PHILIBERT DE L'ORME'S PREMIER TOME DE L'ARCHITECTURE

There is to be found among the books in the exhibition of the principal accessions of 1927 and 1928 in the Department of Prints a copy of the first edition of Le Premier Tome de l'architecture de Philibert de l'Orme, printed at Paris by Frederic Morel in 1567.

This book of de l'Orme's went into no less than six editions, one the year following its first publication, and one, in photographic facsimile, not so very long ago, for it was the first important book on architecture by a French writer, and so practical a one that for a number of generations it was the best treatise on stereotomy in the French language. Into it de l'Orme poured all that knowledge of stone-cutting which from having been the hit-or-miss secret of the old master masons was thenceforth to be a matter for the architect's draughting table.

In some ways this book may be regarded as the forerunner of the great treatises on architecture as that artful science is now known and practised. Before de l'Orme's time the architects had made sketches and the master builders had lived up to them as best they could, or, as often happened, had gone their own ways. He brought together, into the architect's hands, not only the general design, but the equally complicated and infinitely more technical and practical matter of how buildings were to be put together. He went even further than that in practice, and for the first time, in French history at least, kept an oversight upon the contractors and their charges. It cost him the love of the masons and the contractors, and after the death of Henri II was doubtless in some measure responsible for the swiftness of his fall from the great position which he had attained as the first architect and superintendent of the king's buildings.

But in many ways this Premier Tome of Philibert's—for he was never to publish his promised second volume—is much more than a mere book about the techniques of building; it is one of the great source books for anyone who would find out and understand many of the most important and interesting things about the sixteenth century in France. He poured into it a most full record of his own personality, of his adventures and experiences and ideals, making of a technical treatise so personal a thing that in the fifth edition the printer had to recast many of its sentences for lack of an adequate supply of capital J's. As a memoirs it is to be set alongside that of du Bellay. Not only does he tell about his youth in Rome and how he measured and drew and excavated antique fragments and masonry and became the friend of a future pope, but about his later relationships with the Cardinal du Bellay, the king, and the lady we know today as Diane de Poitiers.

He gives wise admonitions about where to build and the matters of soils and prevailing winds in their relationship to building sites. He consciously introduces all sorts of new words—now so old and hackneyed—into his talk. At the beginning of his fifth book he says, "Reader, I beg of you not to find it odd if in this discourse I sometimes use Greek, Latin, Italian or other words. Because, to speak truly, our French tongue is so poor and sterile for the explanation of many things, that we have no words which can represent them properly if we do not either usurp foreign speech and words or make use of some long circumlocution." And then he begins to juggle such things as architrave, epistyle, hemicycle, stylobate, metope, and many other strange words that by his contemporaries were put down as mere pedantic showing-off, as shown by the pleasant story in the Contes d'Eutrapel. Constantly he speaks of the glories of classical architecture, and displays the full enthusiasm of his generation for the Italian Renaissance styles. In the background of his picture of the bad architect are to be seen a steeple and a chateau with moat, drawbridge, round crenellated towers, and a "donjon keep"; in the background of the good architect are classical buildings and an antique ruin. He disliked the Gothic profusion of ornament and decoration, as compared with the austerity and the cleanliness of the classical types of architecture. ("Point de feuillage ny bassetaille qui ne
Massent qu'ordures, villenies, nids d'oiseaux, de mouches et semblables vermine." And also he had the feeling that any good builder has for constructions that have solid permanence. He knew from actual experience that the classical types of construction lasted indefinitely as compared with the Gothic types which were always tumbling to pieces and being shored and rebuilt. ("Aussi telles choses sont si fragiles et de si peu de duree que quand elles commencent à se ruiner, au lieu de donner plaisir, elles donnent un grandissime déplaisir et triste spectacle." And he also knew that they were not so healthy or practical for the purposes of living and working. ("De sorte qu'il vaudroit trop mieux à l'Architecte, selon mon aduis, faillir aux ornements des colonnes, aux mesures & fassades [ou tous qui sont profession de bastir s'estudient le plus] qu'en ces belles regles de nature, qui concernent la commodité, l'usage, & proufit des habitans, & non la decoration, beauté, ou enrichissement des logis, faitz seulement pour contentement des yeux, sans apporter aucun fruit à la santé & vie des hommes.")

He stops to give a word of warning that is still needed, "I have often seen how those who like to call themselves architects have done badly by themselves by trying to use the orders of columns as they have measured at Rome or elsewhere, in spite of the fact that their own work was much smaller. ... No architect, whoever he be, can do good work in taking his measures proportionately to those of the ancients, unless he accommodates his work to the same size, length, measures. ..." He discourses about all the things that architects should know, but says that the art of eloquence is not one of them—"Many that know not how to talk very much are most studious and inventive in their profession and much more to be praised than those who are great talkers and hold forth at length with much ostentation of fine drawings well colored, which their buildings do not in the least resemble." Architect should know how to draw plainly and clearly, but should beware of making such drawings as are "enriched with paint and gold or tricked out in color, as is usually done by such as want to deceive other men." It is as though he were looking forward to the palmy days of boards of directors, philanthropists, and competitions. And at the end of his volume he draws pen pictures of the good and the bad architect, one of which is as revealing a self-portrait as that fine woodcut which he inserted in his Nouvelles Inventions of 1561.

Unfortunately there is no place here to recount his adventures in 1546 during the English attack upon Brest, in the defense of which he improvised dummy cannon, or during that hectic July, 1559, when within six days he lost his royal master, was discharged from office, and got mixed up in a little stabbing affray in which two men lost their lives. Nor is it possible to follow up his many interesting inventions, which ranged from new methods of supporting roofs and floors to bringing water to the Tuileries gardens. Palissy gives an account of his pumps at Meudon, the failure of which brought about the enmity of the Duke of Guise and through him of Mary of Scotland, queen to Francis II. Neither is it possible to adduce the reasons for believing that Rabelais knew and admired him, or to go into an account of his celebrated quarrel with Ronsard, other than to quote Ronsard's acid lines:

J'ay veu trop de marons
Bastir les Tuileries
Et en trop de fagons
Faire les momeuries.

Of the buildings that he made, or played a part in the making of, little is left. The chapel and the great entrance at Anet, which he did for Diane, and the monument at St.-Denis to Francis I are the most important of those that remain. The Tuileries lasted until the Commune in 1871, and the fragment in the Beaux-Arts is familiar to all who have played about Palis. He was perhaps not the greatest architect of his time, but in his book he left an artistic and personal testament which had greater influence upon the immediately subsequent development of his art than any other, and that for us of today is in many ways the most interesting literary document about French architecture of the sixteenth cen-
tury. It is one of the great monuments of the history of taste.

For students of prints it contains one priceless passage, the only contemporary account of a technical detail that has bothered many people. At Munich and in Vienna there are Renaissance woodblocks bearing uncut drawings made directly on the wood, and so it has generally been assumed that the Japanese method of pasting drawings on the blocks was never followed in Europe. But listen to de l'Orme as he complains of his wood-cutters:

"Toutesfois ie veux bien aduertir les lecteurs que ie ne trouve mes figures si iustement taillees que ie les auois protraictes, pour autant que les tailleurs ont costume de mouiller, & quelquefois faire vn peu bouillir le papier de la protraicture, premier que de le coller sur la planche, pour la conduite de leur taille. Et selon ce qu'ils tirent ledit papier, il s'estend d'vn costé, & restroissist de l'autre. Qui est cause que ie ne trouve en beaucoup d'endroicts mes figures si iustes que ie les auois descrites & proportionnees."

In this day of self-conscious and doctrinaire "typography" de l'Orme's book is, or should be, particularly interesting to the virtuosi in such matters, as it raises a series of critical questions to which, seemingly, little thought is given by those gentlemen.

It is one of the handsomest pieces of printing of its particular time and place, and there are those that think it would hold its head high in any typographic company, for it is a fine athletic book that carries itself with a swing and says what it has to say with clarity and elegance. In the ordinary sense of the word it is hardly a picture book, but it is certainly and definitely an illustrated and a woodcut book. Many pages in it show as careful correlation between cut and type and margin as any of those more dandiacal and scented volumes that have come from the presses of the world in more recent times, and, in addition, it has the power of design and personality that might be expected from the fact that it was seen through the press by its author. It is not only a fine volume, it is a real book and not merely one of those artificial, interior-decorated curiosities which timid lovers of typography in the abstract have whistled up out of their imaginations. It speaks the printing language of its time boldly and frankly, and, knowing none of the costive niceties of those who are ashamed of their native manners, takes its size and form directly from its function as a work of information and practice—a matter that in these days of "fine printing" is worth considering for a moment.

However interesting and important printing and typographic design may be, certain things cannot be passed over by anyone who is in the habit of using books as distinct from that of looking at them. Reading books and looking at the pictures in them will doubtless be admitted to be the reasons for which most people have books, just as there can be little doubt that primarily these are the two reasons for which most books are made. Looking at books, on the contrary, is a rather artificial matter that only became possible after books had ceased to serve their original functions. It is a side issue of collecting and is practically never met with save in communities or groups that have undergone the subtle changes in valuation that come when their objects have lost their primary uses. So long as an object serves the utilitarian purpose for which it was made it is one thing, but the minute its function is changed it becomes another thing and usually an amazingly different one. As coins, most of the objects put out by the Greek mints were rather poor, they could not be stacked and they were preordained for clipping. But once those coins ceased to be coin of the realm they became works of art and were valued not in accordance with their expressed values or their bullion weight but for their artistic excellence. It has been the same way with books. Some of the early books, after they ceased to be books and became curiosities, were looked upon as works of art. But as these early books were both rare and expensive people began deliberately to make new works of art that were like them—or, rather, that they thought were like them, except in so far as they "improved upon" their models. These shams are not books at all nor are they planned to fill the functions of books.
They begin and they end as curiosities. Now, unfortunately for itself, the deliberately contrived curiosity is a much greater curiosity than at first it seems. A real curiosity—the thing that in the course of time has honestly changed its function—has always about it some homely remnant of the saving grace of honesty. It has aspects that in its changed state are rather dull and inefficient, but which are guarantees of its having once at least been a real thing and not merely a curiosity. If it is an illustrated book made for a practical purpose, that purpose will always have the upper hand in any little conflict between it and typographic nicety. Its cuts, for instance, will not be squeezed into any preordained relationship to the type page and margin, but if necessary for their purpose will follow the requirements of that purpose. Thus the deliberately contrived curiosity is somehow always just a little too good, or too fine, or too something for one quite to have a whole-hearted belief in it—just as one never takes too seriously even the most idealistic of legislative measures if it happens to have lost its enacting clause. Perhaps they are like those faces which patient care and the lavish use of cosmetics have turned into things which are—may one say—artificial and no longer really useful for their original purposes of smiling and laughing, and talking, and, perhaps, of kissing. Whatever it may be that has happened to them, they are now camouflages and no longer real things. Always one is more than a little on one’s guard about them and the things, the aspirations, that lie back of them. And just so it is with these fancy books that are not books and are not meant, honestly, to be dealt with as books. They rarely go into more than one edition, and that almost invariably “tiré à petit nombre.”

The great outstanding fact about books is that they contain two things of substantive importance, their texts and their illustrations, and any number of things, among them “typography,” which, as the lawyers would say, have only an adjectival interest. The printer’s task is to cope with the text and the illustrations, and the minute that he regards them as secondary in importance to the packing box in which he puts them up, he is in the same foolish plight as the amateur musician who, regarding the master’s score merely as a vehicle for self-display, proceeds to distort it in the image of his own “personality.” The fact that people gamble in their work and seek profits from their fliers in printing is merely the equivocal excuse that any green-goods man might give.

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