

“How Races and Peoples Transform Their Civilization and Arts”

by **Doctor Gustave Le Bon**

Review Scientifique

October 1, 1892

Robert K. Stevenson: Translator and Editor



Taj Mahal, viewed from the East

The monuments that the Moguls erected in India, such as the Taj Mahal, are considered by many to be the most splendid monuments ever built; and yet no one would dream of classifying the Moguls among the superior races.

“How Races and Peoples Transform Their Civilization and Arts”

I.

In a preceding work¹ I have attempted to show that it is completely impossible for superior races to impose their civilization on inferior races and make the latter accept it. Taking up and analyzing one by one the most powerful means of action which the Europeans have had at their command and have employed—education, institutions and beliefs—I have demonstrated the absolute insufficiency of these means of action for changing the social state of inferior peoples. In addition, I have tried to establish that all the elements of a civilization correspond to certain modes of feeling and thinking, that is to say, a mental constitution represents the past of all a race, the result of the experiences and actions of a long series of ancestors, the hereditary movers of behavior. In order to change the civilization of a people, it will be necessary to change its soul. Only centuries, and not conquerors, can accomplish such a task. We have also come to see that it is only by means of a series of successive stages, analogous to the ones that the Barbarians—destroyers of the Greco-Roman civilization—cleared, that a people may elevate themselves on the ladder of civilization. If, by means of education, one tries to make a people evade and by-pass these stages, one will only disorganize and throw into confusion these people’s morale and intelligence, and end up leading them back to a level lower than the one where they had arrived by themselves. Lastly, I have shown that today there is only one people—the Arabs—capable of civilizing inferior peoples, because it is the only one which still possesses very simple institutions and beliefs. It is thus that after having transformed an enormous swath of the Orient, Moslems are the only possible civilizers of Africa, whereas Europeans, its conquerors today, are only able to ravage it.

Now, my argumentation, and the documents which will support it, relates above all to those inferior peoples who by reason of colonization are in contact with extremely civilized peoples. My

intention here today is to generalize the question, and to show convincingly that superior races have never been influenced by a foreign civilization more rapidly than inferior races and that, if the former have sometimes adopted beliefs, institutions, languages and arts different from those of their ancestors, it is only after their having been transformed slowly and profoundly in a way that brings them into rapport with their mental constitution.

History seems to contradict itself on each following page. One quite frequently sees, for example, peoples changing the elements of their civilization, adopting new religions, new languages, and new institutions. Some abandon centuries-old beliefs repeatedly in order to convert to Christianity, Buddhism or Islam; others change their language while, lastly, others radically modify their institutions and arts. It even seems that the appearance of a conqueror or an apostle is sufficient in order to produce very easily similar transformations.

However, in our presenting the account of these abrupt revolutions, History only succeeds in accomplishing one of its habitual tasks: creating and propagating many mistakes. When one studies nearly all these supposed changes, one will soon notice that the names only of the things change readily, whereas the realities which hide themselves behind the words continue to live and only transform themselves with extreme slowness.

Now, in order to substantiate and demonstrate how, behind the variable designations, the very slow evolution of things is accomplished, it will be necessary to study each element of each civilization among diverse peoples. This heavy task I have already attempted in many volumes²; I do not propose to recommence it here. Setting aside the numerous elements of civilizations, I shall only examine today one of them: the arts.

Before entering upon the study of the evolution that the arts effect in passing from one people to another, I shall in the meantime make some remarks about the changes that the other elements of the civilization undergo, in order to show that the laws applicable to a single one of these elements are indeed applicable to

all, and that, if the arts of a people are in rapport with a certain mental constitution, so also are the languages, institutions, beliefs, etc., and consequently, these elements cannot abruptly change, but instead are received indifferently by one people from another.

It is mainly with regard to religious beliefs that this theory may seem paradoxical, but it is nevertheless in the history of these same beliefs that one can find the best examples to invoke in order to prove that it is just as impossible for a people to suddenly change the elements of its civilization as it is for an individual to change his height or the color of his eyes.

Everybody is undoubtedly aware that all the great religions—Brahmanism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam—have instigated mass conversions in entire races who have seemed to adopt the new religion all at once; however, when one engages in a deeper study of these conversions, one soon ascertains that what the peoples have primarily changed is the name of their religion, and not the religion itself; that in reality the adopted beliefs have undergone the necessary transformations in order to put themselves in rapport with the old beliefs that they have come to replace and of which they are therefore only the simple continuation.

These transformations, supported by the beliefs passing from one people to another, are themselves so considerable that the newly-adopted religion does not have any visible relationship with the one from which it takes its name. The best example of this is the one provided by Buddhism which, after having been transported to China, has become at this point unrecognizable, so much so that scholars had at first taken it to be an independent religion, and had for a long time missed recognizing that this religion was merely Buddhism transformed by the race who had adopted it. Chinese Buddhism is not at all the Buddhism of India, which itself is very different from the Buddhism of Nepal and likewise differs from the Buddhism of Ceylon. In India Buddhism was but a schism of Brahmanism, which had preceded it, and from which it fundamentally differed quite little; in China it was also a schism of the earlier beliefs to which it had tightly attached itself.

What is rigorously demonstrated for Buddhism is not any less so for Brahmanism. The races of India being extremely diverse, it is easy to suppose that, under identical names, they will come to possess extremely different religious beliefs. Certainly, all the Brahmanic peoples consider Vishnu and Siva as their fundamental divinities, and the Vedas as their sacred books; however, these fundamental gods only leave behind in the religion their names, and the sacred books but their text. One sees this in the innumerable cults that have been formed throughout India—cults where one comes across, depending on the races, the most varied beliefs: monotheism, polytheism, fetishism, pantheism, cults worshipping ancestors, demons, animals, etc. To not judge the cults of India other than from what the Vedas say, one will not obtain the slightest idea of the gods and beliefs which reign in this immense peninsula. The title of the sacred books is venerated among all the Brahmans, but of the religion that these books teach, nothing fully remains.



Siva

Known as “the Auspicious One” and the Destroyer of Evil, Siva is a fundamental deity of the Brahmanic peoples.

Islam itself, notwithstanding the simplicity of its monotheism, has not escaped this law; the Islam of Persia is far from the one of Arabia and the one of India. For example, India, essentially polytheistic, has found ways to render polytheistic the most monotheistic of beliefs. For the 50 million Moslem Indians, Mohammed and the saints of Islam are but two new additions to the thousands of others. Islam has not even succeeded in establishing in India that equality of all men which has been elsewhere one of the causes of its success: the Moslems of India practice, like the other Hindus, the caste system. In the Deccan, among the Dravidian populations, Islam is also becoming so unrecognizable that one is hard-pressed to distinguish it from Brahmanism; it will also not at all be noticeable without the name of Mohammed and without the mosque where the prophet, becoming god, is worshipped.

There is no need, moreover, of going as far as India in order to observe the profound modifications that Islam has undergone in passing from one race to another. It will be sufficient to look at our great possession—Algeria. It contains two very different races: Arabs and Berbers, both equally Moslems. Now, the Islam of the former differs substantially from that of the latter; the polytheism of the Koran has become monogamy with the Berbers, whose religion is little but a fusion of Islam with the old paganism that they have practiced since the long ago ages when Carthage dominated.

The religions of Europe are themselves not exempt from the general law of being transformed in accordance with the races who adopt them. Like in India, the letter of the dogmas fixed by scripture has remained invariable; but, it constitutes vain formulas, the sense of which each race interprets in its own way. Under the general denomination of Christians we find true pagans, such as the Lower Breton who prays to idols; fetishists, such as the Spaniard who wears and worships amulets; polytheists, such as the Italian who venerates as very different divinities the madonnas of each village. Extending this study further, it will be easy to show that the large religious schism of the Reformation was the necessary consequence of the interpretation of one and the

same religious book by very different races: the peoples of northern Europe desired to inquire into their belief and regulate their life, while the southern Europeans remained very backward from the point of view of independence and the philosophical spirit.

But, these here are matters whose development would occupy us quite a while. We must consider even more quickly two other fundamental elements of civilization—the institutions and languages—because it would be necessary to enter into technical details which would lead us too far astray from the confines of this work. Now, what is true for beliefs is equally true for institutions; these latter cannot be transmitted from one people to another without transforming themselves. Without wishing to provide endless examples of this, I invite the reader to simply consider how just in modern times alone the same institutions, imposed by force or persuasion, are transformed depending on the impacted races while still completely preserving identical names. For instance the small Spanish-American republics have adopted the democratic constitution of the United States; however, with these races, half-breeds of inferior elements, this organization, which has made the United States so great, is quickly transformed into bloody dictatorships and frightful anarchy; and one after another, in spite of the astonishing richness of their soil, all these small States pass through in succession permanent revolution, civil war and ruin, awaiting perhaps the approaching hour when they will be absorbed by a superior race. A people might indeed strictly impose by force its institutions on a very different race, as England has done on Ireland, but such an imposition yields as its consequence for the subjugated people the most lamentable decadence. Our own colonies provide similar sad examples of the above, and our absolute ignorance of the fundamental principles that I have set forth here will lead us to inevitably lose them.

I shall not go into any greater detail with respect to languages as I have for institutions, and shall restrict myself to calling attention to the fact that even though it is fixed in writing, a language necessarily transforms itself in passing from one people to another, and this very same fact is what renders so absurd the idea of a universal language. Indeed, less than two centuries after

the conquest, the Gauls, notwithstanding the immense superiority of their number, had adopted Latin; but, this language the people soon transformed in accordance with its needs and the special logic of its spirit; it was from these transformations that French finally emerged, a language very different from Italian or Spanish, even though it shares a common origin.

The same holds true for India. With the enormous peninsula being inhabited by extremely numerous and diverse races, one ought to expect to encounter there languages that are likewise extremely numerous: scholars, in fact, have counted 240 such languages, and some of them differ much more between themselves than Greek differs from French. Two hundred forty languages, without even speaking of about 300 dialects! Among these languages the most widespread is a completely modern one, as it does not have three centuries of existence; it is Hindustani, formed by the combination of Persian and Arabic, which the Moslem conquerors spoke, with Hindi, one of the widespread languages spoken within the invaded regions. Both the conquerors and conquered soon forgot their original language in order to speak the new language, which was adapted to the needs of the new race produced by the intermixing of the diverse peoples facing each other.

I shall not pursue the above point any further and instead shall restrict myself to denoting fundamental ideas concerning languages. If I were enter into the necessary developments of this subject, I would go quite far and say that when peoples are very different, the words considered as corresponding represent modes of thinking and feeling so remote that in reality their languages are not synonymous, and that the actual translation of one of these languages to the other is absolutely impossible. One can easily understand this by beholding from a distance of a few centuries that in the same country, and involving the same race, the same words end up corresponding to totally dissimilar ideas. Now, if it is a question of peoples of entirely different races who lived in different times and whose ideas do not have any relationship with our own, the translation can only produce words that are completely stripped of their original meaning, that is to say,

they are enlivened in our spirit with ideas that are entirely different from the ones that they had formerly evoked. This phenomenon is striking above all with respect to the ancient languages of India. With this people who hold irresolute ideas and whose logic does not share any affinities with our own, words have never had the precise and fixed sense that the centuries and turn of our spirit have given to them in Europe. There are books, such as the Vedas, whose translation, attempted in vain, is impossible.³ Fathoming the reasoning of individuals with whom we live, but who are separated from us by certain differences of age, race, sex, and education, is already very difficult; fathoming the reasoning of races upon whom the dust of centuries lies heavily is a task that will never be given to any scholar or scientist to perform. All the science that one might be able to acquire will only serve to demonstrate the complete uselessness of such attempts.

As brief and little-developed as the preceding examples were, it will suffice to show how profound the transformations are for the peoples submitting to the elements of the civilization that they borrow. Now, this borrowing often appears considerable because the names in effect change abruptly; but, at the outset it is always, in reality, very small. It is only over the centuries, with the slow labors of generations, that because of successive additions the borrowed element ends up differing very greatly from the element which it had substituted itself for at first. Of these successive variations History, which mainly attaches itself to words, hardly takes into account, and when it tells us, for example, that a people adopted a new religion, what is represented to us is not at all the beliefs that had really been adopted, but rather the religion like the one that is known to us today. It is necessary to carry out a deep study of these slow adaptations in order to well understand their genesis and to perceive the difference which separate the words from the realities.

The history of civilization therefore is composed of slow adaptations and small successive transformations. If they appear to us as sudden and considerable, it is because, like in geology, we pass over the intermediate phases in order to envisage only the extreme phases.

In reality, no matter how intelligent and gifted that one supposes a people to be, its ability to absorb a new element of civilization is always very limited. This is because brain cells simply cannot assimilate in a day what it has been necessary for centuries to create, and what is adapted to the sentiments and needs of different organisms. Only slow hereditary accumulations permit such assimilations. Later on when we study the evolution of the arts in the most intelligent of the peoples of antiquity—the Greeks—we'll see that it had indeed been necessary for centuries to elapse in order for them to depart from producing rough copies of the models of Assyria and Egypt, which constituted at first their arts, and make their way in successive stages to the masterpieces which have immortalized their name.

And yet throughout History all the peoples who have succeeded themselves—with the exception of some of the early peoples, such as the Egyptians and Chaldeans—have not much been able to but assimilate, by transforming them according to their mental constitution, the elements of civilization which constitute the heritage of the Past. Meanwhile, the development of civilizations has been infinitely slower, and the history of diverse peoples would only have been an eternal recommencement if they had not been able to take advantage of the materials worked out before them. The civilizations created seven or eight thousand years ago by the inhabitants of Egypt and Chaldea have created and formed a source of materials which all subsequent peoples have come to draw from in turn. For example, the Greek arts were born from the banks of the Nile and Tigris. And from the Greek style the Roman style was born. The Roman style, a mixture of Oriental influences, has successively given birth to the Byzantine, Romanesque, and Gothic styles—styles which have varied in accordance with the spirit of the era of the peoples in whom they have taken birth, but styles which have had a common origin.

What I have expressed with respect to the arts is also applicable to all the elements of civilization—institutions, languages and beliefs. The European languages are derived, as we know, from a mother tongue formerly spoken on the central plateau of Asia. Our law is the son of Roman law, which itself is the son of earlier

laws. The Jewish religion proceeded directly from Chaldean beliefs; partnering with Aryan beliefs, it has become the great religion that has governed the peoples of the West for nearly two thousand years. Our sciences themselves would not be what they are today were it not for the long labor of centuries. The great founders of modern astronomy—Copernicus, Kepler, Newton—are linked by the Alexandrian school to the Egyptians and Chaldeans. We thus are able to just see, notwithstanding the formidable gaps which the history of civilization is replete with, a slow evolution of our acquirements and learning which have led us across the ages and empires from the dawn of these ancient civilizations, a period that modern science is today trying to link to those early prehistoric times of mankind. But, however much the source is common, the transformations—whether progressive or regressive, that each people make the elements, assumed in accordance with its mental constitution, undergo—are extremely diverse, and it is the history itself of these transformations which constitute the history of civilizations.



An example of Byzantine architecture is the 11th Century monastery of Hosios Lukas in Greece. The architectural style of the Romans, Greeks, and Egyptians successively preceded the one of the Byzantines.

II.

We have established that the fundamental elements which compose a civilization are unique and individual to a people, that they are the result, the expression itself of its mental structure, and that they cannot, consequently, pass from one race to another without undergoing completely profound changes. We have also seen that what masks the extent of these changes is, on the one hand, linguistic needs which oblige us to designate under identical words very different things, and, on the other hand, historical needs which lead to our envisaging only the extreme forms of a civilization, without our considering at all the intermediate forms which join them.

Not being able to demonstrate here the succession of changes which operates on all the elements of a civilization when they pass from one people to another, I shall focus on a single element: the arts, and I shall occupy myself almost exclusively on one of their most important manifestations—architecture. As we shall soon see, its productions possess a special precision which render the demonstrations easy.

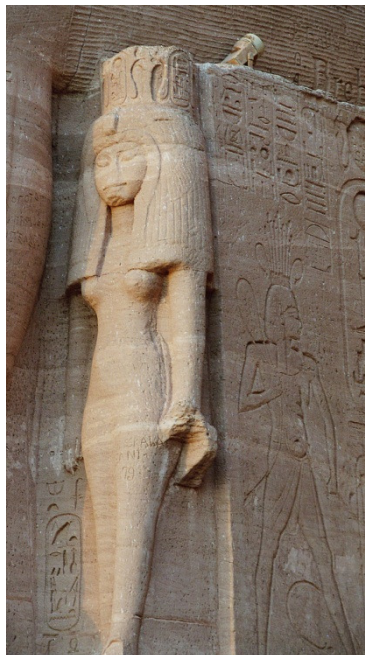
However, before demonstrating the transformations that the arts, like other elements of a civilization, undergo in passing from one people to another, we must first investigate to what degree they are the expression of a civilization.

There are today hardly any books devoted to works of art where it is not repeated that these artworks faithfully convey the thinking of peoples and are the most exact expression of their civilization. This is no doubt often the case, but the evidence by far is lacking that this rule is general or that the development of the arts always corresponds to the intellectual and social development of nations. While in some peoples works of art are indeed the most important manifestation of their peculiar spirit and genius, it is the case with others, quite highly placed nevertheless on the ladder of civilization, where the arts have only played a very secondary role. If one were condemned to write the history of the civilization of each people by taking up only one element, this element would vary

from one people to another: it would be the arts for some, but for others it would be the political and military institutions, industry, etc. which would permit us to better understand them. This is a point that is important to first establish because it will allow us later on to understand how the arts have undergone very unequal transformations in being transmitted from one people to another.

Among the peoples of antiquity, the Egyptians and Romans present examples totally characteristic of this inequality in the development of the diverse elements of a civilization, and also of the diverse branches of which each of these elements is composed.

Let us first consider the Egyptians. With them their literature was always very deficient and their painting was quite mediocre, yet on the contrary their architecture and statuary produced masterpieces. Their monuments still elicit our admiration. The statues that they have left us, such as the Scribe, Nefert-Ari, Rahotep, and many others are still today exemplary models of art, and it was for only a very short period that the Greeks were successful in surpassing them.



Statue of Nefert-Ari
(Abu Simbel Temple in southern Egypt)

Leaving the Egyptians, we shall now examine the Romans, who have played such a preponderant role in history. They were not wanting neither of education nor of models because both the Egyptians and Greeks had preceded them; but nevertheless they did not succeed in creating for themselves a personal art; and perhaps never has any people manifested less originality in its artistic productions. The Romans cared very little about the arts, hardly envisaging them but from the utilitarian point of view, and only viewed them as a sort of article of importation analogous to the products, such as the metals, aromatics and spices that they sought from foreign peoples. While they were the masters of the world, the Romans did not possess a national art, and even during the era of universal peace their wealth and the needs of luxurious living developed little their weak artistic sentiments, and it was always to Greece that they turned to for artists and models. The history of Roman architecture and sculpture therefore is little but a subchapter of the history of Greek architecture and sculpture.

But, this noble Roman people, so inferior in its arts, elevated to a very high degree three other elements of civilization. It possessed military institutions which assured it the domination of the world, political and judicial institutions that we still copy, and lastly it created a literature which our own has drawn inspiration from over the centuries.

We have therefore seen in a striking manner the inequality of the development of the elements of civilization in two nations whose high degree of culture cannot be contested, and this observation has been able to provide us a presentiment of the errors to which one will expose himself by using as a scale only one of these elements, the arts, for example. We found with the Egyptians that their arts, with the exception of painting, were extremely original and remarkable; their literature, on the contrary, was quite mediocre. With the Romans their arts were mediocre, without traces of originality, but their literature was brilliant, and in addition their political and military institutions were of the highest order.

The Greeks themselves, one of the peoples who have most clearly displayed superiority in the most different branches, can

also be cited for proving the lack of parallelism that exists between a civilization's diverse elements. During the Homeric era their literature was already extremely brilliant, as evidenced by the fact that the poems of Homer are still regarded as models which the young university student in Europe has been condemned to saturate himself with for centuries; and yet the discoveries of modern archeology have clearly shown that during the era which the Homeric poems date back to, Greek sculpture and architecture were grossly barbaric, and only were composed of crude imitations of Egypt and Assyria.

But, it is above all the Hindus who will demonstrate to us these inequalities of development. From the point of view of architecture, there are very few peoples who have equaled them. From the point of view of philosophy, their speculations have attained a profundity which only in very recent times has European thought been able to arrive at. In literature, if they did not equal the Greeks and Latins, they did produce nevertheless admirable passages. As for statuary, it is, by contrast, mediocre and very beneath that of the Greeks. With respect to the realm of the sciences and historical works, they produced nothing of any account, and one ascertains in them an absence of precision that one does not encounter in any other people to a similar degree. Their sciences have only amounted to childish speculations; their so-called history books are comprised of absurd legends, and do not include a single date and probably not single exact event. Here then we clearly see that the exclusive study of the arts will prove insufficient for indicating where on the ladder of civilization this people rests.

Old Hindu Temple
in Shimla, India



Many other examples can be furnished to support the preceding point. Indeed, there are many races who, without ever having occupied a totally superior rank, succeeded in creating for themselves a completely personal art that contains no visible relationship with any previous models. Such a race was the Arabs. Less than a century after they had overrun the old Greco-Roman world, they had transformed the Byzantine architecture adopted by them at first to the point where it would be impossible to discover from what types they had drawn inspiration if we still did not have before our eyes the series of intermediate monuments.

Moreover, even though it may not possess any artistic or literary aptitude, a people can create an elevated civilization. Such were the Phoenicians who did not possess any other superiority but their commercial competency. It was through their intermediation that the ancient world, of which they had in view all the parts in relation, became civilized; but, by themselves they were not nearly so productive, and the history of their civilization is only the history of their commerce.

There are finally peoples in whom all elements of the civilization remain inferior, with the exception of the arts. Such were the Moguls. The monuments that they erected in India, whose style is hardly at all Hindu, are so splendid that many high accomplished artists have qualified them as being the most beautiful monuments ever built by the hand of man; and yet no one would dream of classifying the Moguls among the superior races.

In addition, I must point out that even with the most civilized peoples it is not always during the culminating era of their civilization that the arts attained the highest degree of development. With the Egyptians and Hindus notably, the most perfect monuments are generally the most ancient; in Europe it was during the Middle Ages, an era regarded as semi-barbaric, that the marvelous Gothic art, whose admirable works have never been equaled, flourished.

It is therefore totally impossible to judge the level of a people solely by the development of its arts. They only constitute, I repeat,

one of the elements of its civilization; and it will not at all be necessarily the case that this element—any more so than literature—will prove to be the most highly developed. On the contrary, often it is those peoples who are placed at the head of civilization—the Romans of antiquity, the Americans of our day—whose artistic works are the poorest. Often also it was during the semi-barbaric eras that peoples gave birth to their literary and artistic masterpieces (their literary masterpieces above all).

It seems therefore that the period of personality in the arts among a people is a blooming of its childhood or youth, and not of its mature age; and if one takes into consideration that, with the utilitarian preoccupations of the new society whose dawn we just now are able to see, the role of the arts is hardly marked, we are able to foresee the day where they will be classified as, if not inferior, at least secondary manifestations of a civilization.



An example of the outstanding Gothic architecture of the semi-barbaric Middle Ages is the Basilica of St. Denis (located near Paris, France).

Many reasons, besides, stand in the way of the arts following a progress that is parallel to those of the other elements of the civilization: they have their own independent and special evolution. Whether it is a question of Egypt, Greece or different peoples of Europe, we can state this general law: as soon as the art has attained a certain level, that is to say that true masterpieces have been created, a period of imitation immediately begins, inevitably followed by a period of decadence, all of which is entirely independent of the movement of the other elements of the civilization. This phase of decadence in the arts subsists until the time when a political revolution, an invasion, the adoption of new beliefs or any other analogous factor comes to introduce in the art new elements. It was in this manner that during the Middle Ages the Crusades introduced new ideas and knowledge which imparted on the art an impulse which resulted in the transformation of the Roman style into the Gothic style. It was, once again, in this manner that several centuries later the revival of Greco-Roman studies brought about the transformation of Gothic art into the art of the Renaissance. It was also in this same manner that in India the Moslem invasions led to the transformation of Hindu art.

It is also important to note that since the arts express in a general way certain needs of the civilization and correspond to certain sentiments, they are condemned to undergo transformations conforming to these needs, and even to disappear entirely if the needs and sentiments that have engendered them happen themselves to be transformed or disappear. It does not at all follow that if the arts disappear that the civilization will be in a state of decline, and here again we apprehend the absence of parallelism between the evolution of the arts and that of the other elements of the civilization. At no other era in history has civilization been as elevated as today's, and yet at no other era, perhaps, has art been more banal and impersonal. The religious beliefs, ideas and needs which made art an essential element of civilization, in the eras when it had temples and palaces for sanctuaries, have disappeared. Art therefore has become an accessory, an amenity to which it is not possible to devote neither much time nor money. No longer being a necessity, it can hardly be but an artificial and imitative thing. There are no more peoples today who have a national art,

and each one, in architecture as well as sculpture, gives life to more or less successful industrial imitations of the art of vanished eras.

Art is no more than an inferior trade when it ceases being the expression of the needs, ideas and sentiments of an era. I admire the naïve works of our Middle Ages artists portraying the saints, Christ, Paradise and Hell, things entirely fundamental then and which were the principal aim of existence; but, when painters who do not possess these beliefs cover our walls with these primitive legends or with infantile symbols in attempting to return to the technique of another age, they only make miserable pastiches without interest for the present and which the future will despise. The charming naivetés of the child provoke repulsion whenever they are imitated by the old man.

What has been said of painting is applicable to our architecture today that has been reduced to being imitations of architectural forms corresponding to needs and beliefs that we no longer possess. The only sincere architecture these days, because it is the only one that corresponds to the needs and ideas of our civilization, is that of the 5-story house, a viaduct, and a railroad station. This utilitarian art is just as characteristic of an era as formerly was the Gothic church and feudal castle, and for the archeologist of the future the large hotels of today and the Gothic churches will present an equal interest, because they will constitute successive pages in the books of stone that each age leaves behind, whereas he will disregard like useless documents the poor counterfeits which make up all modern art.



The utilitarian architecture of the train station in Paris corresponds well to the needs and ideas of our present-day civilization.

The error our artists make is to wish to revive forms corresponding to needs and aesthetic sentiments which we no longer have. Our lamentable classical education system has filled their head with vanished forms and has imposed on them an aesthetic ideal that is without interest today. However, people, their needs, and their beliefs all change with the centuries. Now, in the name of whatever principles some will claim that aesthetics alone is overlooked by the law of evolution which governs the world. But, each aesthetic represents the ideal of beauty of an era and of a race, and as a result, when the eras and races are dissimilar, the ideal of beauty must constantly vary. From the philosophical point of view, all ideals contain value because they only are the essence of transitory symbols. When the influence of the Greeks and Romans, who have altered and corrupted the European spirit for many centuries, finally disappears from our education system and we learn to behold what is about us, we will discover that the world is full of monuments possessing an aesthetic value at least equal to that of the Parthenon, and, for modern peoples, possessing an aesthetic value of much higher interest.

We conclude from what has preceded that if the arts are, like all elements of a civilization, the expression of this civilization, it should quite be the case that they constitute for all peoples the clearest manifestation of their development.

Proof of the above conclusion, though, is necessary. This is because the degree to which a people assigns importance to an element of civilization is proportional to the force of transformation that this people applies to the same element at the moment of its being assumed from a foreign race. If, for example, a people's personality primarily manifests itself in the arts, it will not reproduce the imported models without greatly marking them with its stamp. On the other hand, it will little transform elements which do not perform the function of being expressers of its spirit. Indeed, when the Romans adopted the architecture of the Greeks, they did not make it undergo radical modifications because it was not in their monuments that they most placed their soul.

Yet, even with a similar people, bereft of a personal architecture,

who is compelled to go and fetch the foreigner for its models and artists, the resulting art is obliged to submit to for a few centuries the influence of the milieu and to become, almost in spite of itself, the expression of the race who adopted it. The temples, palaces, triumphal arches, and bas-reliefs of ancient Rome are works of Greeks or the pupils of Greeks; and yet, the character of these striking monuments, their intent, their embellishments, and even their dimensions do not awaken in us the poetic and delicate remembrances of the Athenian spirit, but rather the ideas of force, domination, and military passion which enlivened and lifted up the great soul of Rome. Therefore even with respect to the domain where it shows itself in the least personal way, a race cannot make a footprint without leaving some trace that only belongs to it and which reveals to us something of its mental constitution and innermost thought.

It is in reality the true artist, whether he be an architect, writer or poet, who possesses the magical faculty of conveying in magnificent compositions the spirit of an age or race. Very impressionable and unconscious, mainly thinking in images and reasoning very little, artists are fideliours mirrors of the society in which they live; their works are the most accurate of the records that one may call upon in order to restore a civilization. Indeed, artists are too unconscious in order to not be sincere, and are much too affected by the milieu which surrounds them in order to not faithfully express their society's ideas, sentiments, needs and tendencies. They do not have freedom, and this is what comprises their power. They are enclosed in a web of traditions, ideas, beliefs (the ensemble of which constitutes the spirit of a race and era) as well as the heritage of sentiments, thoughts and aspirations whose influence is all-powerful over them because it governs their unconscious, the region where their works are elaborated. If, not having these artworks, we were only acquainted in regard to long ago eras with what is said in the absurd accounts and the artificial arrangements of history books, the true past of each people would almost be to us as closed and unknowable as the one of that mysterious Atlantis submerged by the sea, of which Plato speaks.

An artwork's main property therefore is to sincerely express the

needs and ideas of the era which has given birth to it; but, if the artwork is a faithful language, it is often a language that is difficult to interpret. Between the artwork and unconscious thought that created it, there is an intimate connection; but where does one find the thread that allows us to determine the origin of one from another? This thought—formed day after day by innumerable influences of the milieu, beliefs, and needs accumulated by heredity—is often mute for men of another race and another age, less mute, however, whenever it has conveyed itself in stone than when it has reached us through words; this is because words are a supple veil that covers the same clothes with the most dissimilar ideas. Of all the diverse languages that relate the past, works of art—those of architecture above all—are, moreover, the most intelligible. More honest than books, less artificial than religions and languages, they altogether express needs and feelings. In short, the architect is the builder of the abode of men and that of the gods; and, it has always been within the enclosure of the temple or inside the home that the main causes of the events that fill history are carefully and thoroughly developed.

III.

Having posited the preceding general principles, we shall now investigate how the arts, notably architecture, transform themselves in passing from one people to another.

In this investigation I shall only occupy myself with the Oriental arts. The genesis and transformation of the European arts have been subjected to the same laws; but, in order to show their evolution among the diverse races, it would be necessary to enter into details that the exceedingly restricted framework of this study does not allow.

We shall first take up the arts of Egypt, and see what they formerly turned into in being successively passed on to three different races—the negroes of Ethiopia, the Greeks, and the Persians.

Of all the civilizations that have flourished on the surface of the

globe, the civilization of Egypt is the one that has expressed itself the most completely in the arts. It expressed itself here with so much power and clarity that the artistic models born on the banks of the Nile were only able to be in accord with it alone, and it had not been adopted by other peoples but after having undergone profound transformations.

The Egyptian arts—architecture above all—sprang from a particular ideal which during fifty centuries was the constant preoccupation of an entire people. Egypt chiefly dreamt to create for man an imperishable dwelling in the face of his ephemeral existence. This race, contrary to so many others, despised life and courted death. What mainly interested it was the inert mummy who, with its eyes of enamel incrusting its mask of gold, eternally contemplates in the heart of his dark dwelling mysterious hieroglyphics. Sheltered from all profanation in his sepulchral home, spacious as a palace, this mummy will meet again and recognize, painted and sculpted on the walls of the endless corridors, what had charmed him during his brief terrestrial existence.

Everything is stable, durable and massive in this architecture because it has to do with being eternal. If the Egyptians were the only people of antiquity that were known to us, we would truly be able to say, in fact, that art is the most faithful expression of the soul of the race that has created it.



As the Great Pyramid of Giza (pictured above) well illustrates, everything is stable, durable and massive in Egyptian architecture.

Peoples very different from one another—the Ethiopians (an inferior race), the Greeks and Persians (superior races)—have borrowed, either from Egypt alone or from both Egypt and Assyria, their arts. Let us see what these arts became in their hands.

I shall first take up the case of the most inferior of the peoples that I cited—the Ethiopians. We know that at a very late era of Egyptian history (24th dynasty), the peoples of Sudan, profiting from the anarchy and decadence of Egypt, seized some of its provinces and established a kingdom which had as its capital Napata and Meroe respectively, and which maintained its independence for many centuries. Dazzled by the civilization of the vanquished, they tried to copy their monuments and their arts; but these copies, of which we possess numerous specimens, are most often only coarse, rough shapes. These negroes were barbarians, and their cerebral inferiority condemned them to never being able to emerge from barbarity; in spite of the civilizing action of the Egyptians that continued for a long period of time, the Ethiopians, in fact, were never able to outgrow their primitive nature. Indeed, there is no example in ancient or modern history where a black population has been able to elevate itself to a certain level of civilization; and all the times whenever through one of these historical accidents, which in antiquity was produced in Ethiopia, and in our day in Haiti, an advanced civilization falls into the hands of negro races, this civilization has been rapidly brought back down to miserably lower forms.⁴



The pyramids of Meroe, built from 720 to 300 B.C., clearly reveal themselves to be inferior copies of the Egyptian pyramids.

In a very different latitude another race, at that time also barbarous, but a white race—that of the Greeks—borrowed from Egypt and Assyria the principal models of their arts, and likewise at first restricted itself to making informed copies. The art products of these two great civilizations were supplied to the Greeks by the Phoenicians, masters of the sea routes linking the shores of the Mediterranean, and by the peoples of Asia Minor, masters of the land routes which they commended from Ninevah and Babylon.

Nobody is unaware of what point in time the Greeks ended up rising above the models of Egypt and Assyria. However, the discoveries of modern-day archeology have proven how gross and coarse their first artistic works were, and that it was necessary for centuries to pass in order for them to arrive at producing the masterpieces that rendered them immortal. On this heavy task of creating a personal and superior art, the Greeks spent about 700 years; but, the progress realized in the latter centuries was more considerable than that of all the previous ages. Indeed, what takes the longest for a people to surmount is not the highest stages of civilization, but rather the lower stages. The most ancient products of Greek art, those made in the 12th Century B.C. by Tresor of Mycenae, are clear evidence of being a completely barbarous art, for they are crude copies of Oriental objects. Six centuries later the art still remained entirely Oriental; the Apollo of Tenos and the Apollo of Orchomenus singularly resembled Egyptian statues. However, from this point on progress came much more rapidly, and a century later we arrive at Phidias and the marvelous statues of the Parthenon, that is to say, we reach an art that has broken free from its Oriental origins and which is now far superior to the models that for a long time had served as inspiration.

It was the same for architecture, although the stages of its evolution are less easy to establish. We are not aware of what might be the palaces described in the 9th Century B.C. in the Homeric poems; but, the bronze walls with their sparkling, colorful copings, the golden and silver animals guarding the doorways of which the poet speaks, immediately bring to mind the Assyrian palaces adorned with bronze plaques and enameled bricks, and guarded by sculpted bulls. We do know, in any case, that the type of the most

ancient Greek Doric columns, which appear to date back to the 7th Century B.C., are met with again in Egypt at Karnak and Beni Hasan; that the Ionic column has several of its parts borrowed from Assyria; but, we also know that these foreign elements, a little superimposed at first, then blended, and finally transformed, gave birth to new columns very different from their primitive models.

At another extremity of the ancient world, Persia offers up to us an analogous adoption and evolution, but an evolution that was unable to be fully carried out there because it was abruptly arrested by the foreign conquest. Persia did not have seven centuries like Greece, but only two hundred years in order to create an art. Only one people—the Arabs—have been successful up to now in originating a personal art in such a short period of time.

The history of Persian civilization essentially only began with Cyrus and his successors who succeeded five centuries before our era to make themselves masters of Babylonia and Egypt, that is to say the two great centers of civilization whose fame illuminated the Oriental world. The Greeks, who came to dominate in turn, did not count yet. The Persian Empire became the center of civilization until three centuries before our era it was overturned by Alexander, who displaced in one blow the world's center of civilization. Not possessing any traces of art, the Persians, when they were masters of Egypt and Babylon, borrowed these lands' artists and models. With their power only lasting two centuries, they did not have time to significantly modify these arts, but by the time that they were overthrown they had already begun to transform them. The ruins of Persepolis, still standing, reveal to us the genesis of these transformations. We unquestionably find here the fusion, or rather the superposition of the arts of Egypt and Assyria, mixed with some Greek elements; but, new elements, notably the tall Persepolitan column with bicephalous capitals, already appear here, and easily allow one to ascertain that if the time in power had not been so restricted for the Persians, this superior race would have created for itself an art just as personal, if not just as elevated, as that of the Greeks. We have, moreover, proof of this supposition when we revisit the monuments of Persia about ten centuries later—the

architectural history of the intermediate period being unknown. Succeeding the Achaemenid dynasty, which Alexander overthrew, was the one of the Seleucids, followed then by that of the Arsacids, and finally the one of the Sassanians, which in the 7th Century A.D. the Arabs destroyed; and, at this point in time when we find again new monuments in Persia, we see that they possess a stamp of incontestable originality resulting from the combination of Arab art with the ancient architecture of the Achaemenids: gigantic portals taking up the entire height of the building's façade, enameled bricks, pointed arch-shaped openings, etc. It was this new art that the Moguls afterwards came to adopt, in their turn transform, and lastly transport to India.

In the preceding examples we find varying degrees of transformations that the arts of a people which have been passed on to another may undergo, with these transformations occurring in accordance with the race involved and the time it has been able to devote to this process.

With an inferior race—the Ethiopians—having nevertheless centuries for itself, but only being endowed with an insufficient cerebral capacity, we have seen that the art they borrowed has been brought down to a lower form. With another race—at the time advanced and having centuries for itself—the Greeks, we have clearly observed a complete transformation of the ancient art into a new art that was very superior to the arts that at first had been borrowed. With yet another race—the Persians—less advanced than the Greeks, and who possessed limited time, we have only found a great ability for adaptation and the beginning of transformation. It has been necessary for us to jump over a thousand years of architectural history in Persia in order to discover a transformation, as the relationship with the first, much earlier art is difficult to establish.

However, outside of the very distant-in-time examples that I have cited so far, there is another much more modern one whose specimens are still in existence, which readily show the extent and magnitude of the transformations that one race is obliged to make the arts that it borrows undergo. This example is widespread, it

having to do with peoples professing the same religion, but having different origins. I am speaking of the Moslems. When in the 7th Century of our era the Arabs made themselves masters of the largest part of the old Greco-Roman world, and established this gigantic empire which soon stretched from southern Spain to Central Asia, they found themselves in the presence of a clearly defined architecture: the Byzantine architecture. They simply adopted it at first, as much in Spain as in Egypt and Syria, for the building of their mosques. The Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem, the one of Amr in Cairo, and other monuments still standing display this adoption to us. But, it did not last a long time, and one sees the monuments become transformed from country to country and from century to century. In my *Histoire de la Civilisation des Arabes* I have shown the genesis of these changes. They are so considerable that between one monument dating from the debut of the conquest, such as the Mosque of Amr in Cairo (742 A.D.), and that of Kait Bey (1468 A.D.) at the close of the great Arab period, there is no trace of resemblance. In addition, as the explanations and pictures contained in my above work demonstrate, in the diverse countries subject to the law of Islam—Spain, Africa, Syria, Persia, India—the monuments present differences so considerable that it is truly impossible to classify them under the same designation like one can make, for example, for the Gothic monuments, which, in spite of their varieties, offer an obvious analogy.



Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem (viewed from the north)

The Byzantine architectural style, which the Arabs adopted at first, is clearly displayed here.

These radical differences in the architecture of the Moslem countries cannot be related to a diversity of religions, because the religion is the same; instead, these differences are wedded to the divergencies of races, which have an influence on the evolution of the arts that's just as profound as it is on the destinies of empires.

If this assertion is correct, we ought to expect to find in the same country, inhabited by different races, very dissimilar monuments, despite the identicalness of beliefs and the unity of the political rule. This is precisely what one is able to observe in India, and what the most superficial examination places beyond doubt. Between a temple in northern India and a pagoda in the south consecrated to the same divinity, if not by the same race, at least by the same people, there is as little analogy between them as there is between a Greek temple and a Gothic cathedral. This fact is important, and I shall make it my study in a forthcoming article. At the same time I shall have the occasion to apply the principles posed in this work to the solution of a problem that has been investigated for a long time: the origin of the arts in India. It is in India where it is the easiest to find examples that support the general principles set forth in this study. The great peninsula constitutes the most suggestive and philosophical in the books of history. It is today the only country, in fact, where by means of simple displacements in space, one is able to travel at will in time and see again still living the series of successive stages that humanity must traverse in order to attain the higher levels of civilization. All the forms of human evolution are met with here: the Stone Age has its representatives here, as also does the Age of Electricity and earlier ages. Nowhere else can one better see the role of the great factors which preside over the genesis and evolution of civilizations.

In a work as brief as this one, I shall not lay stress any further on these questions, but instead shall restrict myself, in conclusion, to providing a summary containing the following propositions of the principles that I have sought to bring to light:

- 1.** The diverse elements whose ensemble constitutes a civilization—the institutions, beliefs and arts notably—are the

expression of certain modes of thinking and feeling particular to each race, and are inevitably transformed in passing from one race to another.

2. The diverse elements which make up civilization hardly ever follow, among different races, a parallel development; with some races it is the institutions which preponderate, while with others it is literature, industry or the arts. One or many of these elements—the arts above all—may remain at a lower level in the midst of a brilliant civilization. On the other hand, they may be very developed in an inferior civilization.

3. Of all the factors which preside over the adoption and evolution of the fundamental elements of a civilization, the most important one is race. It takes its seat well above the influence of political institutions and conquests, and well above also the influence of religious beliefs (however much still powerful).

4. When a people belonging to a very superior race is in contact with a people of a very inferior race—the whites and the negroes, for example—the second is absolutely unable to borrow and assume anything of use for itself from the first.

5. Two superior races facing each other do not exercise any action one upon another when, because of very different mental structures, they possess incompatible civilizations. This case presents itself especially whenever a very civilized people, such as present-day Europeans, finds itself in contact with peoples belonging to a very ancient and quite different civilization, such as the Hindus and Chinese, for example.

6. When civilizations possessing compatible elements—the civilization of the Moslems and the one of the Hindus, for example—find themselves facing each other, they superimpose at first and then later on fuse their compatible elements.

7. The civilizing action that certain peoples can exercise over others has been proportionally more profound the further back in history one goes, because at that time the elements of civilization

were much less complicated than today. This possibility of action diminishes from age to age, and has become entirely null today for the majority of the world's peoples. In our day the civilizations of Europe are unable to exercise useful action over any people (whoever it is). The only peoples whose institutions and beliefs are sufficiently simple for exerting and performing a civilizing role today are the Moslems. They are, for this reason, the only possible civilizers of Africa.

IV.

This short work of mine is nearly finished. It is only a simple sketch, suggestive perhaps, very incomplete to be sure, and should only be considered as a sort of table of contents of a book. Being obliged to only touch upon questions, and being restricted as well to summarizing extensive research findings that have been set forth elsewhere, I have had to set aside many problems. However, there is one consideration, or rather indication, with which I wish to conclude. I have tried to show that peoples, by the sole fact that they borrow any element whatsoever from a foreign civilization—arts, institutions, beliefs, etc.—are fatally condemned to transform it; and I have also shown that the transformations are very different, in accordance with the mental structure of the peoples. Whereas some peoples develop considerably their arts, others develop, on the other hand, their institutions, literature or industry. The question that one might now pose to oneself is the following: among these diverse elements whose ensemble constitutes a civilization, is it possible to establish a hierarchy; to say, for example, which element is the one that ought to be ranked the most important?

This question is extremely interesting because its solution will render possible the classification, which given the current state of our knowledge is very difficult, of different civilizations. But, this seems to me, if not impossible, at least very complicated to resolve. On the one hand, in fact, it appears that this hierarchical classification ought to vary from one era to another, the social usefulness of the diverse elements itself varying according to the times; and, on the other hand, the answer to the question depends

on the point of view from where one takes his place. Indeed, the historian, scientist, artist, and philosopher will not provide identical solutions. If we only take into consideration pure utility, it would be necessary to say that the clearly superior elements of civilization are those which permit one people to dominate others, or at least to not be enslaved by them, and in this case it will be the military institutions that one will place in the first rank; but then it would be necessary to place the Greeks, artists, philosophers, and scholars under the rude cohorts of Rome, the Egyptian sages and savants under the semi-barbarous Persians, and the Hindus under the likewise semi-barbarous Moguls.

These subtle distinctions are scarcely perceived by the blind multitude who are always inclined to believe that the only superiority is military superiority; but, this latter is very rarely accompanied by a corresponding superiority in the other elements of the civilization, or, at least, does not let it subsist for a long time at their side. Military superiority unfortunately cannot grow weaker in a people without it soon being condemned to disappear. It was always at the time when they had reached the height of civilization that superior peoples ended up ceding their place to barbarians very inferior to them in intelligence, but who possessed certain qualities of character and, by consequence, warlike value—qualities that always lead to the ultimate destruction of very refined civilizations.

It is character which forms the strength of a people, and not intelligence. Peoples perish when their character degenerates, and it often degenerates by the sole fact that their intelligence increases.

If these propositions are correct, it will be necessary to reach this saddening conclusion: *it is the philosophically most inferior elements of a civilization that, socially, are the most useful.* If the laws of the future end up being the same as those of the past, one will be able to say that what is the most injurious for a people is for them to attain a too high degree of intelligence and culture. Indeed, it is not with scholars, scientists, artists, and philosophers that the great religions that have governed the world established

themselves, nor all the vast empires that extended themselves from one hemisphere to another; instead, it is with unlettered persons possessing a very strong ideal and very slight needs, while possessing as well very narrow ideas which, however, are sufficiently strong for them to sacrifice without hesitation their life to propagate them. With this very small baggage, but one of irresistible force, the nomads of the deserts of Arabia conquered the old Greco-Roman world and founded the most gigantic empire that history has ever known. It was with the same moral factors that the barbarians, only possessing the rudiments of culture, smashed to pieces the power of Rome. World empire has always belonged to *the convinced*, whose principal strength consists of their servitude to a single idea, and their complete incapacity to reflect and reason. Be they defenders of a truth or defenders of a chimera, it does not matter. It is important, though, in order for the idea to triumph, that it only contain slender particles of truth, or doesn't contain any at all. This is because the crowd fanaticizes itself easily for illusions, but never for truths. It is in the name of the most deceptive chimeras that the world has up to now been thrown into convulsion, that civilizations which seemed imperishable have been destroyed and new ones have been founded. It is not, as the Gospels assert, the kingdom of heaven that is reserved for the weak-minded, but rather that of the earth, on the sole condition that they possess the blind faith which lifts up mountains. The role of the convinced has always been preponderant in the critical hours of History; they make their appearance whenever a civilization is a very advanced age and the beliefs upon which it is based no longer support it. Their role is to impose new beliefs, mothers of new civilizations destined to last until reason is successful in destroying them. Philosophers, who devote centuries to destroy what the convinced has sometimes created in a day, must bow down to them. The convinced form part of the mysterious forces that govern the world, and have determined the most important events that History has ever recorded. It is with ideals—chimerical, undoubtedly, but all-powerful nevertheless—that they have triumphed and have erected the religious, political and social edifices that we have taken refuge in till now. Without them, perhaps, no civilization would be able to be born, and humanity would not escape from

barbarism. It will no doubt once more be to the great hallucinated creators of ideals, and to the deluded convinced summoned to make the creators' chimeras triumphant, that the world will call for the new ideal destined to replace the one that the old societies who are dying no longer possess.

In short, our planet will most certainly see many civilizations still succeeding themselves before the final chapter of the book that demonstrates the preponderant role of the hallucinated and convinced in History can be written.

FOOTNOTES

1. "The Influence of Education and European Institutions on the Indigenous Populations of the Colonies." Speech delivered at the opening of the first general meeting of the International Congress set up by the French government for the study of colonial questions—speech by Doctor Gustave Le Bon, president of one of the sections of this Congress (*Revue Scientifique*, August 24, 1889).

2. *L'Homme et les Sociétés; leurs origins et leur histoire*; 2 vol. – *Les Premiers Civilisations de l'ancien Orient*; 1 vol. – *Les Civilisations de l'Inde*; 1 vol. – *La Civilisation des Arabes*; 1 vol.

3. This is what has been perfectly understood by an eminent scholar on India, Monsieur A. Barth, who by a chance that's quite rare among specialists proves to be also an extremely sagacious philosopher. In speaking about the numerous attempts that have been made at translating the Vedas, this author remarks: "One result that becomes clear from all these so diverse and sometimes contradictory studies is, I have to say, our inability to translate these documents in the true sense of the word."

4. To study the role of interior races and their crossbreeding with superior races in producing the considerable debasement of a civilization, I refer the reader to my work also published here under the title: "Du role des races dans l'histoire" (*Revue Scientifique*, April 28, 1888).