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Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America

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Pre-Paper of the seminar:

How Architectural Criticism was born. The Case of the Pantheon in the Renaissance

The scope of this pre-paper is to provide the premises and the background of what I am going to deliver on Wednesday, therefore I will not include here the specific content of my presentation which starts where this writing ends.

Description of the project

During my Spring semester at the Italian Academy I started a new interdisciplinary project between Renaissance Architecture and Literature.

Architectural criticism as we know it expressed through journals, websites, books, exhibitions, and symposia, was born in fifteenth Century Italy with the raise of Renaissance architecture in Florence. With the practice of Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) and the theory of Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), architecture turned into an autonomous discipline, just like medicine or law, provided with its own set of theoretical rules, the aspect that made possible the “swerve” from the Middle Ages. This is due in part to the rediscovery of Vitruvius *De Architectura*, the only survived ancient roman treatise on architecture which introduces, among other issues, the notion of the architectural orders, the language through which classical architecture expresses itself made by columns, entablatures or arches. Such literary source forced successful architects to provide themselves with intellectual tools turning them from builders into cultivated professionals. Elaborating Petrarch’s (1304-1374) metaphor this is when of the *manus* merged with the *ingenium*.

However one should not be surprised, giving that is during the Sixteenth-century the humanistic disciplines found their set of rules: Drama writers started to follow pseudoaristotelic norms, and books like Baldassarre Castiglione’s *Cortegiano* (Venice, 1528) and Giovanni Della Casa’s *Galateo* (Venice, 1558) provided to the members of the courts a set of rules to properly live and behave in the modern courts. Furthermore, architectural criticism was generated in a period of time when literary criticism, from Petrarch to Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) – the author of the first Italian grammar -

produced a set of rules for the new *lingua volgare*, the emerging popular language in the need to be codified.

This new status reached by the Renaissance architects fostered an endemic corporative aspect: the professional rivalry, something that pushes to criticized the work of peers in order to prevail on them. Being Renaissance architecture a discipline generated on one side by these theoretical rules coming from the treatises, on the other from the study of roman ruins, architects could rely upon *exempla*, so the quality of their work could be judged according to how they comply with them. However, these two sources do not always coincide, a dilemma that sparked the critical sense of the architect forced to wonder who's right or wrong.

My project seeks to sort out all the kinds of criticisms, including professional, self-criticism, critic toward ancient and modern buildings, patrons criticizing their architects and vice versa, citizens criticizing public or religious buildings, criticisms written in architectural treatises, and lastly, committee's reports of architectural competitions.

The first step aims to collect enough material such as texts, annotations, documents, drawings, and a selection of actual buildings of which their architects and architecture are judged. The second step consists in processing this material in order to raise and eventually answer questions including the following: Is architectural criticism a consequence of literary criticism? How they relate? How criticism improved Renaissance architecture and its theory? What is its impact on the thinking of the architect and on the public? Is there a narrative or a specific language to express criticism? If yes, from where this language does come from? How much the critical skills (and the freedom of criticism) reflect the broader local culture and is connected with the political nature of a state or city? So for example is criticism different from republican contexts like Florence or Venice and baronial/papal Rome? Why is Florence the center where criticism was born? What is the relation between criticism and taste?

The understanding of Roman ruins between material evidence and theoretical sources

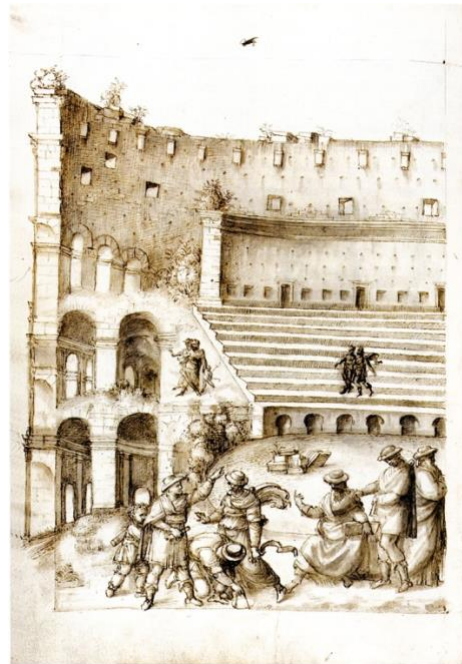


Figure 1. Anonymous, known as "Master of Oxford," *Architects and Scholars studying inside the Colosseum*, c. 1515. Oxford, The Ashmolean Museum, LO1028A.2WA2008.22, f. 15v.

My presentation will focus on the most developed part of the project which is about the criticism toward ancient roman monuments, those ones celebrated as the *exempla* to follow in order to conceive the most possible advance Renaissance architecture.

However, for our purpose, such consideration has to be clarified because its meaning changes over a period of time spanning from c.1430's and 1530's. During the Middle Ages, very often the beholders could not even find the words to describe those large fragments which reverence and interest was not totally lost after the collapse of the Roman Empire, as the famous early XII century cardinal Hildebert de Lavardin's (c.1055-1133) line *Roma quanta fuit ipsa ruina docet*, illuminates.

Nevertheless, ruins were still passively perceived, and appreciated only because they differed from modern buildings. That attitude changed starting from late XIV century Florence. The first generation of humanists including Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), and Flavio Biondo (1392-1463), started to approach the ruins trying to incorporate, for their understanding, other classical literary sources, and to look at them as physical object with a deeper critical eye. For example, they carefully analyzed the structural discontinuities in order to discern possible later

additions, as well as reading the epigraphs attached to the structures in order to date the parts around them according to their Latin and their contents.

But is Leon Battista Alberti in his *De Re Aedificatoria* (1452, but published only in Florence in 1485) the first one to consider the ruins as a written text to be studied and analyzed with the same philological methods with which classical literary sources are read. He claimed that theaters and temples can teach us much about roman civilization just like “listening to distinguished masters”. However, Leon Battista was aware that the lesson of the ruins was not enough to understand them, because the material evidence lacked of the theory that generated it. For example, for most part of the XV century, it was unknown what those large structures standing up in the middle of the cities like for example the theater of Marcellus, and the theater of Pompeus, or the giant baths of Diocletian and Caracalla, served originally for, just because they lost their function right after the fall of the Empire and were reused afterward in different manners (dwellings, shops, storages, monasteries, etc.). This is when Vitruvius *De Architectura* came into the picture, the only survived source on Greek and Roman theory and practice of architecture. For the specific case of the theater, in Book VI he explains in details its architecture and function, so only in reading this part and comparing that to these ruins, the association was possible.

However, this source carried some obstacles in terms of accessibility. Its Latin, emended by engineer Frontinus in the 3rd century, was quite obscure - Alberti stated that Vitruvius wrote his text nor Greek neither Latin, just like he would not write anything – and the manuscripts came with no illustrations. Furthermore, the text describes Greek architecture and Roman republican architecture, the former basically unknown by Italian architects, the latter overwhelmed by the large amount of imperial buildings survived – the majority of the ruins studied by the humanists - conceived after Vitruvius’ life, an aftermath of the Augustan cultural revolution that also affected architecture. Vitruvius, for example, in describing the baths, was referring to small structure typical of his time which have very little to do with the massive imperial compounds. He also lived before the era of triumphal arches, of large and fancy suburban villas like Hadrian’s one, of the Pantheon, and knew very little about the “composite architectural order”, an hybrid system of columns to be added to the three canonic Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian.

For these reasons Vitruvius remained hard to be understood until 1511, when for the first time Veronese humanist Fra Giovanni Giocondo (c.1433-1515) published in Venice an illustrated edition of

the treatise with a much accessible classicizing Latin, even though the real disclosure happened only from 1521 when the first illustrated translation in vulgar, along with a detailed commentary, was issued in Como by Cesare Cesariano (1475-1543), even if only in 1529 it started to circulate. Therefore, the understanding of the ruins and of the *De Architectura*, with some notable exception, lined up only toward the beginning of the fourth decade of the XVI century.

The architect and the monument: Antonio da Sangallo the Younger and the Pantheon

My presentation shows a meaningful case study, probably the only one documented, on how a famous Renaissance architect, Antonio da Sangallo the Younger (Florence 1464- Terni 1446) studied the Pantheon, the most influential roman monument survived from the Antiquity, and how he uses it in his practice.

Copying and studying antiquarian remains through the act of drawings, extracting their meanings, selecting key elements or patterns, and imaginatively reusing or adjusting their forms to different contexts were common practices among Renaissance masters of intruding the past into their modern works. The Florentine painter Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530), for example, studied the celebrated Roman sculpture of the Laocoön, which had resurfaced in 1506, and adopted the leg of the group's right-hand figure, for the main protagonist of his *Sacrifice of Isaac* (Madrid, Prado Museum; 1528). Andrea's choice to cite the leg of this famed sculpture, makes it a referential source that his cultivated audience could have recognized and appreciated, thereby manifesting his skilful confrontation with a revered classical model for rethinking the value of the Renaissance image.

Similarly, from the late antiquity up to modern times, multi-layered encounters with ancient cultures and their monumental fragments living in the present have enriched the theory and practice of arts. In particular, early modern architects, antiquarian-driven artists, and their patrons have viewed the Roman Pantheon, a second-century pagan temple later consecrated as a church by pope Boniface IV (550-615) in 609, as a model of architectural perfection and of inspiration. The interest for this roman monument produced at least three interrelated outcomes: 1) a large number of more or less accurate and detailed renderings and views of the building, the most pristine temple to have survived from the Imperial Roman past; 2) a series of graphic reconstructions of what was believed to be its original shape; 3) several projects of Renaissance (and beyond, if one thinks for example at Low Library in

Columbia campus) edifices inspired by this Roman masterpiece, both built or left on paper. This presentation takes a close look at a small, yet unique, corpus of drawings with commentaries on the Pantheon: this analysis shows how this monument is reconsidered and understood within the concomitant Renaissance architectural practice and the debate on the printed editions of Vitruvius's *De Architectura*.

I will offer an in-depth analysis of Florentine architect Antonio da Sangallo the Younger's (1484-1546) three sheets of the Pantheon (now kept in the *Gabinetto dei Disegni e Stampe, Uffizi* in Florence, GDSU), in which he studied the building, commented on it on paper through writings and drawings, on what he believed were problematic features of the Roman temple. I will demonstrate how an engaged Renaissance architect using his technical expertise, professional competence and knowledge of the Vitruvian treatise, criticized the Pantheon, which he no longer considered as an Albertian *exemplum* to faithfully imitate but a structure to confront for the critical development of the Renaissance built architecture and theory. Antonio's visual and textual reactions to the Pantheon as manifested in his Uffizi sketches drawings constitute the evidences for elaborating on what Manfredo Tafuri (1935-1994) in 1976 has long defined as the notion of "operative criticism" which he defines as it follows:

An analysis of architecture (or of the arts in general) that, instead of an abstract survey, has as its objective the planning of a precise poetical tendency, anticipated in its structures and derived from historical analyses programmatically distorted and finalised. By this definition operative criticism represents the meeting point of history and design.

Architects' critical confrontation, evaluation and assessment of buildings of the past as paradigmatically condensed in Antonio da Sangallo the Younger's graphic *oeuvre* remain an extremely precious and relevant aspect of the dialectic between the built architecture and its concomitant theorization within the Vitruvian debate. Antonio's endeavour declares a break with long standing reverential attitude toward past structures, ultimately having significant implications and ramifications for our understanding of the development of Renaissance architecture.

Antonio da Sangallo the Younger's graphic corpus reproducing the Pantheon during the Renaissance, indicates that we can only speak of the very first critique of some aspects of this Roman monument

and the very first attempt to correct the temple with the knowledge of such modern practicing architect. Even if Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439-1501), during the last quarter of the fifteenth-century, had rendered the Pantheon in a creative manner, his reconstruction depended on arbitrary proportions imposed by the manuscript's page layout, which forced him to re-design the interior. Earlier than, and during Antonio's life architects' opinion of the Pantheon has been only extremely positive: In his book on Antiquities published in 1540, Sebastiano Serlio (1475?-c.1554) judged the Pantheon from a Vitruvian point of view, and he is nothing but highly appreciative about the quality of its architecture, likewise Leon Battista Alberti had been earlier, and Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) would be. Antonio's attitude differed also from that shown by Raphael (1483-1520) and Baldassarre Peruzzi (1481-1536), whose interest in the monument manifested in their drawings - was profound and accurate, and implied a great deal of admiration but it remained purely analytical.

Antonio's reflections on the Pantheon were of different kinds. Arguably he had been the busiest architect in both Rome and central Italy following Bramante's (1444-1514) death until his own death in 1546. Chief architect of the Saint Peter's basilica working under three Popes (Leo X, clemence VII and Paul III), he was simultaneously appointed by a number of highly influential Roman patrons including the Farnese family, and highly appraised for his deep knowledge of Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, of which he owned at least four editions. His fame as an expert of the treatise was acclaimed even in France by distinguished humanist Guillaume Philandrier (1505-1563). Aided by his brother Giovanni Battista (1496-1548), Antonio studied the Pantheon throughout his life, producing a large number of drawings, which scholars have classified in two categories: Some constitute a set of analytical studies with precise measurements of the structure, others make a series of drawings and writings wherein Antonio criticized aspects of the interior of this Roman monument to propose his own corrections following the rational and taste of an early Cinquecento architect like he was. These latter drawings are hard to date even if I argue they might be related with the preparatory study, dated c.1518, for the project of the roman church of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini.

In any event, from the second half of the 1510's, Antonio was already showing his *vis polemica* in the famous *memorial* (Uffizi 303A), where he criticized eminent architects of his time referring to ten flaws of Bramante's and Raphael's project for St. Peter, suggesting his own solutions. These critiques relate to a variety of aspects, and they all stemmed out from a Vitruvian lens and they also reflect a growing rivalry between architects of the post-Bramantesque generation. According to known

accounts, it is necessary to wait for Michelangelo (1475-1564) to face such a polemical attitude toward ancient and contemporary architecture and, interesting enough, Antonio was his target! Sangallo's tendency to criticize architecture, sometimes even his own, will never cease: for example, in 1526 he had shown enough critical skills to comment in a constructive language on antique buildings, including Roman triumphal arches and Byzantine structures like San Vitale in Ravenna. To sum up, it is probably not by chance that the first attempts of Renaissance architectural criticism appear in a time where the design process is aided by theoretical rules that all together form a language, expressed by the architectural orders, provided with a proper syntax and a grammar. This is the framework in which Antonio's criticism to the Pantheon should be contextualized.

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New York, February 26th, 2023.