
Jennifer C. Watson

Citer ce compte rendu


Circle of 1711. Caserta can be read as a desperate attempt to salvage the intersubjective realm of meaning (convention, the public realm) as the locus of architecture still possible in the 18th century. This rhetoric is particularly clear in two very original features of the palace: the emphatic diagonal junctures of the massive vaulted corridors and entrances that link the courtyards, and the theatre, where the literal stage-set of a mythical play and the king’s ‘proscenium-box’ engage in a dialogue, pointing to the transformation of the entire palace-theatre-garden complex into a stage-set. Taking for granted architecture as ‘convention’ in a perspective world, Vanvitelli’s palace is far apart from the critical transcendence of the limitations of relativism and convention which was propagated by Vico’s hermeneutics and, correlatively, in the architecture of Lodoli, the ‘Rigoristii’ and Piranesi.

Vico’s interest in number as mathesis, as a primal form of symbolization, is obvious in his work on Pythagoras. His suspicion and criticism of apriori systems, exemplified by the philosophies of the 17th century, however warn us against reading into his concern for number an interest for systems of mathematical logic. It is well known that there are inconsistencies in Vico’s oeuvre, but we can safely assume that he was being critical of the method of natural science, postulated as a model for all types of human knowledge. Having this in mind, Hersey’s description of proportional relationships in the palace as ‘close packing, plaid graphs, nesting, and vectors’ seems inappropriate. It would be useful to differentiate between the author’s reading of architectural order in terms of a vocabulary of functionalised mathematics (such as geometric planning) and the disclosure of the intentions as can be gleaned from the texts, architectural treatises and scientific culture of the time.

The perception of Caserta in the tradition of Renaissance palaces ruled by proportion, particularly seen in the reference of Gioffredo’s scheme to the Escorial, and through it, to the primordial Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, is all very convincing. Gioffredo wrote that architectural order is ‘the union of several things that by commutative proportions create the formation of a whole.’ Hersey illuminates the symbolic horizon of the rhythms, proportions and symmetries of the palace. These proportional relationships draw from the invertebrate mythopoetic power of numbers to embody the ideals of order and justice of the monarchy through a synthesis of geometric structure and classical ornament in ways that seem to echo Vico’s thought. What is less obvious, however, when one recognizes the antiscrival use of Vitruvian traditional principles and metaphors in the building, is the assumption of both the most substantial (critical) aspects of Vichian philosophy, and the use of some planning methodology that may have promoted the reduction of plans and elevations to mathematical systems or series.

Perhaps the major lesson to be learned from Hersey’s book is that the ‘house’ is architecture by virtue of it being a symbol. The concern of the architect is not comfort or aesthetics as subjective opinions to be realized in the private realm. For the house to be architecture it has to embody a transcendental myth and operate in the realm of the public—the domain of intersubjectivity—regardless of the contradictions that this may entail in the contemporary world. Only established in this domain does meaning appear, constituted by its own ‘syntactic’ horizon, historically layered, with all its richness and ambiguity.

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VICTOR CHAN ‘Leader of My Angels’: William Hayley and His Circle (exhibition catalogue). Edmonton. The Edmonton Art Gallery, in conjunction with the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / The University of Alberta, 1982. 89 pp., illus.

This exhibition catalogue is an outgrowth of Victor Chan’s doctoral dissertation on George Romney’s drawings of John Howard Visiting Prisoners. Like other such catalogues, it is a substantial publication which breaks new ground. The Edmonton Art Gallery (in conjunction with the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and The University of Alberta) is to be commended for producing the catalogue and mounting the show itself.

‘Though Hayley was not a major poet,’ Chan notes in the Introduction, ‘his better ideas were... frequently filtered through his friends and expressed in their works,’ ideas which in many ways, ‘helped in the national crusade to create a new artistic identity through the formation of a school of history painting’ (p. 9). Yet, except in connection with his patronage of William Blake—who once named him: ‘Leader of My Angels,’ the title of this book—Hayley’s role in the development of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English art has not been adequately assessed. Chan’s object, therefore, is to examine Hayley’s relationships and artistic involvements in an effort to bring to light some of the major issues confronting artists of the period. Dividing his essay into two main parts (plus Introduction and Conclusion), he deals with sensibility, sublimity, and modernity in the context of history painting, then specifically the Hayley circle itself.

Eleven artists are represented by 151 drawings, prints, books and paintings, but the eleven surprisingly include Jean-Honore Fragonard, to my knowledge unacquainted with Hayley, while an important omission is Joseph Wright of Derby, not to mention Jeremiah Meyer. Moreover, the author’s observations are somewhat limited in scope, though his thesis is well founded and convincing, as he reconsiders for the first time all previous ideas from this meaningful point of view.

Part I serves primarily as background, being concerned with sensibility, the Sublime, the religious revival, and literature in relation to a search for dramatic subjects; the ‘modern’ concept of a national school of history painting is seen as their converging point. Particular reference is made to the artists of Hayley’s own circle: Thomas Stothard, John Flaxman, and Romney in the eighteenth century. The poet’s life is summarized—Chan neglecting to mention that he was an enthusiastic amateur artist, a salient point—and his publications especially The Triumphs of Temper presented as projects which involved both artists and literary figures. However, the first biographer of Romney was not Hayley, as stated (p. 11), but
As an exhibition catalogue, too, the publication reveals a few flaws. More than half of the works in the show are reproduced, integrated in the catalogue essay — an admirable design decision. But the quality of the plates is only adequate. Further, the exhibition list (pp. 81 ff.) lacks any reference to the illustrations and the entries being arranged seemingly at random, catalogue numbers are assigned to the artist rather than the work of art. The entries themselves are not always consistent; cat. 2, for example, is ascribed to Caroline Watson who engraved the work with no mention of Romney, the painter, yet cat. 52 is ascribed to Flaxman with no mention of the engraver, and cat. 98 to Blake ... (after Romney). It is also unfortunate that the typeface chosen is too small for easy readability. Nevertheless, the catalogue ends with two useful appendices, one of Hayley and his writings, the other of artists' biographies (which perhaps would have been more effectively confined to the poet's circle), followed by a selected bibliography (p. 80). If some additions are mentioned here, it is simply as publications contributing further to the issues discussed in this book:


Notwithstanding the above criticisms, Chan's catalogue, with its novel approach, constitutes a telling interdisciplinary study, as his exhibition correspondingly served to make visible little-known American and especially Canadian holdings of English art. Too often the nationalistic emphasis on Canadian art can be limiting; the example of The Edmonton Art Gallery should spur (it is hoped) similar institutions to originate European shows of consequence.

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This book, as we are told in the introduction, grew out of an exhibition of ninety American paintings in Washington collections that was sent to Mexico in 1981. Those who organized the exhibition found it so intriguing that they hoped to have it shown in Washington and elsewhere. Since this could not be done, they continued themselves with translating into English what is, in effect, a modified and expanded version of the catalog (originally published in Spanish) which accompanied the exhibition to Mexico.

As one looks through the reproductions in the volume, one understands their enthusiasm. It is an interesting and impressive array of works arranged in chronological order from Cooper's The Coopers' Family (1776-77), to Richard Dickebnorn's The Man of La Mancha (1978). The exhibition must have been stunning. Unfortunately, it is with leafing through the color reproductions that one's interest in the book ends. The catalog entries accompanying each reproduction as well as the prefatory text, a brief survey of the