unacceptable addition to the Museum of the Antiquarian Society. I am sorry that the fragments, from their smallness, do not exhibit the character of ancient painting so fully as some I have had an opportunity of seeing in this country; but, as there is nothing of the kind already in the Museum, they may perhaps be thought worthy of a place until some better specimens be procured. Such as they are, however, they are sufficiently interesting; and may serve, with the help of Vitruvius, to give us a pretty correct notion of the manner in which the ancient Roman fresco painting was executed. For, between the age of Augustus (in which Vitruvius lived) and that of Titus, in whose days the Baths were built, from whence the specimens are taken, there does not seem to have been any great change, either in the style of the decorations of their houses, or in the manner of their execution. This might be made to appear by a comparison of the remains of either age with those of the other, or by tracing the complete correspondence which is found to exist between the rules laid down by Vitruvius and the practice followed by the artists of the days of Titus. Vitruvius, like a true Antiquarian, complains bitterly of the vitiated taste which prevailed among his countrymen at the period when he wrote: ‘They love,’ says he, ‘to represent things which neither exist, nor can be, nor have been—*quae nec sunt, nec fieri possunt, nec fuerunt*. Painting,’ he says, ‘represents things which either exist or may exist. But in these days subjects are painted whose prototypes are no where to be observed in nature. For, instead of columns, we find reeds substituted; instead of pediments, the stalks, leaves, and tendrils of plants; candelabra are made to support little temples, from the roofs of which branches spring out bearing absurd figures. And, again, we find other stalks bearing figures, some with human heads, others with heads of beasts. These new fashions have so much prevailed, that, for want of competent judges, true art is little esteemed. How is it possible for a candelabrum to support a house, or for figures to grow on stalks?’ &c. &c.

I am sorry the fragments I have procured are too small to exhibit as a specimen of this grotesque work alluded to and condemned by Vitruvius. Any one, however, who has seen the Baths of Titus, can testify that the style of their decoration is precisely the same as that mentioned by Vitruvius—or that, if any difference exists, it is that the very fault pointed out by him is carried, if possible, to a greater excess. That the mode of execu-

tion was the same as that laid down by Vitruvius, will immediately appear if we compare his words with the appearances in the fragments. He says, that after the beams of a chamber are fixed, Greek reeds, previously bruised or pressed flat, are to be tied to them ; after which, various layers or coats of lime are to be laid on ;—the first composed of lime and very coarse sand ; the second of lime and fine sand ; the third of lime and fine sand mixed with marble dust. The wall is then to be finished by three separate coatings of stucco and marble dust ; on the last of which, while wet, the colours mixed with size are to be laid. After which, if any colour needs to be kept from the action of the air, it is to be covered with a mixture of Punic wax and oil. All these operations the specimens exhibit sufficiently well. On the largest one, and some of the others, impressions of the flattened reeds may be seen, as well as the various coatings of lime and stucco, increasing in fineness towards the coloured surface. The various colours also clearly appear to have been put on before the stucco had been dry, from their having sunk into it in some places more than one-tenth of an inch.

Hoping that you will favour me by taking the trouble of presenting the specimens to the Society as soon as you may find it convenient, I remain, Sir,

Your most obedient servant,

WILLIAM DYCE.