

MONUMENT TO MOSAIC: THE DECORATIVE FRIEZE OF THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL

Alison Inglis

Many may or may not have noticed a decorative frieze running along the outside of the Albert Hall at South Kensington. It is high on the wall, so close to the roof as not to unnecessarily inconvenience the passer-by by obliging him to look at it.

(Marks, *Pen and Pencil Sketches* 1: 209)

With these words the Victorian painter, Henry Stacy Marks, rather ruefully dismissed the decorative frieze of the Royal Albert Hall – a work that he himself had helped to create in the late 1860s. Yet this extraordinary example of monumental art – which extends around the entire circumference of the building, covering an area of 5,200 square feet – deserves more than the cursory description that appears in most twentieth-century accounts of the Hall's architectural history¹ (fig. 1). Described by another contemporary as “perhaps the most interesting feature of an impressive exterior” (R[edgrave] 11), the frieze is significant historically as one of the first major examples of mosaic decoration to be designed for the exterior of a London building. Moreover, the artists responsible for the figurative program included no less than seven of the period's leading painters and sculptors. In fact, this article will argue that the entire scheme needs to be reconsidered in terms of the competitive design climate of the 1860s, when it represented a grandiose vote of confidence in the newly discovered “South Kensington” medium of earthenware mosaic.² In addition, it will be proposed that a deliberate comparison was set up between the Renaissance-inspired ceramic frieze of Henry Cole's Albert Hall and the Gothic Revival glass mosaic of George Gilbert Scott's Albert Memorial, which was being installed at the same time on the opposite side of the road (fig. 2). Before turning to the frieze itself, however, it is necessary to give a brief background to the establishment of the Royal Albert Hall, or to give it the official name bestowed on the building by Queen Victoria when she laid the foundation stone in 1867, the “Royal Albert Hall of Arts and Sciences.”

¹ See Sheppard 189-90. Most twentieth-century accounts of the mosaic frieze simply paraphrase the contemporary descriptions. See Clark 44-46; Physick and Darby 196-97; Thackrah 11, 168-71. The best recent analysis of the frieze appears in Physick “Albertopolis” (327-29).

² The term “South Kensington” was applied to both the newly established “Museums precinct” and the design ethos of Henry Cole and his circle. For this circle's commitment to “art-manufactures,” and its promotion of a red brick and terracotta Neo-Renaissance style in architecture, see Sheppard 76-77, 85, 89-90, 102-03; Durant 121; Conforti 25-33.

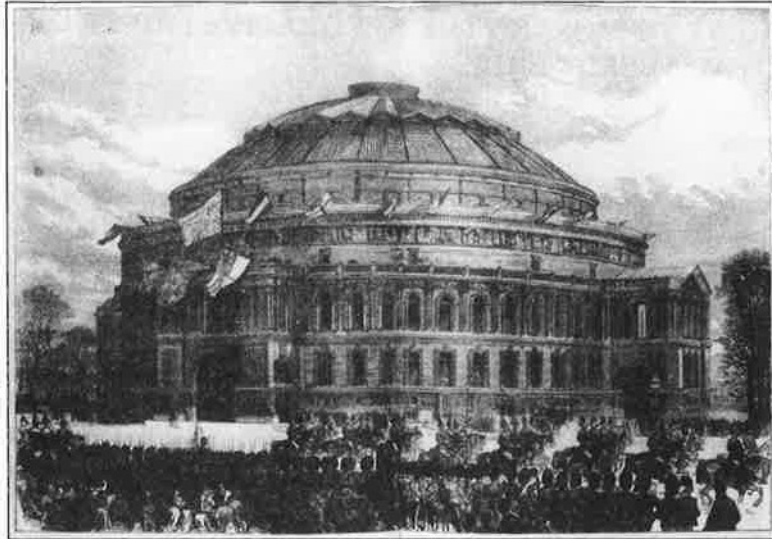


Fig. 1: "Opening of the Royal Albert Hall of Arts and Sciences by the Queen," *Illustrated London News*, 8 Apr. 1871, 344-45 (Baillieu Library, U of Melbourne)



Fig. 2: "Opening of the Royal Albert Hall: Arrival of the Queen," *Illustrated London News*, 8 Apr. 1871, 344-45 (Baillieu Library, U of Melbourne)

History of the Royal Albert Hall

The actual idea for a large public hall had originally come from the Prince Consort in the early 1850s. Prince Albert suggested that a Hall – preferably a “music hall” (Sheppard 177) – should form part of the general plan to transform the South Kensington Estate into an educational complex of museums, academies and other cultural institutions; an ambitious project that was sometimes referred to as “Albertopolis.” But it is highly unlikely that the Prince’s vision would ever have come to fruition without the determined intervention of Henry Cole, the redoubtable head of both the government’s Department of Science and Art and the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum). Cole had enthusiastically taken up the idea of a Hall, and swiftly set about planning a rather more grandiose building than had previously been envisaged. In 1858, he requested the architect of the South Kensington Museum, Captain Francis Fowke, to draw up some designs for a huge hall measuring 600 feet by 300 feet and capable of accommodating up to thirty thousand people (Sheppard 177). Cole hoped that this ambitious scheme might form a part of the proposed plans for the 1862 Exhibition – but the Prince was unimpressed and the Commissioners of the Estate rejected the project as too expensive (Physick, “Albertopolis” 318, 321).

Prince Albert’s sudden death in 1861 offered a fresh opportunity to establish a Hall at South Kensington. The committee set up to advise the Queen on a suitable memorial initially considered a joint project, involving a personal monument and a “Hall of Science” as the most fitting tribute to the Prince’s memory.³ Unfortunately, by 1863 it had become clear that the public donations would barely cover the cost of Sir George Gilbert Scott’s Gothic memorial, and plans for an accompanying “Albert Hall” were dropped.

Cole, undaunted by his plan’s rejection, immediately asked Fowke to produce some smaller, more practical designs. These plans also incorporated a new circular format, which reflected the impact of Cole’s encounter with various ancient amphitheatres during a recent trip to the continent (Physick, “Albertopolis” 324). By 1865, Fowke had executed a cardboard model of the Hall’s interior that was taken by Cole to Osborne, where it received the approval of the Prince of Wales (Sheppard 180).

The only remaining obstacle was the absence of any money to fund the venture – to which Cole responded with the somewhat controversial proposal that the Hall’s cost could be defrayed by selling the interior seating. Prospectuses were circulated, inviting the public to subscribe to individual seats or boxes. Money began to come in, and on 6 July 1865, the Prince of Wales officially presided over the launch of the “Albert Hall” – twelve years after Prince Albert’s original suggestion (Sheppard 182).

Up until this time, the actual appearance of the Hall had not been considered in particular detail. Apart from his model of the interior, Fowke’s designs had barely progressed beyond the stage of “first rough ideas” (Scott 83). Thus, his sudden death

³ The “Hall” was also described as a “Central Hall”; see R[edgrave] 19; Stamp 101, 107.

in December 1865 meant that Fowke's successor, Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Scott (another Royal Engineer like Fowke), was entrusted with the task of completing the exterior. Only three conditions were stipulated – firstly, that he retain the amphitheatre format. Secondly, that the facade should be of red brick and terracotta decoration, in a style which Cole claimed was “based upon that usually seen in North Italian buildings of the fifteenth century” (Cole 1: 333), and was to become synonymous with the new Museums precinct.⁴ (Indeed this combination of Renaissance style and modern materials was the South Kensington circle's solution to the mid-century architectural “battle of the styles,” and was hailed by some critics as “neither Grecian nor Gothic but thoroughly nineteenth century” [Crook 107]). Thirdly, and crucially, that the whole enterprise should not exceed £175,000.⁵

The Mosaic Frieze

Scott began working in 1866, and was quick to alter Fowke's sketchy designs for the exterior by adding a balcony and removing the ground floor arcade. More importantly, in early 1868, he replaced Fowke's “decorative panels of geometric design” with a great continuous frieze (Scott 92).⁶ Interestingly, Cole had initially opposed Scott's proposal to redesign the terracotta and brick exterior to include a “sculptured” frieze (in other words, one modelled in relief),⁷ but he was converted to the idea once he realised the frieze provided “a fine opportunity for a mosaic picture of figures” (Scott 92).

Cole's enthusiasm for this concept stemmed from his genuine commitment to mosaic as a modern form of architectural decoration. In his role as Director of the South Kensington Museum, he had strongly encouraged the use of so-called “revived” materials⁸ – such as ceramic tiles, stained glass, terracotta, enamelled metalwork and mosaic – in the decoration of the building, regarding them as visually evocative, as well as cheaper and more resistant to London's polluted atmosphere. Mosaic was high on his list of personal favourites as its smooth hard surface was extremely long-wearing and easy to clean. Cole and his “South Kensington circle”⁹ also recognised

⁴ In the late 1850s, Cole had travelled through Italy, where he absorbed “architectural and decorative suggestions [. . .] [for] the development of buildings etc at Kensington” (Cole 1: 331-33).

⁵ Physick and Darby 196. For a discussion of the relative contributions of Fowke and Scott to the design of the Albert Hall's exterior, see Sheppard 183-89.

⁶ See the two scale models constructed by Scott in 1867 and 1868. Physick and Darby 203-04; also Sheppard 189. Reuben Townroe is believed responsible for the design of the frieze on the models.

⁷ Henry Cole's diary for 28 June 1866 stated: “Scott having a new design of Hall to accommodate the frieze, ag[ains]t which I protested” (qtd in Physick, “Albertopolis” 444 n.54).

⁸ The term “revived” refers to various forms of decorative art rediscovered during the Victorian period, particular by architects of the Gothic Revival. For the interest in medieval decorative arts, initially inspired by Pugin, see C. Wainwright, “‘Not a style but a Principle,’ Pugin and his influence” and A. Wedgwood, “The Medieval Court.” Atterbury and Wainwright 12-19; 237-45.

⁹ This circle of Cole's friends and supporters included architects, designers and theorists such as Owen Jones, Matthew Digby Wyatt, Richard Redgrave, Austen Henry Layard. For details, see Bonython.

the potential economic and social benefits of recent innovations in the mosaic industry that had permitted the prefabrication of works off-site.¹⁰ This “indirect” mosaic process, it was argued, would not only facilitate “production and increase[d] durability in the work” (Redgrave 13) but also could “create a new branch of industry which may be worked in any locality, and probably by women as well as men” (Layard 906).

From 1862 Cole had put his theory into practice by instigating a number of mosaic schemes to embellish various sections of the South Kensington Museum. Indeed, so serious was his institution’s commitment to the medium that a special class of mosaicists, made up of female students from the Art School, was established in the building to assist in the execution of pictorial mosaics.¹¹ Understandably, contemporary commentators were unanimous in their acknowledgement of Cole’s unremitting efforts to “secure the adoption of mosaic decoration” (“Mosaics in South Kensington” 315). The *Builder* even claimed that “there is little effort made in England out[side] of South Kensington to further the use of this style of decoration” (“Modes of Mural Decoration” 979).

It must also be admitted that Cole’s enthusiasm for a mosaic frieze on the Albert Hall was pragmatic – being prompted by the fact that the project could use the same materials and processes of manufacture currently being employed on the facade of the South Kensington Museum’s new Lecture Theatre. In view of the Albert Hall’s strict budget and time limitations, there were clear benefits to be gained from tailoring the Hall’s decorative scheme to fit the existing expertise of the museum’s designers and art schools. The “twin” project at the Museum was the new Lecture Theatre Building that, from 1864 to 1872, was being decorated with lavish terracotta dressings and a series of figurative mosaics.¹² The mosaic panels on the facade represented the first public declaration of the Museum’s confidence in the suitability of the medium for exterior, as opposed to interior, decoration. Up until this time, the durability of mosaic work in the open air had been questioned, even by Cole himself.¹³ Indeed, he had been one of a group of commentators who had been particularly skeptical about the exposed glass mosaic panels planned for the canopy of George Scott’s Albert Memorial. Cole’s concerns regarding the Albert Memorial mosaics were based partly on his observation that “the only exposed mosaic he had discovered north of the Alps [. . .] had seriously deteriorated” (Darby and Smith 56); and partly on the fact that another recent scheme of Venetian mosaic at the Royal Mausoleum at Frogmore had appeared to change colour following prolonged contact with the open air.¹⁴

¹⁰ The indirect mosaic process had been pioneered by the Venetian firm of Salviati. See W.H.R. 377; Sladen 287-89.

¹¹ Cole I: 334; also Physick 62-63. The Mosaic Class was established in 1862. Members of the mosaic class included three of Cole’s own daughters.

¹² For the history of the decoration of the Lecture Theatre Building’s facade, see Physick 114-20.

¹³ As Cole’s friend, M. D. Wyatt observed in 1862: “our climate is such as must always, I fear, render but little durable any extensive application of mosaic in small tesserae as external decorations: to a great extent, therefore, architects will have to look upon it as an internal embellishment” (219).

¹⁴ For the Albert Memorial’s mosaics, and initial concerns about their durability, see Sladen 289.

Cole's fears regarding exterior mosaics, however, were limited to the glass variety, and he swiftly adopted a different position following the successful production of a form of terracotta (or earthenware) mosaic in the early 1860s that was thought to be "less liable to oxidation than glass or enamel" ("Mosaics" 202).¹⁵ Always an advocate of innovations in British art-manufactures, Cole authorised the use of this material for the ornamentation of the Lecture Theatre Building exterior, chiefly on the pediment, the lunettes and the panels above the windows.¹⁶ The ensuing economical execution of the Lecture Theatre's pediment by the Museum's mosaic class clearly convinced Cole and Scott of the suitability of this mode of decoration for the much more ambitious scheme at the Royal Albert Hall.¹⁷ In addition, Cole's choice of the locally-produced ceramic tesserae would provide a telling contrast with George Gilbert Scott's selection of the Venetian firm of Salviati for the glass mosaic on the Albert Memorial's decorative tympana.¹⁸

Early in 1868, Henry Cole began to discuss the mosaic project with contemporary artists who had experience in large-scale design: his diary for 31 January 1868 records: "saw [Albert] Moore[,] artist who wanted £2,000 to do the frieze of the Hall and wished to do it all himself" (qtd Asleson 71). Moore had recently designed the frieze above the proscenium of the Queen's Theatre, Longacre, but his price was too high. Three months later, Cole approached the eminent academician, Daniel Maclise, who was one of the artists responsible for the major decorative scheme in the Houses of Parliament. Maclise took down the details of the frieze, but recommended Frederic Leighton, another of the Royal Academy's leading lights, who had just completed a fresco in the parish church at Lyndhurst and was also involved in the decoration of the South Kensington Museum.¹⁹

Eventually, neither artist was commissioned, but Cole was clearly determined to obtain the services of a "fine artist," rather than simply employ the decorative designers of the South Kensington Museum (who had been responsible for the

¹⁵ The option of ceramic mosaic had been available to George Gilbert Scott for the Albert Memorial, but he preferred the security of traditional materials, stating: "Venice is the very land and home of mosaic-making and it seems hopeless as yet to equal the work of those who have been brought up among [...] this noble art" (Scott qtd in Sladen 289).

¹⁶ See Physick 117-19. Only terracotta mosaic was used on the exposed facade of the Lecture Theatre. However, the comparative merits of glass and earthenware mosaics were tested in the three roundels sheltered by the recessed arcade. See also "Mosaics" 202.

¹⁷ The Lecture Theatre building's mosaic pediment "was made by the [...] mosaic class in English earthenware mosaic, superintended by Minton, Hollins, for £500" (Department of Education, 84/6, 12 and 23 Dec. 1867, qtd in Physick 117).

¹⁸ Interestingly, contemporary reviewers did not immediately apprehend the deliberate comparison set up between the mosaics of the Memorial and the Albert Hall. They were, however, swift to comment on the similarities between the latter building's exterior and the Museum, with the *Illustrated London News* disparaging the completed Albert Hall frieze with the remark that "the effect is little superior to that of the meagre inlays with the ridiculously pigmy figures, within the pediment of the South Kensington Museum façade" ("The Opening" 346).

¹⁹ For Leighton's career as a decorative artist during the 1860s, see Ormond et al. 124-25; Barringer 135-68.

mosaics on the Lecture Theatre façade).²⁰ The final selection of three members of the Royal Academy: F. R. Pickersgill R.A., H. S. Marks A.R.A, and W. F. Yeames A.R.A., indicates that Cole and his colleagues reached a compromise: while still achieving “designs of a high order of merit” by employing “our best artists” (“Our Rambler” 20), they also managed to cut costs by transforming the project into a group commission. Thus, while all three artists had some experience in decorative design – Pickersgill and Yeames had produced mosaic panels for the interior of the South Kensington Museum, and Marks had recently executed a decorative frieze for a London theatre – their fees as a group were considerably cheaper.²¹ The Hall’s architect, Scott, later took pains to stress the economical outcome: “the sum accepted in payment for the work was so modest as to entitle these gentlemen [i.e. the artists] to the warm thanks of all who are interested in the application of pictorial art to architectural buildings” (Scott 93).

Preliminary discussions between Scott and the artists helped determine the scale of the frieze, the colour scheme – buff and chocolate with black outlines²² – and “a system upon which to prepare the drawings and to share the 800 ft” length of mosaic (R[edgrave] 26). The largest part of the decoration was allocated to these three individuals, who between them received eleven of the frieze’s sixteen thematic sections. However as the scale of the project became apparent, they were joined by four more prominent artists: E. J. Poynter A.R.A., E. Armitage A.R.A., J. C. Horsley R. A. and H. H. Armstead, all of whom had close ties to the South Kensington precinct.²³

This division of the frieze into different artist’s sections meant that these panels were envisaged as “an assembly” of different themes rather than a continuous unified composition, a concept that was reinforced by the range of subjects being represented. In keeping with the stated intention of the Hall – which the inscription above the frieze declared to be: “for the advancement of the Arts and Sciences and Works of Industry of all Nations” (Sheppard 190)²⁴ – the mosaic panels depicted the following

²⁰ The Museum’s “in-house” decorative team of Godfrey Sykes and Reuben Townroe designed the mosaic panels. See Physick 118-20.

²¹ Compared to Moore’s estimate of £2000 for his design, the fees paid to the artists of the Royal Albert Hall came to £782 in total. See Sheppard 190.

²² The chief drawback of ceramic mosaic was the restricted colour range of the tesserae. For details, see Layard 907-09. However, the mosaic frieze’s colour scheme was clearly intended to complement the red brick and yellow terracotta of the Hall’s Neo-Renaissance exterior.

²³ All the Albert Hall artists, except Armstead, had been involved in decorative work at the South Kensington Museum. See R[edgrave] 27; Scott 93; Physick 65, 83. Armstead was simultaneously executing sculpture for the Albert Memorial. See Read 166-67.

²⁴ The entire inscription read: “THIS HALL WAS ERECTED FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE ARTS AND SCIENCES AND WORKS OF INDUSTRY OF ALL NATIONS IN FULFILMENT OF THE INTENTION OF ALBERT PRINCE CONSORT. THE SITE WAS PURCHASED WITH THE PROCEEDS OF THE GREAT EXHIBITION OF THE YEAR MDCCCLI. THE FIRST STONE OF THE HALL WAS LAID BY HER MAJESTY QUEEN VICTORIA ON THE TWENTIETH DAY OF MAY MDCCCLXVII AND IT WAS OPENED BY HER MAJESTY THE TWENTYNINTH OF MARCH IN THE YEAR MDCCCLXXI. THINE O LORD IS THE GREATNESS AND THE POWER

subjects: Music, Sculpture and Painting (by Pickersgill) (fig. 3); Princes, Patrons and Artists (by Armitage) (fig. 4); Workers in Stone, Wood and Brick, and Architecture (by Yeames) (fig. 4); the Infancy of the Arts and Sciences (by Pickersgill); Agriculture, Horticulture and Land Surveying, Astronomy and Navigation (by Marks); Philosophers, Sages and Students (by Armitage); Engineering (by Horsley) (fig. 3); Mechanical Powers (by Armstead); Pottery and Glass-making (by Pickersgill); and lastly, above the main entrance, an allegorical scene showing “The Various Countries of the World bring in their offerings to the Exhibition of 1851” (R[edgrave] 29).

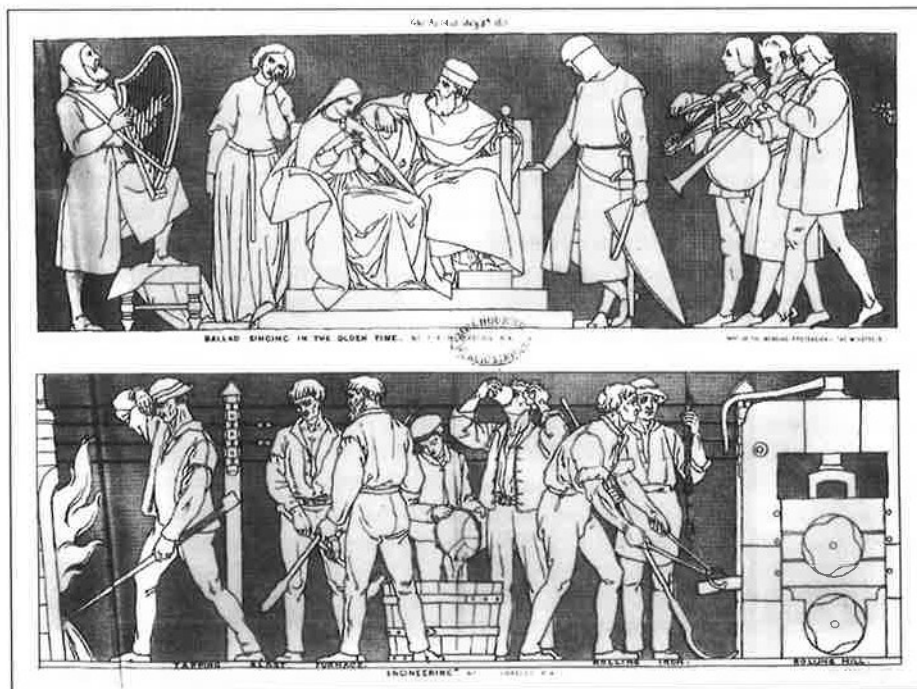


Fig. 3: Designs by F. Pickersgill, “Ballad Singing in the Olden Time” and J. Horsley, “Engineering,” *Architect*, 8 Jul. 1871 (State Library of Victoria)

The general character and contents of this ambitious thematic program have attracted surprisingly little attention from commentators. The element of “modernity” in many of the frieze’s scenes – in the form of lighthouses, electronic telegraphs and railway engines – is usually acknowledged, as well as the “South Kensington”

AND THE GLORY AND THE VICTORY AND THE MAJESTY FOR ALL THAT IS IN THE HEAVEN AND IN THE EARTH IS THINE. THE WISE AND THEIR WORKS ARE IN THE HAND OF GOD. GLORY BE TO GOD ON HIGH AND ON EARTH PEACE.”

character in the choice of subject matter.²⁵ Physick for instance proposes that the “large proportion of the frieze [. . .] devoted to agriculture and gardening was doubtless because, at the time of its execution, the Royal Horticultural Society’s Gardens, immediately south of the Hall, was the main feature of the Commissioners’ estate” (“Albertopolis” 327). However, a far more pertinent influence and point of comparison was surely the iconography of the neighbouring Albert Memorial, which also sought to celebrate the achievements of the Prince Consort (as exemplified by the 1851 Exhibition) and to illustrate “those pursuits of civilization” which most interested him – namely the fine arts, sciences, industrial arts, etc., and patronage in general (Cunningham 207). Indeed, it can be argued that an analysis of the two figurative programmes reveals some telling similarities and differences, which again suggest that a deliberate contrast was being set up by Henry Cole between his Albert Hall and George Gilbert Scott’s Albert Memorial.

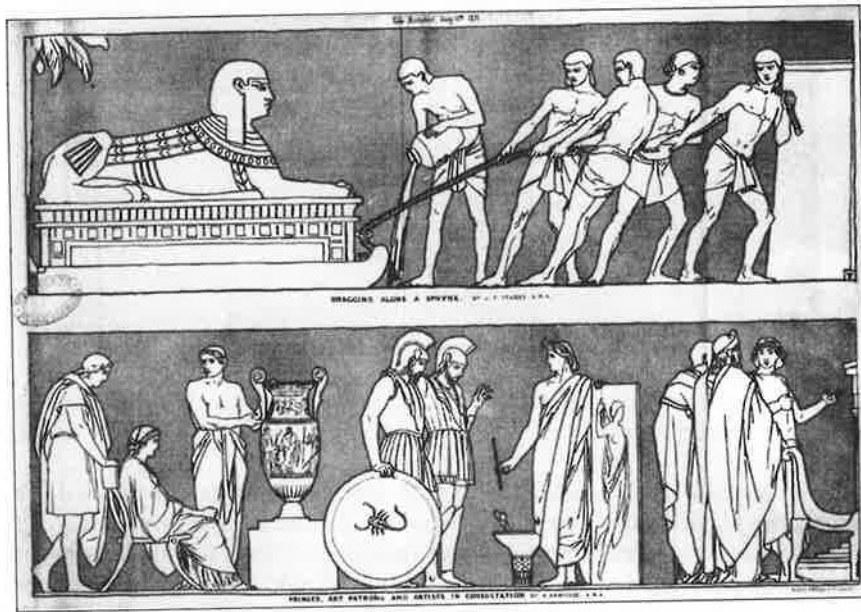


Fig 4: Designs by J. Yeames, “Dragging along a Sphinx” and H. Armitage, “Princes, Art Patrons and Artists in Consultation,” *Architect*, 15 Jul. 1871 (State Library of Victoria)

The most striking difference between the iconography of the two monuments is in the use of allegory – much of the Memorial’s sculptural programme is allegorical,

²⁵ One modern writer claimed that “there is perhaps as much of ‘South Kensington’ as of the Middle Ages” in the panel of “Sculpture” which showed “some monks at work at a recessed wall-tomb, while one of them tries the effect of natural foliage in the spandrels as a suggestion for decoration” (Sheppard 190).

while the scenes on the Hall's frieze are primarily historical and narrative. Thus, for example, both buildings include images of "the Sciences," including the modern discipline of "Geology." The Memorial depicts this concept as a classically draped female personification holding a hammer, with ore and fossil bones at her feet.²⁶ The same science appears on the frieze, in Armitage's "A Group of Philosophers, Sages and Students," but this general theme allows a far more precise and visually dramatic image: the somewhat controversial subject is portrayed very directly, as "a grave professor explaining a fossil saurian to attentive listeners" (R[edgrave] 35) (fig. 5).

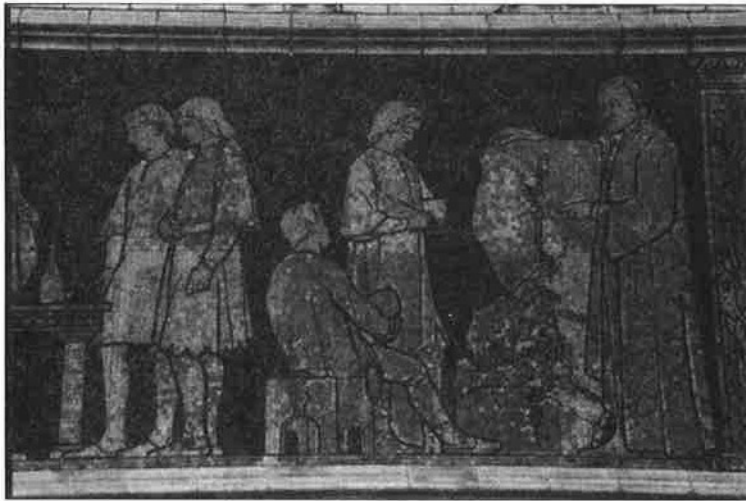


Fig 5: E. Armitage, "A Group of Philosophers, Sages and Students": detail showing "Geology"; section from the mosaic frieze of the Royal Albert Hall (Photo: author)

The mosaic frieze's celebration of "the arts" – both fine and applied – also highlights the pictorial advantages of a narrative approach. Both the Memorial and the Hall include representations of the most famous exponents of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture throughout history. But while the Memorial confines itself primarily to a great sculptured frieze of portraits, the Hall's mosaic shows the Old Masters at work: Pickersgill's depictions of "Sculpture" and "Painting" include Michelangelo with one of his "Slaves" and Raphael drawing from a seated mother and child (fig. 6); while Yeames's "Architecture" presents Christopher Wren and King Charles II in front of St Paul's Cathedral.

This frieze's emphasis on process and manufacture is even more evident in the scenes depicting the "Works of Industry": in numerous vignettes, figures are shown carving metopes on the Parthenon; building Roman arches; moving blocks of stone;

²⁶ For a discussion of the deliberately uncontroversial representation of "the Sciences" on the Albert Memorial, see Cunningham 221.

hollowing wooden boats; quarrying for iron ore; painting pottery; spinning cloth; even mixing medicines. The whole range of “art-manufactures” currently being taught in the South Kensington Art Schools or employed in decorating the Museum and Albert Hall are also highlighted in historical and modern scenes: thus “Workers in Brick” are depicted erecting the Tower of Babel, while contemporary “Pottery Makers” are shown decorating biscuit ware with “engraved transfer patterns” (R[edgrave] 36). The picturesque details and emphasis on action and objects makes a startling contrast to the static sculptural groups of the Albert Memorial which also illustrate the “Industrial Arts and Sciences.” In works such as Weekes’s “Manufacturers” and Lawlor’s “Engineering,” modern day figures appear, but one “youthful potter” must stand for all art-manufactures, while a man “clutching a cogwheel” embodies the profession of mechanical engineering (Cunningham 225, 229).



Fig 6: F. Pickersgill, “Painting”: detail showing Raphael drawing a mother and child; section from the mosaic frieze of the Royal Albert Hall (Photo: author)

Not surprisingly, “Mosaic Working” is given due credit on the Albert Hall frieze. The medium is illustrated in Yeames’s architectural section, represented by “a man engaged in the mosaic inlay of some twisted column, such as those to be found in the cloisters of St John Lateran at Rome” (R[edgrave] 35). The inclusion of St Sophia in Yeames’s examples of “Christian Architecture” would also appear to be an unmistakable allusion to the mosaic interiors of Byzantium. More subtly but no less emphatically, the severely neo-classical style of the frieze itself, when combined with the work’s large scale and matt surface, can be seen to evoke another great mosaic tradition, that of antique “optus sectile” work, which was made from marble and stone

rather than glass tesserae, and generally associated with Roman floor decoration.²⁷ Indeed, many contemporaries likened the Albert Hall frieze to “a tile pavement set on edge” (R[edgrave] 36),²⁸ and the architect, Henry Scott, was said to have gained his original idea for the scheme from the great Renaissance marble pavements of Domenico Beccafumi in Siena Cathedral.²⁹



Fig. 7: E. J. Poynter, “Countries of the World bring in their offerings to the 1851 Exhibition”; section from the mosaic frieze of the Royal Albert Hall (Photo: author)

One section of the frieze more than any other, however, could be said to be inspired by Renaissance mosaic work, and that is Poynter’s centrepiece, over the Hall’s main entrance pavilion, which illustrates the “Countries of the World bring in their offerings to the 1851 Exhibition”³⁰ (fig. 7). The only allegorical design in the entire programme, Poynter’s panel depicts an enthroned Britannia, flanked by figures

²⁷ For a discussion of *opus sectile* and the later tradition of marble mosaic, see W. H. R. 294, 407-08; Furnival 532-38.

²⁸ For example, the *Architect* described the frieze as a “surface or pavement work” (“The Royal Albert Hall” 166).

²⁹ Reuben Townroe, one of Scott’s designers, who assisted in the execution of the plaster models for the Hall, claimed that “the frieze of figures” on the Albert Hall was “suggested by Beccafumi’s mosaics at Siena” (MacColl 112). See also Cole 1: 364. For Beccafumi’s mosaic pavements in Siena Cathedral, see Collareta 652-76.

³⁰ Several commentators noted the stylistic contrast between the neo-classical frieze and the more detailed and elaborate treatment of the centrepiece. See R[edgrave] 30, 31; “The Royal Albert Hall of Arts and Science” 13.

of Peace, Concord, Plenty and Prosperity.³¹ Winged figures of Victory summon the various nations of the World, which move forward in groups behind personifications of the four continents (fig. 8). In keeping with this traditional subject matter, Poynter's elaborate figure groups are presented in an ornate linear style that is reminiscent of both Renaissance marble mosaic and the recent nineteenth-century revival of this art form known as "*tarsia*."³²



Fig. 8: E. J. Poynter, "Countries of the World bring in their offerings to the 1851 Exhibition": detail showing personification of Europe; section from the mosaic frieze of the Royal Albert Hall (Photo: author)

Significantly, the foremost example of *tarsia* work in Britain during the 1860s was the series of pictorial marble panels on the walls of the Wolsey Chapel at Windsor, an important Royal Commission executed by the French sculptor, Henri de Triqueti (who also happened to be Poynter's uncle-by-marriage).³³ The Wolsey Chapel *tarsia* scheme provoked much interest in the art and architectural press, and

³¹ Several motifs, such as putti and cornucopia, appear in both Poynter's section of the frieze and the Lecture Theatre mosaic panels, suggesting a shared "South Kensington" allegorical iconography.

³² Marble "*tarsia*" was a form of inlaid coloured marbles in which outlines and shading were engraved onto the design. The result was a rich but linear mural decoration. This mosaic process was "revived" by Henri de Triqueti, who travelled to Italy in the 1860s to "compare his process with the ancient one" (Beaulieu 213-16). The polychromatic appearance of Poynter's panel recreates, in terracotta mosaic, something of the colour and variety of *tarsia* work. Unlike the rest of the frieze, in which buff figures appear against a chocolate background, Poynter's panel employs two different coloured tesserae – buff and grey – to distinguish between the flesh and drapery of his figures.

³³ For Triqueti's work in the Wolsey Chapel, renamed the Albert Memorial Chapel, see "The Albert Memorial Chapel" 368. Also Davison and Davison; Leroy 10-11; Darby and Smith 32-35.

was immediately recognised as another example of the Queen's enthusiasm for mosaic work (alongside the Salviati mosaic in the Frogmore mausoleum and the mosaic tympana on the Albert Memorial). In fact, at least one commentator was quick to draw a connection between the Wolsey scheme and the mosaic frieze of the Albert Hall, declaring: "the idea of the [latter] work is obviously taken from the very original and beautiful marble mosaics of Baron Triqueti, now in course of erection in St George's Chapel, Windsor" ("The Albert Hall," Victoria and Albert Museum Archives 54). It is not too far-fetched, perhaps, to see the *tarsia*-like treatment of the Albert Hall frieze's central panel as an elegant allusion to the Royal family's pioneering interest in and patronage of the Mosaic Revival in Britain.³⁴

Finally, it also can be argued that mosaic work is obliquely celebrated in two other aspects of the Albert Hall's frieze – firstly, in the emphasis given to "indirect manufacture" in the iconographical programme, and secondly, by the prominence placed on the role of "women workers" in the various sections of the frieze.

As mentioned above, the Albert Hall frieze elected to depict the themes of art, science and industry through historical scenes and narrative rather than allegory. The designers and inventors are portrayed, but always accompanied by their productions – which are often presented as "works in progress" or "modes of manufacture." Moreover, the division between the conceptual design and the production of the work is stressed in numerous examples: Nicola Pisano is shown designing his pulpit in Pisa; a Roman architect or engineer is depicted inspecting plans; but the figures who actually implement the schemes are nearly all anonymous labourers and artisans – or as the contemporary descriptions of the iconography make clear: the "workers" in stone, brick, wood, pottery and glass. The "division of labour" was quite deliberate, and can be directly traced to the broader philosophy of the South Kensington circle, which sought to improve the quality of modern art-manufactures by introducing artists into the design phase of the process but retaining the industrial modes of production.³⁵

However, the particular relevance of this concept for the Albert Hall frieze is not fully understood unless one also interprets it within the context of Cole's rivalry with the nearby Albert Memorial. For, although not publicly known, Cole had actively sought to influence the execution of George Gilbert Scott's Memorial during the initial stage of commissioning the sculptors. As Benedict Read has revealed in his recent study of the Albert Memorial's sculpture, Cole had, in fact, written to Charles Grey, the Queen's Secretary, in 1864:

assert[ing] that a major part of making sculpture came down to artisan manufacture. Though an artist drew up or modeled the original design, he need not be involved in enlarging it to a working model, or in its final execution – and the contracts for the Memorial should reflect this. (Read 170)

³⁴ For Queen Victoria's key role in encouraging a fashion for mosaic during the 1860s, see Dorment 150-51.

³⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this philosophy, see Morris; Conforti.

The authorities in charge of the Albert Memorial took no notice of Cole's views, and the execution of the works remained under the sculptors' manual control throughout the process. When it came to the Albert Hall frieze, however, Cole was able to implement his alternative system of manufacture to its fullest extent. Thus the artists responsible for designing the various segments of the frieze were simply involved in that initial stage of the process. Once their watercolour designs were completed,³⁶ they were handed over to one of the South Kensington Museum's photographers, Sergeant Spackman R.E., who enlarged these compositions to the appropriate scale (a height of six feet six inches) by means of a "magic lantern" projector (R[edgrave] 27-28, 36). These full-size cartoons were then sent to the Museum's Mosaic Class, whose members had the manual task of inserting the different coloured tesserae into the outlines. Such was the scale of the project that it took a dedicated group of twelve women "the greater part of two years" to execute the entire frieze (R[edgrave] 29).³⁷ Interestingly, the artists kept an eye on these proceedings and appeared to be happy with the realisation of their designs. As W. F. Yeames later recounted, there had been general agreement among "my painter friends [. . .] in working out these designs":

We decided on the darker background and the broad outline, thinking they were the most visible at a distance. The frieze being placed at so great a height had to be simple in treatment, the figures to be left a good deal apart, and foreshortening and grouping to be avoided; and what we studied most was to give an ornamental aspect to the frieze. From time to time, whilst the mosaic work was in progress, we visited the Museum to inspect the reproduction of our designs, and were struck both by the exactitude of their enlargement and the faithful rendering. (Scott 98)

The artists were not alone in following the execution of the frieze with close interest. Understandably, the innovative form of technical production attracted enormous press attention – some critics even visiting the Mosaic Class where they were able to report that:

The mosaic is almost entirely worked by young women, and it is no small advantage that a new field for the labour of women seems in a fair way to be opened by their employment on this work. The room we visited, a bright and tidy atelier, contained a considerable number of mosaicists. Each has the paper on which is drawn an outline of the portion she is to execute on her table, and before her the small

³⁶ The watercolours are dated 1869. I would like to thank the authorities of the Royal Albert Hall for granting me access to the original watercolour designs held in their collection.

³⁷ Redgrave states that "ten operators" were responsible for working on the mosaic frieze (R[edgrave] 29). However, the *16th Report of the Science and Art Department 1868-1869* states that there were twelve female mosaic workers executing the frieze of the Albert Hall "the corporation of which has of course borne the cost" (281).

trays of tesserae of the three colours named. The tesserae are little hard lumps of baked earthenware made by Minton, and closely resembling his paving tiles in quality. [. . .] This work is light and seems pleasant, and is rapidly done ("Our Rambler" 20).

This was not the only occasion when Cole sought to promote the employment of women in artistic schemes; indeed it became an important feature of the Museum's Art Schools and the decoration of the museum itself.³⁸ However, no other project produced by "female labour" during the later Victorian period was even remotely near the scale and public prominence of the Albert Hall frieze. It must have seemed only fitting, therefore, to both Cole and his artist-designers, that women be given due prominence in the various scenes of art, science and industry on the frieze itself. Thus nuns are shown singing in Pickersgill's "Music," while his "Infancy of the Arts and Sciences" includes a girl with a distaff and a female nurse beside the bed of a patient, symbolising the "tender care of women" throughout history (R[edgrave] 30, 34). Marks shows "men and maidens" labouring in a garden in his panel of "Agriculture," while a decidedly modern note is struck by Armitage, who in his "Group of Philosophers, Sages and Students" represents "a teacher of geography with his pupils [. . .] of both sexes" (fig. 9) – prompting one contemporary reviewer to comment of this daring inclusion: "Has the artist settled for us thus the vexed question of university education [i.e. for women]?" (R[edgrave] 35). Even "works of industry" were not lacking their female protagonists, for Pickersgill's "Pottery and Glass Making" shows a "girl with a winch to set in motion the thrower's wheel" (R[edgrave] 35).

The bold, almost controversial, appearance of these female figures in the Albert Hall frieze needs to be compared to the virtual absence of women from the nearby Albert Memorial. As modern scholars have recently observed, if one disregards the various allegorical personifications, only three "real" women appear in the Memorial's iconographic programme: one is the idealised "Factory Girl" representing the clothworkers in the "Manufactures" sculpture; the second, the young female harvester in the "Agriculture" group; while the third is the somewhat obscure figure of Nitocris on the podium frieze, portraying the queen of Egypt said to be responsible for commissioning the third pyramid.³⁹ Cunningham has argued that this striking denial of woman's role in human history "is an important reminder of the extent to which 'official' Victorian values were determined by men. In the Memorial's account the great acts of creative genius and cultural achievement are emphatically a male preserve" (240). But this view clearly needs to be tempered when one considers the nearby Albert Hall's startlingly progressive frieze which, in both its subject matter and execution, reflects the growing public recognition of female achievements in the arts, agriculture, manufactures and even the new profession of nursing.

³⁸ See "Art Industries at South Kensington No.1" 1-5; Callen 34-40.

³⁹ See Cunningham 225, 240.



Fig. 9: E. Armitage, “Group of Philosophers, Sages and Students”: detail showing “Geography”; section from the mosaic frieze of the Royal Albert Hall (Photo: author)

Conclusion

The mosaic frieze of the Royal Albert Hall is one of the great monuments of nineteenth-century Britain: its unprecedented scale, innovative method of execution and elaborate iconography all celebrate the cultural ideals and technical achievements of the High Victorian era and the philosophy of the South Kensington circle in particular. Unfortunately, the frieze has received relatively little public or scholarly attention during its one hundred and thirty year history – and the reason for this neglect was recognised even at the time of its official launch in 1871. The majority of commentators emphasised that the frieze could not be easily viewed from the ground – the *Architect*'s critic, for example, noted that the frieze “might wisely have been executed with a bolder, heavier line, and, in places at least, that the drawing of the figures ought to have been more marked” (“The Mosaics at the Albert Hall” 231); while the *Illustrated London News* claimed that, “[t]he compositions of the various designers are of very different degrees of merit, but in none is the design sufficiently simple and emphatic” (“The Opening of the Royal Albert Hall” 346).⁴⁰ Indeed, as the quotation at the beginning of this article made clear, several of the artists were later to voice their disappointment in the lack of interest shown in their designs – a fact which they blamed on its location “at such a height that it is impossible to examine it” (Smith 167).

⁴⁰ Not all the reviewers were negative. The *Builder* found, “for the most part they [the designs] are highly satisfactory” (“The Buildings for the 1871 Exhibition, and the Royal Albert Hall” 977).

This article has sought to show that the Albert Hall frieze deserves a second glance from “the passer by” below; and it has argued that one of the keys to understanding this monument is the innovative material out of which it is constructed. Set up as a deliberate contrast to the nearby Albert Memorial, the frieze’s mosaic medium, execution and subject matter all highlight the ideals of the South Kensington circle – its embodiment of a modern Neo-Renaissance style that is neither Gothic nor classical; its use of British materials and innovations rather than foreign or traditional artistic media (like Venetian glass or marble);⁴¹ its commitment to “art manufactures” – that can be designed by artists but executed cheaply by artisans; its preference for “real life” and narrative rather than allegory; and its delight in all aspects of modernity – from lighthouses to women’s labour. Once one understands the implications behind the selection of earthenware mosaic, the frieze emerges as the South Kensington monument *par excellence*.

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⁴¹ Although commenced later, the Albert Hall was opened before the completion of the Albert Memorial. In Redgrave’s account of the Albert Hall’s history, he cannot resist noting that the Memorial’s use of traditional materials like marble had delayed its completion: “This Monument [memorial] is now rapidly approaching completion, and but for the extremely hard character of the marble selected for the bas-reliefs, might long ere now have been finished and thrown open to the public” (R[edgrave] 20).

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