RENAISSANCE BOOKS ON ARCHITECTURE

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For many years the late W. Gedney Beatty was a familiar and kindly figure among the visitors to the Museum’s Print Room, where he took keen interest in the growth and development of the ornament collection and especially in the prints and illustrated books dealing with architecture. When he died last year he bequeathed to the Museum an important part of his library, including his Vitruviuses, in which he took particular pride, and his editions of the renaissance writers on architecture. Starting with a fifteenth-century manuscript in an English hand, Mr. Beatty’s Vitruviuses included fine copies of all three of the editions printed before 1501, an unusually long run of the editions printed in the sixteenth century, and a large proportion of the important editions printed since that time. The renaissance writers, such as Serlio, Vignola, and Palladio, were represented by many of the various editions of their works, including some that are of quite considerable rarity.

Mr. Beatty’s books were received in the late autumn of 1941 and at a stroke put the Print Room’s collection of the earlier architectural writers among the outstanding groups of its kind in this country. Thanks to his generosity it will be possible to combine his books with the large number already in the Print Room in a single collection. When this has been done the Vitruviuses in the collection will be housed separately in Mr. Beatty’s own old mahogany bookcases. Unfortunately the task of comparison, selection, and description of the books in the combined collection will be laborious and slow, and will be further complicated by the difficulties brought about by the war. Therefore there appears to be little probability that the Beatty books will be available to the public for quite some time to come.

These renaissance architectural books are of the greatest interest from many very different points of view. Their texts present some of the abiding problems of textual scholarship. To the bibliographer the various editions have all the charm of the utmost difficulty and complication. What other field can produce such a tangle as that of the various editions of the books of Serlio, or such a lovely oddity as that second edition of Vitruvius which contains two conflicting colophons, one of which says Florence 1496 and the other Venice 1495? Their illustrations, in addition to containing some of the finest prints of their several kinds, present an infinity of the most fascinating questions. There are families and subfamilies of woodcuts, reprinted, copied, altered, and changed, the filiation of which is as interesting and frequently as complicated as the genealogy of any group of hybrid tea roses. Out of these illustrations came not only the great buildings of France from the time of the Valois down to the present time but many of those in Italy and England. The complicated crossing of strains that resulted in our American Williamsburg and Salem cannot be understood without going back to these original sources.

It is doubtful whether any other art at any time has been marked by what seems to be an outstanding peculiarity or idiosyncrasy of renaissance architecture. This peculiarity is the fact that the most influential of the architectural leaders acquired their power over the imaginations of their contemporaries and followers not so much directly by the buildings they designed as through the books they wrote about building. The general rule in most of the arts is that practice precedes theory and that the weavers of theories take a subsidiary rank in their hierarchies. In the development of the renaissance classical styles in architecture this was exactly reversed. It is largely
because of its theoretical origin that so much post-renaissance architecture in western Europe has borne the pale cast of a learning and an intellectuality that have been conspicuously absent from many of the other arts. The part that Alberti, the first great modern writer on architecture, played in initiating this was exceedingly important.

One of the most interesting things that was done during the Renaissance was the tying together of the architectural forms of the surviving classical monuments and fragments with the ancient text of Vitruvius and the following up of that task in the theoretical and descriptive writings and pictures of such architectural ideologists as Serlio, Palladio, and Vignola. The result was the creation of an academic grammar and vocabulary of forms which for centuries has dominated the architecture of Italy, France, England, and this country. Perhaps no other so small a group of texts and pictures has had a greater or more concrete effect upon the arts and cultures of the western European peoples. The mere count of the sixteenth-century editions, their languages, and their geographical distribution, provides material for much thought.

During the last two or three decades there has been a great deal of talk and discussion about abstract art, and, as a good many people have found objection to it, much of the discussion has been characterized on both sides by its heat rather than by its historical understanding. The people who have most objected to modern abstract art have been those who have most firmly and obstinately clung to the purely abstract rules of form and proportion laid down by the old architectural writers; the people who have been the most wholeheartedly in favor of modern abstract art have been the ones who have led the attack upon those rules and proportions.

In so far as architecture is an art of form and design and not merely an engineering practice, it is very definitely in the class of the abstract arts, and the mere fact that in its renaissance classical forms it has a logic and a grammar does not in the least remove it from that class. The really amazing thing is that this logic and grammar should so eagerly have been accepted by the Western world that eventually they became something like the so-called "facts of nature"—that was the way things were and there was nothing that could be done about it. Much of the strength of the rules may have been that they provided for infinite variety within a well-understood convention or tradition capable of dealing with almost every problem that ordinary life could produce. In many ways it was as though the

Columns from the first illustrated edition of Vitruvius (Venice, 1511). In the Beatty collection
west of Europe had adopted a code of manners which greatly simplified while dignifying its life.

This code of manners never sank very deep into the consciousness or thought of those parts of the world which had not for long periods been integral parts of the ancient Roman empire. In Germany and Austria it was always something foreign, and the more closely the architects attempted to perform within its prescriptions the more their work took on the aspect of the cold, dead "reconstructed" models of the famous buildings of antiquity that at one time were chillily fashionable in all museums. It was only when the Germans took the classical motifs and used them in their own native way, as in the South German baroque, that they were successful with them, but they were able to achieve this success only by a complete and gemütlich disregard of the code of manners that was the strength of the Italian and French designers. No more eloquent testimony can be desired of the way in which the Western mind has been "conditioned in its reflexes" by the strict canon of the renaissance classical tradition than the dismay which most people reared in that tradition feel upon their first sight of such buildings as the "Asam" church in Munich or the Belvedere in Vienna. To such people those buildings are in many ways as upsetting as "modern art" was at the Armory Exhibition in New York in 1913, or as the idea of a fifth dimension still is to many engineers.

The theories, the learning, and the taste of the architects of the Renaissance have come down to us most clearly and impressively through their books. It was really the books that carried the styles on their victorious course across Europe. Few architects in the old days enjoyed the somewhat doubtful privileges of foreign study, and their knowledge of the forms and rules was acquired from books rather than from firsthand knowledge of the monuments in foreign countries. The French architects of the sixteenth century knew little or nothing of the great classical monuments in the south of France, and they looked exclusively to Italy and its books for their knowl-

[Image: Capital from the first illustrated Vitruvius edge of what they regarded as a new style rather than as a revival of an old one.]

The cultural importance of a fine collection of the kind that, thanks in great part to Mr. Beatty, has now been assembled in the Museum’s Print Room is obvious. It may be hazarded that, to architecture as a living art as distinct from an archaeological learning, a collection of this kind is of far greater importance than all the photographs of existing monuments, for the old books have the great advantage that while they provide a vocabulary, a grammar, and a logic, they cannot be slavishly copied, as, alas! photographs all too often and too misunderstandingly are. Whatever the psychological reason may be, there is no doubt of the fact that the photograph does not lead to creative design as the old engraved book illustration did. Perhaps it may be, very simply, that the engraved book illustration required a good deal of basic thought before it could be adapted to the occasions of daily life. Every student of art knows how impossible it is to make a lively drawing from a photograph, and every serious connoisseur knows the fine difference in quality between drawings made from memory and those after the model. The old engraved illustrations being an integral part of the communal memory, their pious preservation is one of the best assurances of the future of good architectural design.
Title page of a blue paper copy of the 1540 issue of the third book of Serlio
In the Beatty collection
Title page of the first (undated) edition of Vignola's “Five Orders of Architecture” (about 1562). In the Beatty collection