

Architecture & Building

[Note—The Articles appearing on pages 767 to 775 are published by arrangement with the New Zealand Institute of Architects.]

“What is Art, and who are Artists?”

—No. III.

By S. HURST SEAGER, F.R.I.B.A.

It has been said that literature cannot fully convey the power of the other arts, and this is equally true of them all; each art has a power peculiar to it which cannot be conveyed by any other means than the art itself, thus neither descriptions nor definitions can carry us very far; for unless we know something of the thing defined it carries no meaning with it. It

man. Illustrations will assist us in realizing its far reaching truth.

Let us first see the process of passing natural supports through the alembic of man. There can be no better mode of realizing this than by means of a diagram (Fig. 1) which I copied some years ago from a book by Mr. Garbett, to whom I am indebted for an interpretation of it. We want a column, that is, a long body intended for transmitting pressure to or from a flat surface, and the expression we want to give is that of fitness to receive this pressure. Some nations have copied columns from trees, and some from men, but neither is imitating nature; on



Fig. 1—The Supports of Nature Compared with the Doric Column.

is only by long study and observation that the definitions have been framed, and it is only by long study that the full meaning of them can be grasped. The more comprehensive the definition, the greater the knowledge necessary to feel its full force. Still it is of great advantage to have a comprehensive definition before us to guide us in our observations and lead us more directly to good results.

Therefore let us remember one other which from its brevity and comprehensiveness is of great value. “Art is Nature passed through the alembic of man.” It is hard to grasp the depth of the meaning in this definition, nor is it much easier on learning that “alembic” is an old alchemist’s term for crucible—Art is Nature passed through the “crucible” of



Fig. 2—The Doric Column as seen in the Parthenon at Athens.

the contrary, they are most unnatural, since Nature has not made either a tree or a man to serve the purpose of a column. Are there then no columns in nature? Certainly there are. The limbs of all animals are columns, and the surface against which they press is the ground. The human arm uplifted to support a weight is also a column, and when pushing horizontally it is a horizontal column or strut. Now in comparing these natural columns, to discover what they have in common, we find:—*First*, that their transverse section has roundness, therefore we make the artificial column round. *Second*, we observe that they vary in length from four to ten times their greatest diameter, but that in animals remarkable for power and majesty they