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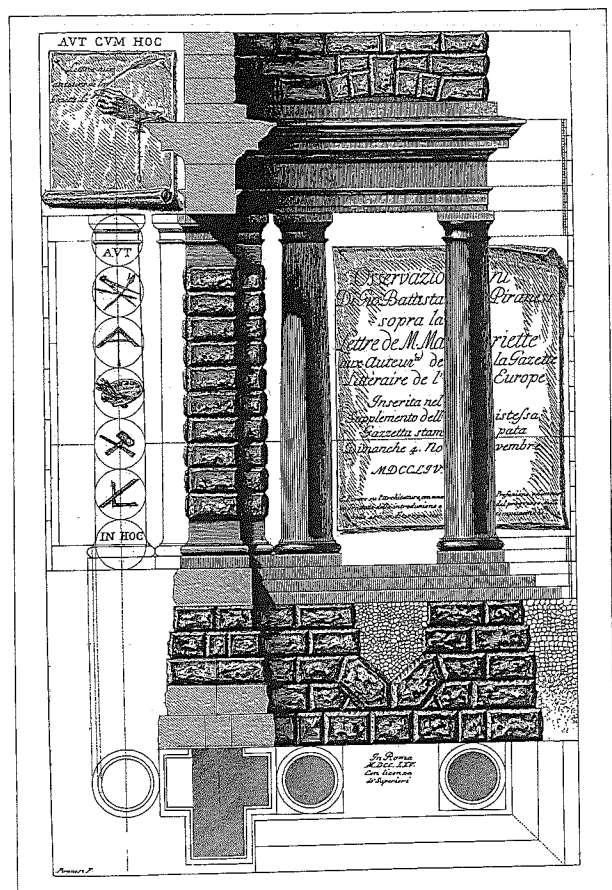
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 Osservazioni ... sopra la lettre de M.
 Mariette, Giovanni Battista
 Piranesi, 1765.

Thoughts on Architecture

Giovanni Battista Piranesi

Translation by Michaela Nonis and Mark Epstein

Introduction by Kevin C. Lippert

In the *Gazette littéraire de l'Europe* of 4 November 1764, there appears a letter from the French critic, collector, dealer, and artist, Pierre Jean Mariette, roundly criticizing Giovanni Battista Piranesi. In his letter, Mariette seeks to "defend the Greeks against certain attacks directed against them by M. Piranesi. This author, who prefers [Roman architecture], does not seem to me to speak of the Greeks with all the esteem that is their due." Mariette is referring to Piranesi's *Della Magnificenza dell' Architettura dei Romani*, in which he challenges the notion, particularly dear to French theorists such as Laugier, Cordemoy, and Le Roy, of the superiority of Greek over Roman architecture. Piranesi's defense of the degenerate, overly ornamented architecture of the Etruscans confounds Mariette: "There is no composition that is not full of superfluous ornament, and absolutely *hors d'œuvre*. Everything is sacrificed for luxury, and in the end one is left with a style that quickly becomes ridiculous and barbarous."

Piranesi's reply — the *Osservazioni di Giovanni Battista Piranesi sopra la Lettre de Monsieur Mariette aux Auteurs de la Gazette Littéraire de l'Europe* of 1765 — was quick and biting. This short essay (twenty-three pages and nine plates) is made up of three parts. The first, the *Osservazioni*, is a reprint of Mariette's letter with sarcastic annotations. The third, *Della introduzione e del progresso delle belle arti in Europa ne tempi antichi*, is an introduction to a longer essay that was never completed. It is the second essay, the *Parere su l'architettura*, translated here, that provides the clearest exposition of Piranesi's thoughts on ornament and quotation.

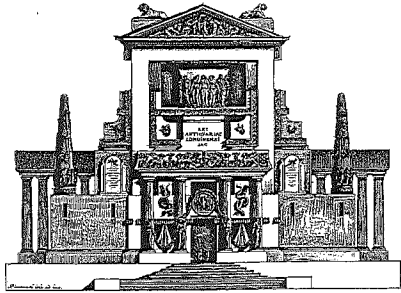
The *Parere* is a dialogue between the strawman Protopiro, a rigorist in the tradition of Laugier and Winckelmann, and Didascalò, the voice of Piranesi. Didascalò reduces *ad absurdum* Protopiro's argument in favor of the Vitruvian principles of law, reason, and simplicity, and demonstrates that its logical conclusion is an architecture of monotony, devoid of any artistic originality. Today, when some theorists and practitioners argue in favor of a reductionist architecture based on a rational interpretation of its tectonic origins, and others argue in

favor of an architecture rich in ornament and historical association, Piranesi's dialogue is especially appropriate.

Piranesi's treatise is accompanied by nine plates, exaggerated compositions combining Greek, Egyptian, and Etruscan motifs in a highly polemical manner. Here all classical rules are discarded in favor of a free and creative use of the elements of antiquity. Anticipating that critics such as Mariette would find these designs excessive and bizarre, Piranesi inscribes a retort in the attic of the last plate: "They despise my novelty, I their timidity."

Giovanni Battista Piranesi

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2, 3 Plates from *Parere su l'Architettura*.

Protopiro: What, Didascalo! When finally, being well versed in the practice of architecture, you have come to discern the good from the bad, instead of making good use of your knowledge, would you like to be thought of as one of those people who, the more they believe they know something of this art, the less they practice it?

Didascalo: Why do you say this, Protopiro?

Protopiro: What kind of drawings are those that you are beginning to defend? You force me to recall Montesquieu's axiom: "A building laden with ornament is an enigma for the eyes, as a confused poem is an enigma for the mind." This I told Piranesi himself when he showed me those drawings, trying to convince me that they were one of the best things that his hands had accomplished so far.

Didascalo: Goodness gracious! You certainly do not hide your feelings!

Protopiro: Well, I love the truth!

Didascalo: So do I; and since I am more familiar with it; and thus love it even more than you do, I would like to point out to you that Montesquieu knew more about poetry than about architecture. He understood, of course, that a distinguished poet had many expedients available to him and need not confuse the minds of his readers; but he didn't know, as far as ornaments are concerned, how few are the resources of architecture, especially if architects are prevented from dressing it up as best they can with things other than that which strictly pertains to it. And now please tell me; a confused poem has done nothing more than confuse the mind: a building laden with ornaments is something that has been liked through the centuries and is now appreciated more than ever, and I think that buildings were built to satisfy the taste of the public, not that of the critics. Now how can Montesquieu compare a poem that, being confused, has everybody rising up against it, with a building that, being full of ornamentation, has pleased and is pleasing to the majority of men? My

friend, you must be more cautious in adopting new proverbs, because when you analyze them thoroughly, you find that their wisdom is only skin deep. Follow the old saying, "Use creates the rules."

Protopiro: Use, not abuse, creates the rules. Where is he? Where is the wise architect, or admirer of architectural works, who does not condemn the use of those attributes which do not belong to architecture, which you could define only as "things other than those that strictly pertain to it?"

Didascalo: You force me to say what I did not want to say. I do not think you know what you are saying. Answer me, please: On what grounds do you call that which is commonly done in architecture abuse?

Protopiro: You should ask your friend Piranesi; he is the author of those endless declamations one reads in *Della Magnificenza e dell' Architettura dei Romani* against that way of doing things, against adorning buildings with ornaments different from those that are given by the truth; that is to say, by the very nature of architecture.

Didascalo: Answer my question, please. Then you will find that Piranesi is not as inconstant a person as you think. On what grounds, I say, do you define as abuse what is commonly done in architecture?

Protopiro: You force me to say what you know as well as I do. In order to show that what is commonly done in architecture is not really germane to this art, but is an abuse, one should discuss the nature of architecture, and that would be an interminable discussion. But hasn't Piranesi said more than enough on these subjects in his book? However, just so that you will not be able to say that I had nothing to object to in your arguments, I will try to contradict some of Piranesi's theories, which he has deduced from his lengthy examination of the origins of architecture.

Didascalo: Please begin!

Protopiro: I hope that my memory does not fail me, though I think I remember all fairly clearly. In the first place I would like to know why, if a building's walls are pulled up for no other reason than to protect us from the sides and to support what covers our heads, they must exhibit all those decorations: tympana or rustications, as they are called, ashlars, cornices, and many other interruptions. And what is the meaning of the garlands, the grotesque masks, the plates, the stripes, the heads of deer, of oxen, and of all those other encumbrances which one finds around the doors, the windows, the arches, and the other openings in the walls? The festoons, the labyrinths, the arabesques, the hippogriffs, the sphinxes: Why don't they go back to the land of poetry? Why don't the dolphins, the lions, and the other ferocious beasts go back to Libya? Why don't the oval, triangular, and the octagonal columns return to their original round shape? Why doesn't someone straighten the spirals, the twists and the genuflections? The former certainly do not imitate the roundness of the trees from which they originate; the latter reveal a weakness in the structure of the building. The triglyphs should originate from a well-balanced scaffolding, the modillions from the regular placement of the beams in the roof covering. One should put the dentils in their allotted place ...

Didascalo: Both should disappear from the front elevations of factory buildings; they also should not be placed where there are neither beams nor scaffolding. One should not place dentils on the cornice under the frontispiece of a facade, because they don't belong there.

Protopiro: Yes, Sir! Let us bring together the apexes that have been cut in half, and let us pretend no more that a roof can be split in half the long way ...

Didascalo: And that it should rain in the house ...

Protopiro: Let us destroy the epicenes ...

Didascalo: Let us make sure that the volutes and the foliage do not stray from the capitals; then the roofs will seem stronger and the houses will not appear to

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8 encroach upon each other.

Protopiro: I agree! Let the architects free themselves from the obsession which has made them fall for these extravagances, and everything will be the better for it.

Didascalo: Have you more to say?

Protopiro: I could go on talking for a whole century; however, even if only these things I have mentioned now would get done, a lot would be accomplished, and architecture would be revived and resurrected.

Didascalo: What do you mean by that?

Protopiro: It would be much closer to what it was at the time of its greatest glory.

Didascalo: You mean to say that it would be closer to the architecture the Greeks elevated to perfection, is that right? And whoever doesn't follow your suggestion only shows his ignorance? Therefore Piranesi, who, instead of doing this, has, in his drawings, taken the crazy liberty to work capriciously ...

Protopiro: With no reason for doing so ...

Didascalo: Yes, without a reason. And along with the most ordinary of architects he is also showing his ignorance?

Protopiro: Without a doubt!

Didascalo: My dear Protopiro, with all these maxims floating around in your head, you are likely to send all architects to the pasture!

Protopiro: I don't follow you.

Didascalo: You would like us to go live in those huts from which some people believe the Greeks took the rules for ornamenting architecture.

Protopiro: Didascalo, please do not quibble!

Didascalo: You are the quibbler, you who would like to give architecture rules that it has never had. What will you say if I prove to you that severity, reason, and the imitation of huts are incompatible with architecture? That architecture, instead of using ornaments that derive from those parts which are necessary for the structure of the building, should be ornamented with things totally unrelated to it?

Protopiro: You have quite a task in front of you!

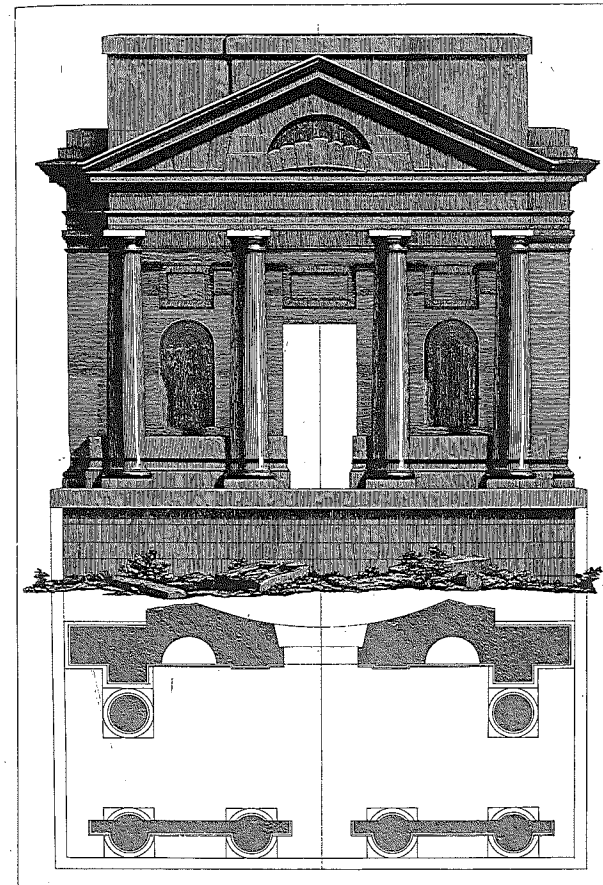
Didascalo: Before giving you a proof of what I am saying I would like to know: Just in what do you think that severity, reason, and imitation lie? I suppose in the style that Vitruvius left us and that Palladio, among other architects, was the first to revive. But on the contrary, you might think it lies in the styles that have recently come from Greece, and which have been presented to us with more pomp than they themselves exhibit.

Protopiro: In either of those styles, provided that it doesn't show the errors and licenses which some architects who revived it thought it opportune to add.

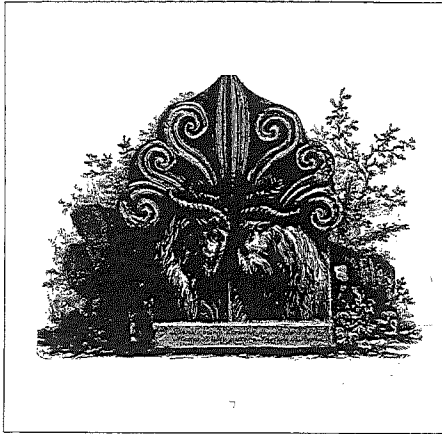
Didascalo: You can have all the reservations you want: the more you have, the easier it will be for me to find proofs in order to convince you; the fewer you have the easier it will be for you to admit that rules should not be a hindrance nor an obstacle to whomever is working.

Protopiro: You know my opinion.

Didascalo: Well then, Greece or Vitruvius? Tell me, please, what are columns supposed to represent? According to Vitruvius, they originate from the forked sticks placed at the corner of the huts; according to others, they are the trunks that support the roof. And what is the meaning of the flutes? Vitruvius thinks that they represent the pleats in the robes of Roman matrons. This means that the columns do not imitate forked sticks or trees but rather women supporting a



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roof. What do you think of the flutes? I think columns should be smooth; please remember this: *smooth columns*. The forked sticks and the trees are planted firmly in the ground, which makes them stable and straight. This is exactly the way in which the Dorians fancied their columns. Consequently, they should be made without bases. Remember this: *without bases*. The top of the trees, should they be used for supporting the roof, should be flat and smooth; the top of a forked stick certainly does not resemble a capital; if this is insufficient, you should remember that capitals are supposed to represent something very sturdy, not the heads of men, of virgins, of matrons, nor baskets with leaves around them, nor matrons' wigs put around a basket. Let us also add: *without capitals*. Do not fear, there are many other purists who would like to see smooth columns without bases, and without capitals.

The architraves can imitate, according to your preference, either tree trunks put crosswise on top of forked sticks, or beams laid across smooth tree tops. Now why do bands and a border protrude from the surface of the architraves? Are they there to absorb the water and rot the wood? Please remember this: *architraves without bands or borders*.

What are triglyphs? Vitruvius maintains that they are the extremities of the attic stringers. But, when they are placed at the corners of a building, they contradict this opinion and also fail to be equidistant, since they have to fall at the center of each column. Even if they are not placed at the corners, one will be able to place them at an equal distance from each other only by narrowing or widening the building. Now it is out of the question that some small incisions on cement or stone should dictate the proportions of a building. The ancient architects about whom Vitruvius talks thought that temples shouldn't be built in the Doric style, and the Romans went even further by building temples in this style leaving out all the unnecessary encumbrances. Please remember, Mr. Protopiro: *friezes without triglyphs*. But now it is your turn, Protopiro, to divest architecture of all those ornaments that you were

despising not so long ago.

Protopiro: When? Have you finished?

Didascalo: Finished? I have barely begun! Let us now enter a temple, a palace, any building you want. Around the walls we will see architraves, friezes, and cornices adorned by those decorations which you have said should only be found underneath the roof of a building — triglyphs, modillions, and dentils. Even when these decorations are absent, and the friezes and the cornices are smooth, the architraves and the friezes still seem to be supporting the roof and the cornices will look like eaves. Now these apparent eaves, if they fulfill their function, will let the rain fall in the temple, the palace, or the basilica. So the palace, the temple, or the basilica will end up being outside, and the outside will appear to be inside. Is that not so? Now, in order to correct the mistakes and dissimulations of architecture, you must remember to build *the internal walls of a building without architraves, friezes, or cornices*.

Vaults are often erected on cornices which to us appear to be eaves; this is an inaccuracy worse than that of putting epicenes on the roof, a practice which Vitruvius also condemns. So please remember: *buildings without vaults*.

Let us now observe the inside and outside walls of a building. At the top one finds the architraves and all that goes above them; below the architraves one finds mostly half-columns or pilasters. Now I ask you, what holds up the roof of the building? If the wall is supporting it, then there is no need for the architrave; if the columns or the pilasters are holding it up, then what exactly is the function of the wall? Please choose, Protopiro: Which would you like to destroy? The walls or the pilasters? You do not know how to answer? Well, then, I will destroy everything! Store this in your memory, please: *buildings without walls, columns, pilasters, friezes, cornices, vaults, and roofs*. Get rid of it all; a *tabella rasa*.

You will object that I am talking of buildings that exist 11 only in my imagination; but exercise your own! Show me a drawing of a purist, who believes that he has created the most marvelous way of designing a building. If the purists will not appear to be even more foolish than one of the free architects, then I will seem all the more naive. A building without irregularities will be built only when four straight sticks holding a roof — this being the architectural prototype — will be able to exist, whole and in isolation, at the very same moment in which they are divided and disposed in thousands of different ways; that is to say, when the single shall be composite and the one will be the multitude that we admire.

But, to go back to what I was saying, don't you think that you are giving architecture rules that it has never had? Haven't I pointed out to you that to build a building according to your principles, to do everything according to reason and truth, will reduce us to living in so many huts? The Scitites, the Goths, and many other barbaric people who used to inhabit these reasonable buildings, waged wars against those populations that were living in buildings built without rules and according to caprice, in order to be able to live in them. But do not panic, no nation will wage a war in order to live in 'reasonable' buildings.

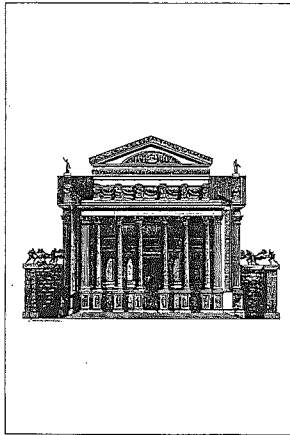
Here is the answer to the objection you raised against Piranesi, to what you said about those declarations which one finds in his book *Della Magnificenza e dell' Architettura dei Romani*, against all who build according to whimsy. A purist rebuked the Romans for having corrupted Greek architecture; Piranesi had to show that the Romans, who could not heal the sores which infected the roots of Greek architecture, embraced it nonetheless, and tried to heal what sores they could. Try to compare the spirit of the book with what I have said so far, and you will see that Piranesi, who held one position yesterday, holds a different one today. What is happening, Protopiro, are you being excessively naive?

Protopiro: I'm just letting you talk.

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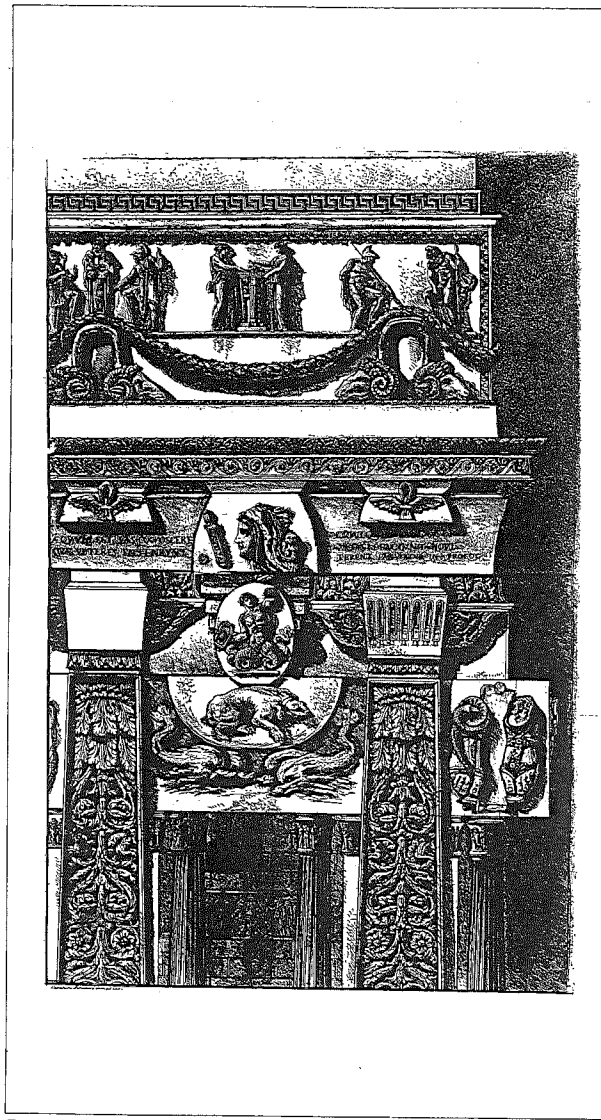


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6-11 Plates from Parere.



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Didascalo: I understand, my criticism seems too harsh; but if I have destroyed the purists' buildings, I have done it with the help of that same reason with which they would like to destroy the most remarkable cities of the universe.

Protopiro: Have you finished? May I speak once?

Didascalo: Please do.

Protopiro: *Est modus in rebus*, says Horatio; all extremes are vicious, says the proverb. Now, if you will reason keeping this in mind, we will make some progress, otherwise farewell!

Didascalo: You would like me to follow your reasoning without protest, and to say that the style dictated by Vitruvius is reasonable, that his rules imitate the truth.

Protopiro: Vitruvius' rules are extremely reasonable when compared to the unbounded license that we find in use today.

Didascalo: Ah! They are reasonable when compared with what is in use today. Well now, if you take away what is in use today, your reason will also disappear. Criticism, which is never silent, will find even then something to say; and since its main scapegoat — today's modern practice — will not be around, it will turn against that little which you admit. You can certainly say that all extremes are wrong, that too much rigor is offensive; this is not the basis on which your style will be judged; or was judged when it was discovered. If you accuse me of being too outspoken and too rigorous in my criticism when I reduce your architecture to mere huts, in which people have no desire to live, you should be accused of building monotonous buildings, which people also dislike.

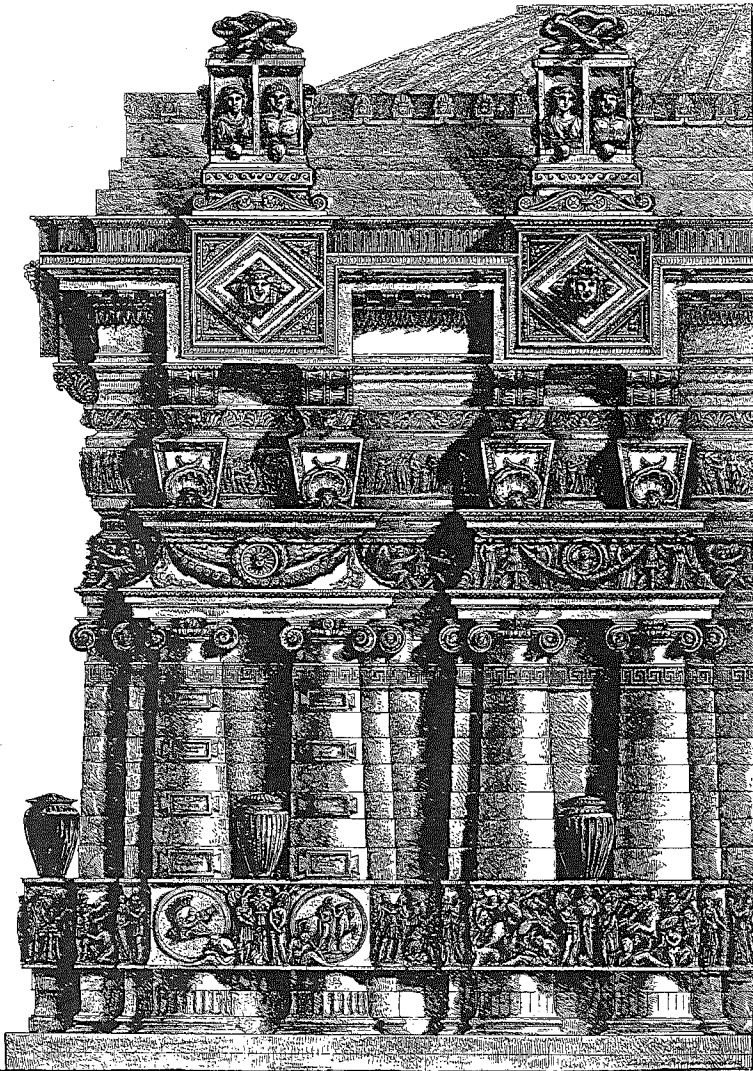
Protopiro: Monotonous buildings?

Didascalo: You are monotonous, yes, your architecture is always the same. And you would go from being

extraordinary architects, at least in your own eyes, to being considered ordinary, indeed very ordinary. Explain to me why the successors of those people who invented the style you espouse tried quickly to find ways of adorning it? Maybe because they were not as capable as their ancestors? Certainly not! They came out of the same schools and had all around them examples of an architecture that was all the more easy to imitate because it was simple.

Protopiro: I am not saying that we must use another style, I am not condemning the successors of those ancient architects for wanting to show us new things, and contemporary architects who are trying to find something new.

Didascalo: Do you mean that Bernini, Borromini, and others all did their job without thinking that ornament must derive from the elements of architecture? When you criticize them, who do you think you are criticizing? You are criticizing the greatest architects there have ever been and there ever will be. You criticize the labor of that multitude of scholars who, ever since this kind of architecture was invented, has always worked this way, and, once this style was resurrected, has never been able to follow anything else. You are condemning that very spirit which invented that which you praise, and which, being aware of not having pleased the whole world, was and is obliged to invent variations in the manner of which you so disapprove. Now, if a great number of scholars, who were experts on all that this art consists of, has not been able, throughout so many centuries, to come up with what you are looking for, it is impossible not to say that, if one takes away from architecture all that you disapprove of, we will have works of unbearable monotony. We can only call foolish those people who are pleased to think that their lot in life is to find in this art what has not been found in so many centuries. They are all the more foolish because they do not heed their wounded pride, and don't reconsider even when it is clear that they don't know how to find what they are looking for.



Protopiro: You will have to prove to me that this is and was indeed their aim.

Didascalo: You are the one who must look for a proof of what you are saying! It is foolish to want to teach what one doesn't know. However, since you affirm that what you would like to see in architecture has not been effectively looked for, let me remind you of the numerous competitions that have been established precisely for this purpose. The latter have been made even more inviting by the addition of royal prizes. But what have the competitors produced? Nothing. They have abandoned the enterprise and refused the prize because their task is an impossible one. What have those people who have recently overrun Asia, Egypt, and Greece produced? Have they found what they were looking for? They say yes to whomever goes to see their work. But what does their work mean to the person who sees it? He goes to see the ruins and brings back the measurements of a column, a frieze, or a cornice, with the intention of giving to architecture proportions different from those we have used until now; he hopes that this will be liked as much as a new order, as a new style of architecture which he has not been able to find. Whether experienced or a novice in these matters, he has not yet understood that there is no building, among the ancient ones, whose proportions are the same as another's, and there are also no old buildings which have the same columns, intercolumniations, arches, etc. He does not want to understand that one order, be it Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, or composite, with all its different measurements and ornaments, is hard to distinguish from another. He doesn't realize that there is only one order, or better, that there is only one style of architecture, which we follow. When I think of this I cannot but laugh at the faults which recently the French *Gazette littéraire* found in the design of a building, built in London by Mr. Adams, one of the most discerning architects of our time. But I have the *Gazette* in my pocket, wait a minute ... please listen:

Mr. Adams distinguishes himself by the grandeur of his ideas as well as by the manner in which he renders them.

This artist exhibited, a short while ago, a drawing which has drawn forth praise from all the connoisseurs. This drawing illustrates a marvelous building which would be fit for the London Parliament or the Academies of Science and Letters. This great design, whose execution would be worthy of a great nation, is particularly remarkable for the gravity which reigns in all its parts; it is an imitation of the best Greek, Egyptian, and Latin styles. The intelligence and the order with which the main traits of the History of England have been put in the bas-relief, with which Mr. Adams has adorned various parts of the building, are truly remarkable.

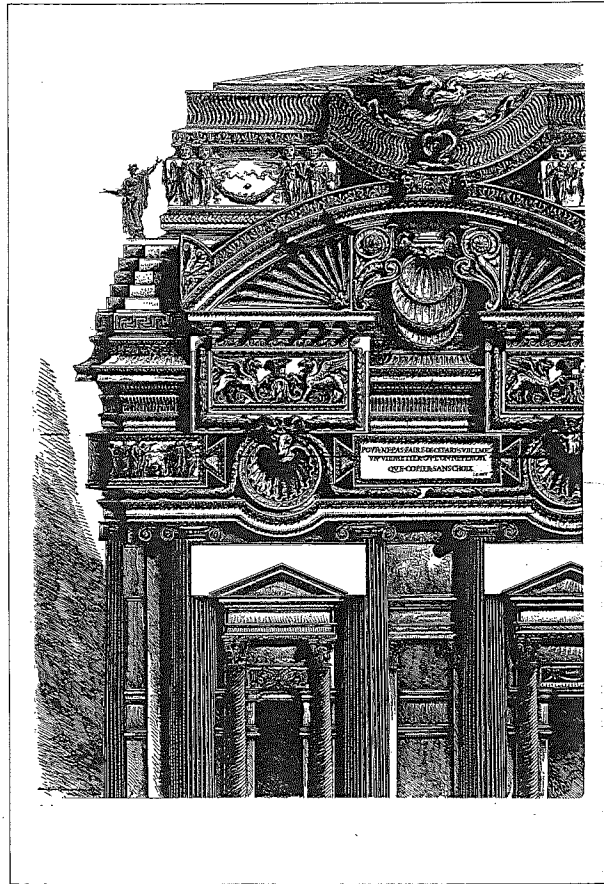
Protopiro: And what have you to say about all this?

Didascalo: Nothing. But please listen to the thoughts of this critic, after he has lavished such a wonderful praise on Mr. Adams:

Nonetheless, one must not think that this drawing presents to us a new order of architecture, as a few people, who have given it the name of 'British Order,' have fancied. A new order is not created just by introducing new ornaments in the capitals and in the other parts of the building. If one considers carefully the orders that are composed in the Corinthian manner, one finds that the ornamentation of the smaller parts varies so much from one to the other that one can easily say that there are as many orders as there are monuments; whereas when one examines the orders only in their principal proportions, one finds that they are quite uniform.

Now, what do you have to say? The critic has praised Mr. Adams again and again, but has made us understand that the drawing should have illustrated a new order, if it wanted to be really extraordinary.

Protopiro: Have pity on me! You attribute to the critic that very fault of which he is accusing those people who want to call Mr. Adams' design the 'British Order.'



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18 Didascalo: Do I attribute to the critic those very faults for which he is reproaching others? In this case I would be doing him an injustice only if he thought, as those other people do, that to invent a new order is an impossible thing; but he, along with many others, believes exactly the contrary: Doesn't he say "When we examine the principal proportions" of the so-called British Order, "we find that they are nearly all uniform?" Isn't this as if he said that to invent a new order one has to create proportions which differ from those of all the other orders: Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian? Now these new proportions may very well be invented and that means that a new order may very well be created. This is the critic's opinion. Do you agree? But look at how odd he is! He states:

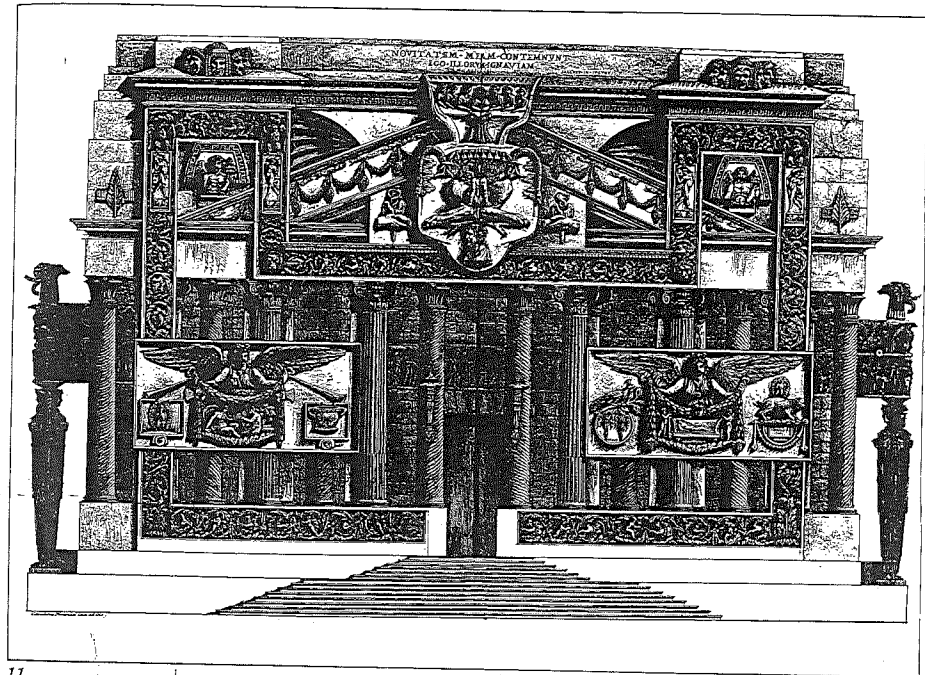
One does not create a new order just by introducing new ornaments in the capitals and in the other parts of the building, and if one considers carefully the orders which are composed in the Corinthian manner, one finds that the ornamentation of the smaller parts varies so much from one to the other, that one can easily say that there are as many orders as there are monuments ...

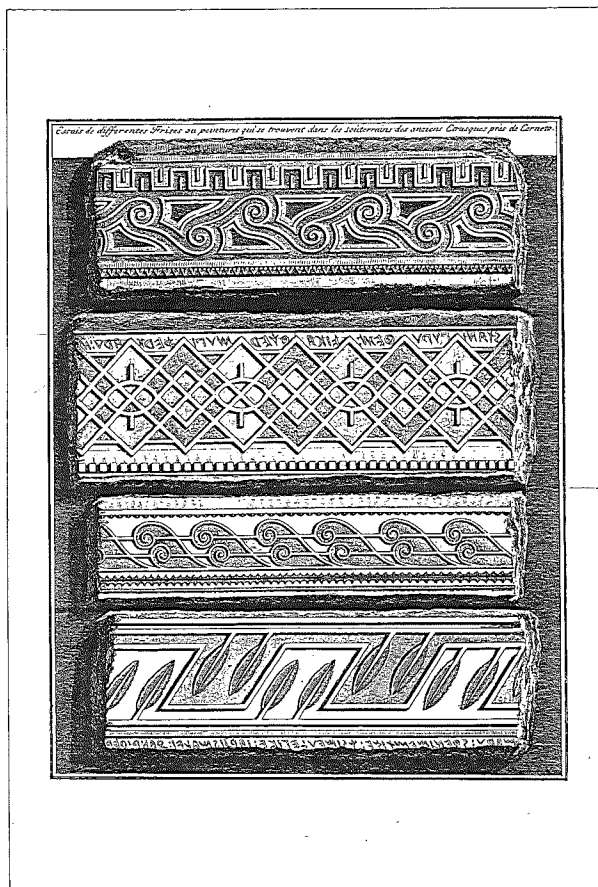
But I would like to ask the critic (here is what I find laughable about all this business) if he believes that the Doric, the Ionic, and the Corinthian are really different orders. Does he believe that there are three different styles of architecture? He will say yes, of course. Now I will pretend to go back to that time in which the three orders were invented: the Doric first, the Ionic and the Corinthian later. Using the critic's words, I will say to the men who invented the two later styles: "Do not pride yourselves in having created a new order just because you have introduced new ornaments in the capitals and in the other parts of the building. My dear Sirs, the same elements that appear in the Doric are still there, the same architraves, columns, friezes, and cornices. And if one looks attentively at every temple built with the Doric order, one finds that the ornamentation of the smaller parts varies so much from one to the other, that one can easily say that there are as many orders as there are monuments." What would the inventors of the Ionic

and Corinthian orders answer? They would, for their own part, repeat the critic's words and say: "If one examines the principal proportions of our orders, one finds that they differ quite a bit from those of the Doric order"; and they would be sure to have dispelled all my doubts. But I, using the critic's words once again, would add something which, strangely enough, would contradict both them and the critic: "If one looks attentively at the Doric order in all the temples of Greece, Asia, and Italy, one finds that its principal proportions vary so much from one to the other that one can easily establish as many orders as there are temples; the proof of all this is in the examples that Mr. Le Roy and Mr. Steward have gathered in their *Recueil*."

So, to go back to what I was saying, my dear Protopiro, one and only one is the style of architecture that we follow. How much longer will we refrain from admitting that to vary the ornament is not the same thing as creating a new order? A better way to put this would be to say that there are really three styles that we follow in architecture (style or order, as you please): one composed by columns, one by pilasters, and one composed by the continuous wall. It is truly crazy to think that different proportions will produce a new kind of architecture! Even the large proportions would get lost in the whole, and it already happens that we cannot distinguish the difference in the measurements of ancient and modern buildings. Furthermore, why look for other proportions? It is sufficient that the frieze not fall under the weight of the cornice, the architrave under the weight of the frieze and the cornice, the column under the weight of all three combined. These are the proportions of architecture - they have all been discovered! Whether these proportions vary, whether they increase or diminish in size so as not to jeopardize the solidity of the building, is of little importance. Consequently, since the intention is to make a building stand up, there will not be many different ornaments to confuse the beholder, only those that derive from that intention.

So, my dear Protopiro, since there is no way to create new orders, and since the difference in the proportions





does not contribute to make any appreciable difference in the appearance of a building, how can one abolish what has become the common procedure for architects without becoming monotonous?

But let us suppose the impossible: let us suppose that the world, though weary of all that does not vary day by day, would be kind enough to put up with your monotony. What would architecture be reduced to then? "To a vile trade where all would be imitation," as a certain gentleman has already pointed out; you and your kind would be reduced to being very ordinary, undistinguished architects, little better than bricklayers. They, at least, by doing the same thing over and over again, learn their trade by heart and have also the advantage of doing it mechanically, without effort. The architectural trade would cease to exist because whoever will want to build will not make the mistake of asking an architect to do what a bricklayer would do for less.

Protopiro: Yes, this could happen if architecture consisted only in what is ancient and imposing.

Didascalò: Do not even mention the rest. You know better than I do that bricklayers are as competent as architects for all that concerns the solidity of a building — foundations, materials, the thickness of the walls, the width of the arches; if this also were taken into account, the works of architecture would be quite simple and in keeping with tradition.

Protopiro: Do these 'experts' have any knowledge of the proper sites and of the proper way to place this or that building? Are they aware of all the details that have to be considered in the destination and usage of a building, dictated by economy, excellence, and inclination?

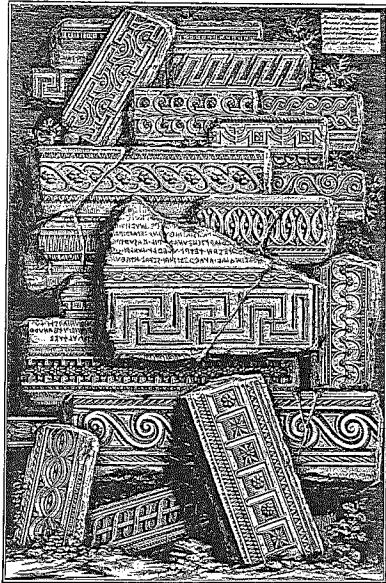
Didascalò: As far as that is concerned, you should remember that what is being done today has always been done. Architects are called only when somebody wants to build a beautiful building; this is all architecture consists of today. But when there is no concern for the

exterior or the onlooker, the builder becomes the architect, and all he needs is somebody who will build the walls. All the other aspects of architecture, apart from ornament, are so unimportant and provide so little fame to the architects involved that very few consider these aspects as having anything to do with their profession.

Protopiro: And you think of these people as architects? Do you also think that the builders should be praised for what they do?

Didascalò: On this subject I will only add that most people have grown accustomed to buildings designed by builders or bricklayers, or architects of this kind; and the people who live in these buildings, instead of being pitied for their inadequate lodgings, are often reproved for the luxury they live in. But let's get back to our topic: When you take away the freedom to vary the ornamentation according to one's talent, you open up the sanctuary of architecture, and architecture, now public domain, will be despised by everyone! In time, the buildings will be built carelessly, those methods that you think are so reasonable will be lost no matter what you now do to uphold them. You will lose the possibility and the desire to criticize, along with the unique position which you now share with other architects: this would be, in your eyes, the greatest of all calamities. I pray you to keep considering your so-called reason in trying to remedy the current confusion, without, however, ceasing to respect the liberty to operate as one pleases.

Please do not think though that by defending this liberty I am also saying that all buildings, no matter how they are ornamented, should be considered appropriate and beautiful. Here is what I think, as far as ornament is concerned. Tell me, how does it happen that something which we have thought beautiful in our imagination appears to us as displeasing once we see it in reality? Why has nobody ever condemned the poets for having imagined buildings with ornaments much stranger and unreasonable than those used by architects? Montesquieu finds fault with a building laden



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column, the clearly defined members which compose it, is not altered in the least by the superimposition of a profusion of ornaments.

Somebody — you will say — will want to adorn a building with obtrusive ornaments. He must then distinguish between the principal ornament and those which surround it; he must not present to the beholder a multitude of different objects, every one of which has been put there to be the most important figure. He must establish among ornaments something which we often see in nature, a hierarchy, a system of ranking, from the most to the least imposing, and only then will the eyes perceive a pleasant and pleasurable disposition of things rather than an irritating confusion. And, in truth, if these and other ornaments which are used in architecture are beautiful in their own right, and if the architecture itself is beautiful, why would we want to give the eye only one pleasure, which is to let it admire only the architecture? Why not give the observer the double pleasure of showing him an architecture covered by ornament, once we have discovered the way to make the one harmonize with the other?

In the meantime, we have achieved here a partial harmonization of the parts with the whole, which, in my judgment, one must try to achieve not only with these particular attributes of architecture but also with all those ornaments that one will want to use. Piranesi, with his drawings which have given rise to our dispute, has wanted to enlighten us with an example, being well aware that to do it with words would be nearly impossible. The reason for this is that, if architects have to be absolutely free to operate as they wish, it would take us an eternity to talk about those rules which, in their freedom, they are nonetheless bound to follow. Whether Piranesi has, in his work, conformed to his own and to my way of thinking, must be judged by him and will be judged by the public. Goodbye, my dear Protopiro. I hope that you will remain of your opinion, because it would be frivolous of you to declare yourself convinced of the contrary by a madman like me!

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