

This PDF includes a chapter from the following book:

Gottfried Semper

In Search of Architecture

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Editorial Method

Translating one's own writings has its advantages: communication between author and translator is close, the principle of considering the original text as almost sacrosanct less of an impediment. Naturally, I have tried to convey the meaning of the original as truthfully as I possibly could, but I had no scruples about clarifying passages that now, some years after I had written them, seemed ambiguous or about making corrections and additions when recent research called for them. But apart from this and the addition of short introductions to the three main parts, the American edition is basically the same as the German ones, with this distinction: the texts of the first two parts, here combined into one volume, were originally written and published five years apart.

The identity of author and translator ceased, of course, when it came to the translation of Semper's theoretical manuscripts. The text is at times difficult to understand even for someone whose mother tongue is German. Semper affects, in Pevsner's words, "a literary style which can be horrible." To make it not only understandable but also palatable to the English-speaking reader, long intertwined phrases had to be broken up and simplified. Even emended, the English version is no easy matter to read. This, I am afraid, could not be avoided. It would have been wrong to try to modernize Semper's style. These manuscripts were written in the middle of the last century, and Semper conformed to the more ornate and involved literary style of the time. In addition, he often left the meaning intentionally vague, so a translator would not be justified in deciding arbitrarily on a specific interpretation. Should the reader find one or the other wording odd, it very often sounds odd in German, too. The objective not to indulge in a radical purification but, on the contrary, to retain something of the flavor that his writings convey to the German reader fills in the portrait that I have tried to give of Semper in the first two parts of this book.

Some items that date from Semper's London years—official documents, certain correspondence, manuscripts for lectures—were written in English. This made a deviation from the German edition advisable since I now could cite verbatim what I often had preferred to paraphrase for the benefit of the German reader. To this class of documents belong Semper's London lectures and letters he wrote to Henry Cole. Quoting from these, I did not correct his peculiar and often faulty English.

Furthermore, the manuscripts for his published works as well as for lectures and treatises exist in different versions. As I had done in the German edition, I selected those versions for quotation that best formulated a particular thought or contained some additional information. This explains why at times two quotations that echo one another are in fact not identical. In addition to writing different versions, Semper also frequently revised what he had considered to be the final manuscript. The revisions of the preface and introduction to his "Theory of Formal Beauty" (MSS 178, 179, reproduced at the end of the book) were particularly extensive. I choose for incorporation into the main text those revisions that help to clarify the meaning but, not wishing to burden the text with notes, I did not indicate where a passage in its revised form was adopted in preference to the original one.

The freedom I enjoyed in deciding on the best presentation of the manuscripts, the opportunity I had of updating the main text, of rewording passages where necessary, and of correcting errors—all these fortunate conditions give me hope that the translation of the original edition was worth the long hours spent on it.

Gottfried Semper