

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Von Harmonie und Mass”: Antike Monumente in den Architekturlehrbüchern des 16. bis 19. Jahrhunderts

Curator: Elke Seibert

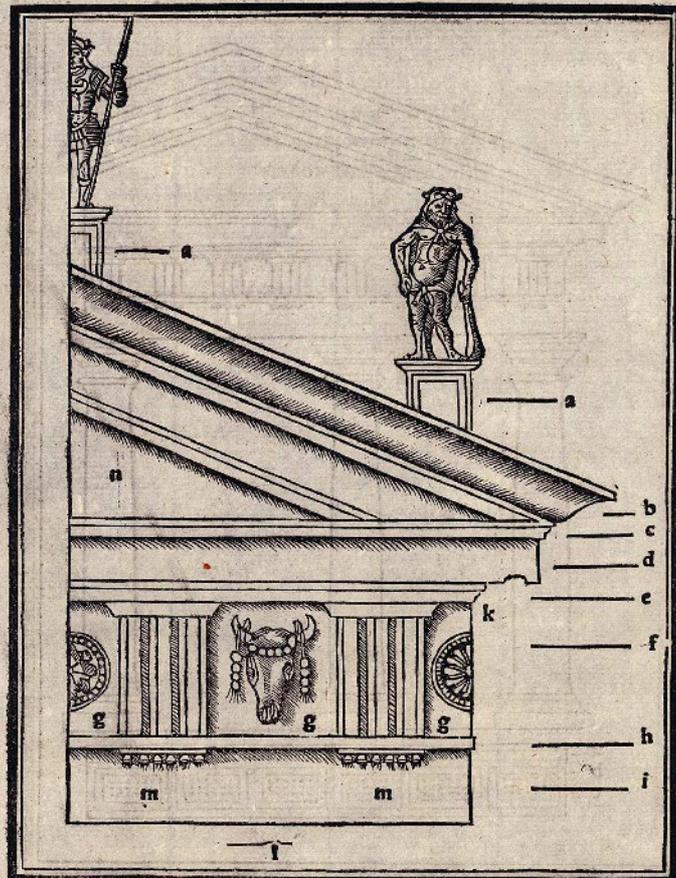
Skulpturhalle Basel

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What is the theory of architectural practice? It has come out of fashion among architects to ask about the theoretical foundations of their own discipline. But reflection on one's own work and its publication has been an important aspect of architectural practice for centuries, as was demonstrated in the exhibition of rare and valuable illustrated books on architecture in Basel “*Von Harmonie und Maß*”: *Antike Monumente in den Architekturlehrbüchern des 16. bis 19. Jahrhunderts* (“*Of Harmony and Measure*”: *Antique Monuments in the Architectural Treatises of the Sixteenth through Nineteenth Centuries*). An overall presentation of architectural theory from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century can, of course, hardly ever raise a claim to completeness. Nevertheless, with a group of dedicated students from the University of Heidelberg's Institut für Europäische Kunstgeschichte, Elke Seibert assembled an impressive exhibition on the topic which featured rare architectural books from the university libraries of Basel, Bern and Zurich as well as the Stiftung Bibliothek Werner Oechslin in Einsiedeln, and gave a broad overview of the evolution of architectural theory.

The thread of continuity weaving through the entire exhibition was the reception of antiquity through readings of Vitruvius. After a manuscript of the *De Architectura* by Marcus Vitruvius Pollio was rediscovered in 1430 by Poggio Bracciolini in the St. Gall monastery library, generations of architects and scholars used the ancient material as a source for establishing their architectural theories. They arranged the contents and, where necessary, added further information. From the beginning it was also a central concern to add illustrations to the text.

Appropriately, the tour through the history of architectural theory began with Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* in a precious edition of 1485 with



- a. acroteria
- b. sima
- c. cymatium
- d. corone
- e. cymatium
- f. triglyphi
- g. methopæ
- h. tenia
- i. epistylium
- k. capitulum
- triglyphi
- m. gutte. alie
- gutte scalpantur sub corona ad ppediculum triglyphorum de qb⁹ infra
- l. modulus
- n. tympani

Triglyphis ita collocatis, methopæ q̄ sunt iter triglyphos, æque altæ sint, q̄ lōgæ. Itē ī extremis angulis semimethopia sunt impleta dimidia moduli latitudie. Ita. n. erit vt oīa vitia et methopæ et itercolūniōæ et lacūariōæ, q̄æq̄ les diuisiōes factæ erūt, emédēt, Triglyphi capla sexta pte moduli sūt faciēda, Supra triglyphorū capla corona ē collocāda ī pietura dimidia & sexta pte hñs cymatiū doricū ī imo alteæ ī sūmo, itē cū cymatiis corona crassa ex dimidia moduli, Diuidēda aut sūt ī corona ima ad ppendiculū triglyphorū & ad medias methopas viæ directiōes & guttæ distributiōes, ita vti guttæ sex ī lōgitudinē tres ī latitudinē pateāt, reliq̄ spatia, qd̄ latiores sunt methopæ, q̄ triglyphi, pura relinquant, aut fulmina scalpant, ad ipm q̄ mētū coronæ icidat linea, q̄ scotia dicit, Reliq̄ oīa tympana, sima, coronæ, quē ad modū scriptū ē in ionicis, ita pficiant, Hæc rō ī opib⁹ diastylis erit cōstituta.

Detail of a Doric temple pediment, from Fra Giocondo, *M. Vitruvius per Jocundum solito castigatior factus cum figuris et tabula ut iam legi et intelligi posit.* Venetiis: Jo. Tacuinus, 1511, p. 37
Photograph: Universitätsbibliothek Basel / Skulpturhalle Basel

handwritten annotations, and continued with early editions of Vitruvius, such as Fra Giocondo's *De architectura* (Venice, 1511) and the first translation from Latin into Italian, Cesare Cesariano's treatise published in Como in 1521. The German translation by Walter Ryff was of particular interest at the exhibition venue since it was displayed in an edition published in Basel in 1575.

These textual analyses of Vitruvius, which were the initial focus of scholarly interest, were followed during the sixteenth century by increasingly sophisticated illustrated manuals for practical use. Sebastiano Serlio's *Sette libri d'architettura*, which - with the exception of Book VI - were published between 1537 and 1575, are the best examples for this period. The exhibition displayed an impressive range of numerous translations and editions of Serlio's treatise that illustrated the great international success of his writings. Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola's *Regola delle cinque ordini d'architettura* aimed still more at practical use: Vignola reduced architectural theory to an analysis of the five classical orders of columns and in so doing prepared the ground for a dogmatization of form that lasted well into the twentieth century. A particular highlight was the edition of Vignola's *Regole* published in Siena in 1635, featuring engravings of some portals attributed to Michelangelo.

The seventeenth-century discourse of architectural theory was determined mainly by French authors and accordingly Roland Fréart de Chambray, Claude Perrault and François Blondel were represented with their fundamental architectural treatises. Consistent with the exhibition concept, less significant seventeenth-century contributions were omitted. This omission, however, constitutes one of the few criticisms of the exhibition: a broader perspective including the English and Spanish developments during the century would have been instructive.

The exhibition concluded with an eclectic mix of travel literature and contributions from the beginnings of scientific archaeology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; among these Gottfried Semper's *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Ästhetik. Ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde*, and Charles Garnier's reconstructions of ancient monuments with lavish color illustrations deserve particular mention.

Rounding out the successful exhibition concept were a number of cork models of Roman antiquities from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Together with engravings from Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Vedute di Roma* they strikingly evoked the reception of ancient architecture during this period.

With its varying perspectives—the rediscovery of Vitruvius in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the orders of columns in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the colored and three-dimensional reconstructions of the ancient world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the exhibition offered a dense and vivid picture of architectural theory as a response to the heritage of antiquity across four hundred years. Furthermore, it provided a rare opportunity to see a rich display of precious early architectural books and related objects which normally are carefully preserved in libraries and archives throughout Switzerland and Germany

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Publication related to the exhibition:

Elke Seibert, editor, *Von Harmonie und Maß. Antike Monumente in den Architekturlehrbüchern des 16. bis 19. Jahrhunderts*, Heidelberg: Mattes Verlag, in cooperation with the Skulpturhalle Basel, 2009, 184 pp., 114 illus., CHF 50.00 / € 39.00, ISBN: 978-3-86809-027-7

The book contains eleven essays (with contributions by Elke Seibert, Tomas Lochman, Werner Oechslin, Heiner Knell and others) as well as a large section with catalogue entries on the individual treatises and cork models.