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Gottfried Semper

In Search of Architecture

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Was Semper a Materialist?

The public received *Der Stil* as a complete major work in which Semper dealt comprehensively with industrial art as a whole and with the factors conditioning the artistic process. Because throughout the book he emphasized the decisive influence of material and function, he was, and at times still is, thought to have been a materialist. This he certainly was not. He himself stated explicitly that he “opposed modern materialism in art on principle” and that the “constructive-technical interpretation advanced in [*Der Stil*] had nothing in common with the crude materialistic notion according to which the essence of architecture was nothing more than developed construction, as it were, an illustration and illumination of statics and mechanics, simply a display of material.”¹ The reason that he considered material and function to have this overriding importance lay in the task that he had set himself: to trace the way back to the archetypes and show that the primitive makers of the whole range of artifacts had instinctively followed principles identical with those that were in time established for architecture. It was a purely empirical approach; he did not intend to expound on art theory. When he did deal with art in general, however, it is obvious that he was aware of the important impact that factors other than materialistic ones had on artists and their creations.

While still in London, before he had begun *Der Stil*, Semper began a treatise, “*Theorie des Formell-Schönen*,” in which he intended to deal with “the abstract and formal attributes” of a work of art to the exclusion of “all that is extrinsic to the phenomenon, everything that does not relate to it directly, in particular its development in history and the differences in material.”² He identified these abstract qualities of formal beauty as symmetry, proportion, and direction. In response to the old maxim urged upon artists and architects alike to take nature as their model, he set about probing deeper into the structural laws

of nature. Adopting the classification that writers on aesthetics commonly used, he examined the structures of crystals, plants, and animals, including man. The method he applied was unusual but to him quite normal: he reduced the natural object, as if it were a building, to an abstract projection of ground plan, sections, and cross sections. He observed dynamic forces that in crystalline formations coincide, thus neutralizing their effect. In higher organisms, culminating in man and works of art, they either conflict or are polarized into a unified direction. To the centers of these forces (or axes) belong the three attributes of formal beauty—symmetry, proportion, and direction. Of these three one will always be the dominant element, while the other two act only as accompanying factors. But—and this is important in the present context—he went further and identified a fourth attribute, which in its effect surpasses the other three: the quality of content or purpose. This concept might have been suggested to him by Friedrich Theodor Vischer, his colleague at the Polytechnicum.³ But even so it is significant that Semper, who seemingly upheld materialistic principles when examining industrial art products and processes, sought out this concept although the subject of his study was not “style” but beauty as a whole. This fourth “authority,” fitness of content, can, he wrote in “*Theorie des Formell-Schönen*,” “culminate in certain phenomena of a higher order in character and expression . . . it is the cardinal point of the phenomenon, it is the phenomenon’s purpose.”⁴

Years before, Semper had subscribed to the belief that the idea was the foremost factor determining beauty. In an 1843 letter to Vieweg he criticized those architects who “often give the material precedence over the idea which, although it is freeborn, they put into iron fetters by asserting that the store of architectural forms is in essence conditioned by and has evolved from the material.”⁵ Twelve years later he still stood by these principles, the greater part of which he incorporated in the preface to “*Vergleichende Baulehre*.” Toward the end of this manuscript he interrupted his description of Egyptian architecture with this significant note: “It cannot be repeated too often that the author has been convinced from the beginning that the material, though essential, is in no way the first and most important coefficient to affect the configuration of architectural forms. Material must conform to the idea; the idea must not evolve out of the material . . . This conviction will be the basic theme resounding throughout the book.”⁶

Unfortunately, he never got farther than that. “*Vergleichende Baulehre*” remained unfinished, as did “*Theorie des Formell-Schönen*.” Realizing that his contract for *Der Stil* precluded the possibility of publishing any other manuscript he had in hand, he decided to make

use of the greater part of the preface and introduction to “*Theorie des Formell-Schönen*” and work it into the prolegomena to *Der Stil*. In this way he hoped to ensure early publication of his theories of art, apparently not minding that these purely theoretical observations would appear to have little relevance to the empiricism of *Der Stil*. Again, wishing to make public his ideas about the formative elements of adornment, he gave a lecture in 1856 on this subject in which he repeated the content of a chapter of “*Theorie des Formell-Schönen*” and added a summary of his aesthetic theory. The lecture was published the same year.⁷ Architectural style was the theme of another lecture. Semper was convinced that architectural styles reflected the social, political, and religious conditions of their times, and he cited as an illustration the detailed accounts of ancient buildings and cultures he had given in “*Vergleichende Baulehre*.” This lecture also was published and became the only one, shortly after his death, to be translated into English.⁸