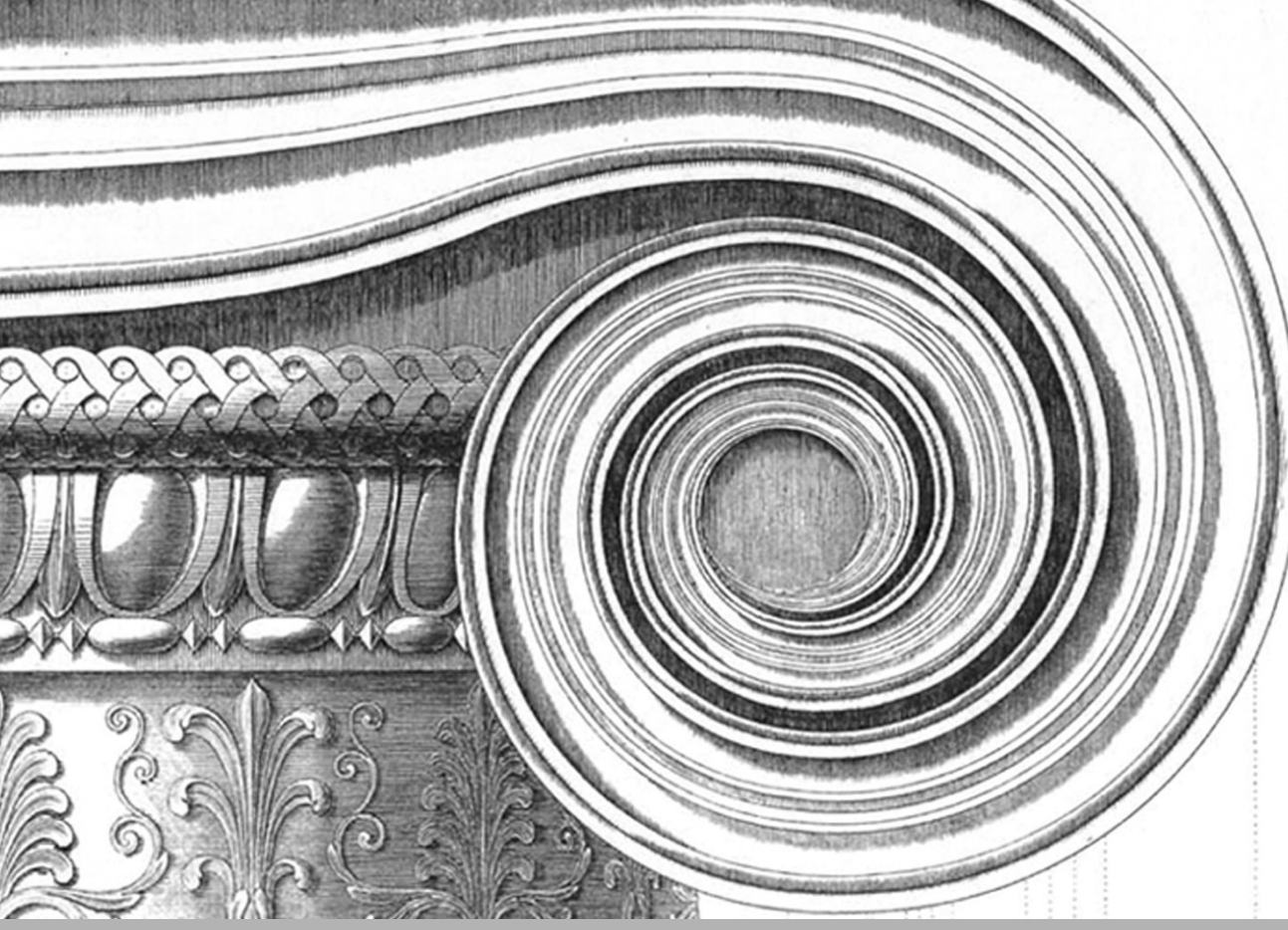

A. FRENCH CLASSICISM: ANCIENTS AND MODERNS

Introduction

The relationship of France and Italy during the Renaissance is defined by the geographical proximity of the two areas and by the interactions of the two cultures. Italy, to begin with, was not a country in any sense of the term. A map of the area at the start of the sixteenth century shows the entire southern half of the Italian peninsula largely under the control of Spain, the republics of the middle region and (an often hostile) Venice composing the Papal States, and parts of Lombardy and Piedmont forming the southern extension of the Holy Roman Empire. France during the same years had geographic borders much smaller than today and was still making its political passage from a monarchy controlled by feudal lords to a centralized state. The religious reformations of the first part of the sixteenth century further complicated this picture. In 1517 Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of Wittenberg castle's church; in 1529 Henry VIII of England began the process of separating his church

from that of Rome; and in 1541 Jean Calvin forcefully assumed control of the city-state of Geneva. Catholic France was thus drawn into alliances and conflicts with the papacy but also into continuous military competition with Britain, Spain, and with the various territorial centers of the Habsburgs. Thus the French monarch Charles VIII initiated the Italian wars in 1494 in pursuit of Naples. Louis XII led a French army south in 1499 in pursuit of Milan, and François I led yet another French army into Italy in 1515 – both to press dynastic claims and to challenge the Habsburgs for control of the Continent. These wars at least served the purpose of cultural exchange. After François's victory at Marignano in 1515 he possessed Milan (for a while), where he became impressed with the splendor of the new Italian residences. Shortly thereafter he invited Leonardo da Vinci to France to design a royal palace at Romorantin (1515–17), and around the same time he began work on his Loire-valley châteaux at Bois (1515–24) and Chambord (begun 1519). The French king especially appreciated the cultural life of Italian humanism and based his own court on its model.

This fascination soon became a trend. The same king, as we have seen, invited Serlio to France in the early 1540s, and Vignola eventually followed. French artists and scholars by this date were also regularly making their way to Italy. Scholarly annotations to the treatise of Vitruvius were published by the Frenchman Guillaume Philander in Rome in 1544, the following year in Paris. In 1547 Jean Martin made the first French translation of Vitruvius, and in 1553 he published a translation of Alberti's treatise. It was a little over a decade later – in 1567 – that the first French treatise of the Renaissance appeared. Its author was the architect Philibert Delorme (c. 1510–70), an almost exact contemporary of Palladio.

Over the next century Renaissance forms became the basis of an emerging French classicism. Architects such as Pierre Lescot (d. 1578), Salomon de Brosse (1571–1626), Jacques Lemercier (1582–1654), and François Mansart (1598–1666) established a refined Renaissance manner of building with a distinct French coloration. The political situation of the country was also changing. The bloody religious wars between Catholics and Calvinists that had wreaked havoc in the last third of the sixteenth century had been brought to a tentative (but not permanent) halt by the Edict of Nantes of 1598, which acknowledged at least the principle of religious toleration. The economic devastation wrought by the strife now slowly came to be repaired over the first half of the seventeenth century, despite the instability the Thirty Years War (1618–48). By the end of this continental conflict, France had succeeded Habsburg Spain as the leading military power on the Continent and was poised for greater things in the cultural field. The architect Louis Le Vau (1612–70) was developing a style of classicism with distinct overtones of the Italian baroque. Painters such as Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorraine were beginning to rival the efforts of Italian painters. And in 1648 a petition was presented to the 10-year-old Dauphin to create a Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. The glorious Age of Louis XIV was poised to begin.

For architecture, French classicism takes its decisive turn in 1671 with the founding of the Royal Academy of Architecture. The Academy was one of several founded by Louis XIV as a way to codify theory and advance the country's standing in the arts. For France these institutions also became a means to define an artistic path independent from that of Italy. French classicism, along every front, now became hostile to the "baroque" turn of the Renaissance, and the various academies advocated a sterner and more rigid interpretation of classicism. The person most responsible for defining this position in architecture was the Academy of Architecture's first director, François Blondel, who in 1674–83 published his two-volume *Cours d'architecture* (Course of architecture). The theory of Vitruvius was central to Blondel's version of classicism, but he nevertheless allowed the Renaissance interpretations of Alberti, Serlio, Vignola, Palladio, and Scamozzi in certain matters. Blondel's view of antiquity and the aesthetic underpinnings of his teachings, however, would not go unchallenged. As in every instance when an institutional authority is set in place, dissenting voices are soon to be heard. Blondel found his protagonist and able opponent in the person of Claude Perrault, a surgeon, scientist, part-time architect, and translator. Squaring off in the 1670s and 1680s – they would initiate the first round of a debate that famously became known as the "quarrel between the Ancients and Moderns." The Renaissance tradition of classicism now came under its first challenge.

23 RENÉ DESCARTES
from *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1628)

Renaissance theory, as it became assimilated into France, was predicated on the belief that the arts, like the sciences, participated in the greater order of the universe, in an eternal grammar of mathematical forms, numbers, and relations. This belief, architecturally reinterpreted by Villalpando at the start of the century, was central to Renaissance theory, and it is this belief that will first come under attack in the second half of the seventeenth century. The initial soundings of disquiet, however, are heard not from an architect but rather from the young French mathematician living in Holland, René Descartes. He had spent much of the previous decade traveling around Europe, and was at the time turning from mathematics to philosophy. In embarking on his deductive "system" or method of reasoning – later known as Cartesianism – he, in the late-1620s, compiled a notebook of rules that would guide him through his logical deliberations. The skeptical note voiced in rule 3 – later published as the first principle of his *Discourse on the Method* (1637) – came to be referred to as "Cartesian doubt" and would be widely embraced by scientists intent on advancing knowledge. The implied challenge here to the theories of Plato and Aristotle could be transposed into architecture as skepticism toward the teachings of Vitruvius.

Rule Three

Concerning objects proposed for study, we ought to investigate what we can clearly and evidently intuit or deduce with certainty, and not what other people have thought or what we ourselves conjecture. For knowledge can be attained in no other way.

We ought to read the writings of the ancients, for it is of great advantage to be able to make use of the labours of so many men. We should do so both in order to learn what truths have already been discovered and also to be informed about the points which remain to be worked out in the various disciplines. But at the same time there is a considerable danger that if we study these works too closely traces of their errors will infect us and cling to us against our will and despite our precautions. For, once writers have credulously and heedlessly taken up a position on some controversial question, they are generally inclined to employ the most subtle arguments in an attempt to get us to adopt their point of view. On the other hand, whenever they have the luck to discover something certain and evident, they always present it wrapped up in various obscurities, either because they fear that the simplicity of their argument may depreciate the importance of their finding, or because they begrudge us the plain truth.

René Descartes (1596–1650), from *Regulae ad Directionen Ingenii* [Rules for the direction of the mind] (1628), trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 13.

But even if all writers were sincere and open, and never tried to palm off doubtful matters as true, but instead put forward everything in good faith, we would always be uncertain which of them to believe, for hardly anything is said by one writer the contrary of which is not asserted by some other. It would be of no use to count heads, so as to follow the view which many authorities hold. For if the question at issue is a difficult one, it is more likely that few, rather than many, should have been able to discover the truth about it. But even if they all agreed among themselves, their teaching would still not be all we need. For example, even though we know other people's demonstrations by heart, we shall never become mathematicians if we lack the intellectual aptitude to solve any given problem. And even though we have read all the arguments of Plato and Aristotle, we shall never become philosophers if we are unable to make a sound judgement on matters which come up for discussion; in this case what we would seem to have learnt would not be science but history.

24 ROLAND FRÉART DE CHAMBRAY
from Preface to *A Parallel of the Ancient Architecture with the Modern* (1650)

It is within this skeptical context – and as a reaction to the Italian baroque – that we must consider the treatise of Roland Fréart de Chambray (Sieur de Chambray). This diplomat and connoisseur had honed his artistic interests in Italy in the 1630s, where he was close to the circle of painters and savants that had gathered around Poussin. In 1640, while he was accompanying the Paris superintendent of building on a tour of the south, he was asked to write a treatise that would summarize for his countrymen the architectural teachings of antiquity and the Renaissance. He chose to limit his subject to the orders, and to do so in a comparative manner that would pit one example from classical times against several Renaissance examples. He also brought to his study a full classical bearing: a belief in absolute beauty and the importance of geometry (he was also a translator of Euclid) and numerical proportions.

The book, as a result, is a study of contrasts. On the one hand, it is a reining in of French classicism from the dangers of the Italian baroque and an attempt to ground theory once again on Vitruvian or antique principles. On the other hand, Fréart de Chambray – with his recognition that there was no universally accepted proportional system – allowed the modern French architect the same freedom to invent "as the *Antients*," thereby preparing the way for other French departures from Italian taste.

Roland Fréart de Chambray (1606–76), from Preface to *Parallele de l'architecture antique et de la moderne* (1650), trans. John Evelyn in *A Parallel of the Antient Architecture with the Modern*, printed in London by The Roycroft for John Place's shop in Holborn, 1664, pp. 1–3.

READER,

Before I do altogether resign this *Book* to thy judgement, I advertise thee, that 'twas not my design in compiling it to teach any man, much less yet to satisfie those *Critical* spirits which the World so much abounds with: nor, is the Publique at all beholding to me; I have no thought of obliging it, an envious, and evil Judge: In a word, being nothing inclin'd to give them satisfaction, I have easily gratified my labour with the desir'd success: My principal drift was, First, to satisfie my self, nor has it cost me much trouble; though we sometimes find certain humors that are more averse, and difficult to themselves, then they would prove to others: For my part, I do not so use to treat my self: We have Enemies enough besides; and whatever I were able to do, I expect that men should presently say of me, all that Jealousie does commonly suggest in reproach of Novelty. That being no *Artisan*, it did not become me to prescribe to others the rules of their *Mystery*; That I teach nothing particular and extraordinary here; That the *Books* from whence I have gather'd all that I say being common and much ampler then mine, there was no need to have scumm'd them thus superficially over; That it had been better to have search'd, and produc'd something which the World had not yet seen: That the mind is free, not bound, and that we have as good right to invent, and follow our own *Genius*, as the *Antients*, without rendring our selves their Slaves; since *Art* is an infinite thing, growing every day to more perfection, and suiting it self to the humor of the several *Ages*, and *Nations*, who judge of it differently, and define what is agreeable, every one according to his own mode, with a world of such like vain and frivolous reasonings, which yet leave a deep impression on the minds of certain half-knowing people, whom the practice of *Arts* has not yet disabus'd; and on simple *Workmen*, whose *Trade* dwells all upon their fingers ends onely: but we shall not appeal to such *Arbiters* as these. There are others to be found (though truely very rarely) that having their first studies well founded on the *Principles* of *Geometry* before they adventur'd to work, do afterward easily, and with assurance arrive to the knowledge of the perfection of the *Art*: It is to such onely that I address my self, and to whom I willingly communicate the thoughts which I have had of separating in two branches the *five Orders of Architecture*, and forming a *body* a part of the *Three* which are deriv'd to us from the *Greeks*; to wit, the *Dorique, Ionique*, and the *Corinthian*, which one may with reason call the very flower and perfection of the *Orders*; since they not onely contain whatsoever is excellent, but likewise all that is necessary of *Architecture*; there being but three manners of *Building*, the *Solid*, the *Mean*, and the *Delicate*; all of them accurately express'd in these three *Orders here*, that have therefore no need of the other two (*Tuscan*, and *Composita*) which being purely of *Latine* extraction, and but forrainers in respect to *them*, seem as it were of another *species*; so as being mingl'd, they do never well together, as those to whom I discourse will soon perceive, when they shall have once put off a certain blind respect and reverence, which *Antiquity*, and a long custome (even of the greatest abuses) does commonly imprint in the most part of men, whose judgements they so pre-occupate, that they find it afterwards a difficult matter to undeceive themselves; because they deferr too much, and hardly dare to examine what has been receiv'd by the vulgar approbation for so long a time: Let them but consider, that we find no *antique example* where the *Greek Orders* are employ'd amongst the *Latine*, and that so many ages of ignorance have pass'd over us, especially in the Arts of *Architecture*, and *Painting*, which the Warr, and frequent inundations of *Barbarians* had almost extinguish'd in the very Country of their *Originals*; and which were in a manner new born again but a few years since, when those

great Modern *Masters, Michael Angelo*, and *Raphael*, did as it were raise them from the Sepulchers of their antient ruines, under which, these poor *Sciences* lay buri'd; and I shall have fair hopes of their Conversion, and to see them of my opinion. It is the very least of my thoughts to broach *Novelties*; on the contrary, I would (were it possible) ascend even to the very sourse of the *Orders* themselves, and derive from thence the *Images*, and pure *Ideas* of these incomparable *Masters*, who were indeed their first *Inventors*, and be instructed from their own mouths; since doubtless the farther men have wander'd from their *Principles*, transplanting them as it were into a strange soile, the more they are become degenerate, and scarce cognoscible to their very *Authours*. For to say truth, have we at this present any reason in the World to call those *three* by the name of *Orders*, viz. *Dorique, Ionique*, and *Corinthian*, which we daily behold so disfigur'd, and ill treated by the *Workmen* of this age? to speak seriously, remains there so much as a simple *Member*, which has not receiv'd some strange and monstrous alteration? Nay, things are arrived to that pass, that a man shall hardly find an *Architect* who disdains not to follow the best and most approved *examples* of *Antiquity*: Every man will now forsooth compose after his own fansie, and conceives, that to imitate *Them*, were to become an *Apprentise* again; and that to be *Masters* indeed, they must of necessity produce something of new: Poor men that they are, to believe, that in fantastically designing some one kind of particular *Cornice*, or like *Member*, they are presently the *Inventors* of a new *Order*, as if in that onely consisted, what is call'd *Invention*; as if the *Pantheon*, that same stupendious and incomparable Structure (which is yet to be seen at *Rome*) were not the *Invention* of the *Architect* who built it, because he has vary'd nothing from the *Corinthian* Ordinance of which it is intirely compos'd? 'Tis not in the *retail* of the *minuter portions*, that the talent of an *Architect* appears; *this* is to be judg'd from the general distribution of the *Whole* Work. These low and reptile *Souls*, who never arrive to the universal knowledge of the *Art*, and embrace her in all her dimensions, are constrain'd to stop *there*, for want of abilities, incessantly crawling after these poor little things; and as their *studies* have no other objects, being already empty, and barren of themselves; their *Ideas* are so base and miserable, that they produce nothing save *Mascarons*, wretched *Cartouches*, and the like idle and impertinent *Grotesks*, with which they have even infected all our *Modern Architecture*. As for those other to whom Nature has been more propitious, and are indu'd with a clearer imagination, they very well perceive that the true and essential beauty of *Architecture* consists not simply in the minute separation of every member *apart*; but does rather principally result from the *Symmetry* and *Oeconomy* of the *whole*, which is the union and concourse of them all together, producing as 'twere a visible harmony and consent, which those eyes that are clear'd and enlightned by the real Intelligence of *Art*, contemplate and behold with excess of delectation.