

**WHAT ROME WAS BUILT WITH: A
DESCRIPTION OF THE STONES
EMPLOYED IN ANCIENT TIMES
FOR ITS BUILDING AND
DECORATION. [1907]**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649732937

What Rome Was Built With: A Description of the Stones Employed in Ancient Times for Its Building and Decoration. [1907] by Mary Winearls Porter

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MARY WINEARLS PORTER

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MARY WINEARLS PORTER

LONDON AND OXFORD: HENRY FROWDE
ALSO AT NEW YORK AND TORONTO

1907

H195.18

Min. Lab.

OXFORD: HORACE HART
PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY

PREFACE

It is necessary to say a few words about marble itself before describing the special varieties known to the Romans. The name, from the Greek word *marmairon* (to shine), is correctly applied to limestones, which are essentially composed of carbonate of lime, and capable of being used as decorative stones. The larger class of these marbles are metamorphic; that is, they have been transformed from non-crystalline to crystalline rocks. This change is usually caused by earth movement accompanied by heat and pressure.

Of limestones from which the greater part of marble is derived there are two varieties, the most common being formed of the hardened calcareous remains of plants and animals, that is, of organic origin. The other variety is of inorganic formation, and is deposited by water carrying carbonate of lime in solution, thus forming sheets of limestone. Of such is the ordinary compact limestone.

It is difficult to ascertain from which of these two formations a marble may be derived, as in crystallization all fossil remains are often entirely obliterated.

Marble occurs in beds and lenticular masses in

many different geological horizons ; the majority of those used for building and ornamental purposes being of the Cambrian, Silurian, Devonian and Carboniferous systems.¹

Marble, when formed of carbonate of lime without impurities, is pure white, as, for instance, statuary marble. The presence of other substances leads to various colorations. Yellow, pink and red tints are as a rule due to iron oxides ; blue-grey, grey and black to carbonaceous matter derived from organic remains.²

Marble is soft, can be easily scratched with a knife, and effervesces at the touch of hydrochloric acid.

The name marble is popularly but incorrectly given to any fairly hard and durable material that will take a polish and can be used for decorative purposes, but geologically speaking it is only applied to a rock composed of carbonate of lime.

The visitor in Rome cannot overlook the beauty and variety of the decorative stones which he encounters at every turn, in the museums, churches, temples and palaces, and which may awaken in him a desire to know something of their history and formation.

The guides are not to be trusted as to the names of marbles, which are invented by the stone-cutters, and are usually merely descriptive of colour or

¹ *Stones for Building and Decoration*, by George P. Merrill.

² *Ibid.*

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marking, or of some other peculiarity, and which for the most part bear no reference to the true geological character of the stone or the locality whence it comes.

There are several good collections of ancient marbles in Europe that are well worth seeing. The finest of these is in the University Museum, Oxford, England, and is composed of 1,000 fine slabs collected by Faustino Corsi in 1825 and sold to S. Jarrett, a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, who in 1828 presented them to the University. This collection contains excellent examples of all the stones seen in Rome, and a good collection of Italian marbles, a few of which were also employed by the Romans. A duplicate collection belongs to the University of Rome. Two other smaller collections were made by Belli about 1857; one for Cardinal Antonelli which is dispersed; the other is now in the Musée Cinquantenaire at Brussels, and consists of about 800 fair-sized slabs. There is also a collection in the British Museum of some 600 pieces presented by Mrs. Aldworth. In the preparation of this book I have been most courteously afforded every opportunity of inspecting these interesting and important collections.

The study of collections, however, is most unsatisfactory, unless the specimens are of unusual size. Small pieces of a marble are very deceptive; for instance, a block of variegated marble a foot square when cut up would easily yield fifteen or twenty

pieces of entirely different colour and stain. It is far better if possible to study marbles in large blocks, columns or slabs.

In describing the various marbles used by the Romans, the order has been kept as far as possible chronologically, and subsequently alphabetically.

In conclusion it gives me pleasure to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Miers, Secretary to the University Museum, Oxford, through whose kindness I had the opportunity of handling and examining the Corsi Marbles (which I have rearranged, translating the Catalogue), and to thank Dr. Merrill of the National Museum, Washington, for his cordial assistance. I am also indebted to Miss Evelyn Gifford for her interest and help, which has been greatly appreciated, and to Signor Boni for his kindness in correcting the proofs.

M. W. P.

106 BANBURY ROAD, OXFORD.
June 30, 1907.

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