

# Gottfried Semper

## In Search of Architecture

Wolfgang Herrmann



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***Gottfried Semper***



Gottfried Semper by Ernst Kietz, 1850. (Semper-Archiv Zurich)

***Gottfried Semper***

*In Search of Architecture*

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*Wolfgang Herrmann*

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## Foreword

### *“Table and Tablecloth”: Joseph Paxton and Gottfried Semper*

On January 28, 1852, several months after the close of the Great Exhibition of 1851, Joseph Paxton gave a speech before the Royal Commission.<sup>1</sup> He tried to explain the structural principle of his exhibition hall, which had become instantly famous as the “Crystal Palace.” He compared the support structure and the glass skin of this hall, which he had derived from a hothouse, to a “table and tablecloth.” He wanted to make clear to the members of the Royal Commission that the new feature of his building method consisted primarily in the improvement of the “tablecloth” (glass skin), which led to the possibility of the “table’s” (the support structure) being “greatly varied to suit changing conditions and changing uses.”<sup>2</sup>

This comparison of a work of architecture to a table and tablecloth would have pleased no one more than the German architect Gottfried Semper. Semper was in fact living in London at the time of the exhibition, but as a political emigrant who had fled Dresden after his participation in the unsuccessful 1849 revolution, he now had to fight for professional recognition in England—a country whose language he had not yet mastered in 1851. Although he was invited to participate in the design of the Great Exhibition that year, his role was limited to minor building and interior decoration.

I assume that Semper would have been pleased and satisfied by Paxton’s descriptive formula table and tablecloth, on the grounds of his unique theory of the fundamentals of architecture, which he had brought along from Germany and which—despite his forced emigration—was published there in 1851 under the title *Four Elements of Architecture*. Semper’s basic theory held that the walls of the primitive house of ancient times were not made of stone but consisted of hanging cloth—rugs or woven “mats.” In other words, Semper also maintained

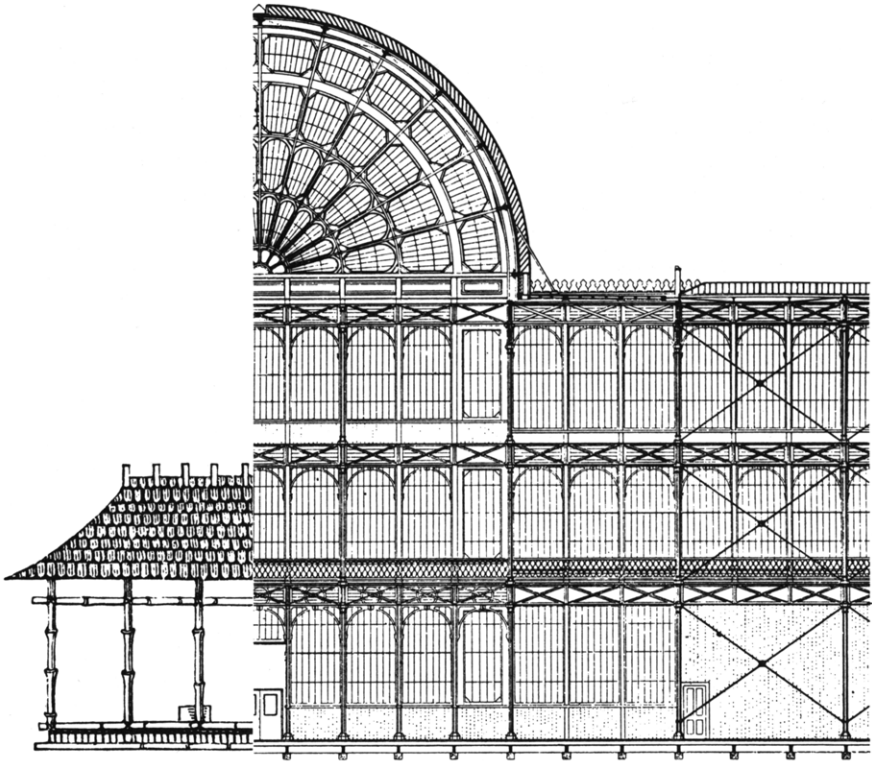
the thesis of tablecloth and table, but he advanced it as a *historical* theory of the “original conditions of human society.” He now found, curiously enough, in the Great Exhibition, that is, in Paxton’s Crystal Palace, an excellent proof for his theory. There he discovered a “Caribbean Hut” (figure 1), which confirmed his theory of the textile-wall.

This bamboo hut evidently made a lasting impression on Semper, for he discussed it first in a London lecture of 1854, “On Architectural Symbols”; then in section 143 of his main work, *Der Stil*, he illustrated it and described it under the heading “The Primitive Hut.” He found in it “not an imaginary construction but a completely realistic instance provided by ethnology . . . which could be seen in the Great Exhibition of 1851. In it appear all the elements of ancient architecture in a highly original manner and without adulteration: the hearth as the center, the earthen platform surrounded by the pilework as a terrace, the roof on columns (pillars), and the woven bamboo mat (fence) as a space divider or wall.” Here we find listed in full the four elements that constituted a house in Semper’s view: the hearth, “the first and most important, the moral element of architecture,” then the earthen platform (terrace), on top of that the roof on columns (supporting system), and finally the wall, which is to be understood as a textile hanging.<sup>3</sup>

Semper assigned a “technical skill” to each of the four elements present in the hut, that is, he presented the four elements of his scheme as crystallizations of the early building professions. For the construction of the hearth were employed “the ceramic and subsequent metallurgical arts”; for that of the earthen platform (terrace), processes involving water and masonry; for the columns and the roof, the art of joinery; and, finally, for the walls, “the art of weaving mats and rugs.”

It goes without saying that this is a highly idealistic scheme. Yet it is not easily forgotten, for two good reasons. First, to conceive the wall as texture, as a mat and a textile hanging, also means to include in the archaic household from the very beginning ornament and color—two elements of future *picture making*; and second, Semper was ready and willing to *verify* his idealistic scheme, as his reception of the Caribbean hut proves. This “completely realistic instance provided by ethnology” thereby became a lesson for him, too, and enabled him to abandon his idealistic point of departure and to find the pragmatic anthropological approach that later on became the distinctive feature of *Der Stil*.

From this point of view, the Crystal Palace of 1851, together with its exhibitions, was a unique phenomenon. For the Caribbean hut



1

Wall and structure, primitive and modern. The Caribbean hut as represented in the Great Exhibition of 1851 compared with Paxton's Crystal Palace, which housed the exhibition.

exhibited there represented the original form of the principle table and tablecloth, which Paxton propounded as his own. In other words the germ of primal form, the seed for the Crystal Palace, was exhibited within its own structure. To date I have not been able to find any evidence that Paxton became aware of this strange coincidence. As far as I know, Semper did not notice this connection either, simply because in his opinion Paxton's work, regardless of how much admiration it received, did not belong in the category of architecture.

*The Function of the Hand in the History of Production*

In the third part of this book Wolfgang Herrmann presents five manuscripts that are to be found in the Semper-Archiv of the Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur of the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule, Zurich. The first three of these five handwritten texts, published here for the first time, are part of "Comparative Building Theory," a final masterwork Semper had planned. Although in his draft for the preface (MS 55) he emphatically criticized the existing theories of Durand and Rondelet and set down his own goals, he interrupted his favorite project in order to write another book (*Der Stil*), "devoted exclusively to the industrial arts." We have to ask why he thus left the field of architecture proper in favor of the industrial arts, including textiles, ceramics, carpentry, masonry, and metalwork. The answer is to be found in a lecture he gave in the London years, that is, before receiving a professorship at the ETH in Zurich.

The crucial passage reads as follows: "A great part of the forms used in architecture thus originate from works of industrial art, and the rules and laws of beauty and style . . . were determined and practiced long before the existence of any monumental art. The works of industrial art therefore very often give the key and basis for the understanding of architectural forms and principles." These two sentences are clear evidence for the transformation of the idealist Semper into an anthropologically oriented pragmatist, who no longer sought explanations from "above"—that is, derived from the monumental—but who found them in the applied arts, in the so-called simple or "lower" genres, and thus in that genre that in his times was called industrial art (*Kunstindustrie*). He justified this decisive fundamental change in standpoint, doubtless also influenced by the impressions left on him by the Great Exhibition and its Caribbean hut, in the first of the sentences quoted above: "beauty and style . . . were determined *long before* the existence of any monumental art" (italics added). This

insight and conviction resulted for him in a logical chain of connections: *because* he believed that the monumental was chronologically a secondary phenomenon, he discovered the vast sphere of the industrial arts; *because* this sphere represented the earliest production of the human hand, he wanted to discover its rules of production; *because* these rules of production were determined by the properties of the material and the properties of their intended use, he discovered thereby the early stages of Functionalism.

Thus it becomes understandable that he analyzed in great detail hundreds of examples of industrial art of many countries and periods, but it is nevertheless astonishing that in this two-volume work by an architect for architects, the entire first volume (approximately 480 pages) is devoted to textile art. In the second volume follow approximately 200 pages on ceramics, 132 pages on carpentry, and 120 pages on masonry—all in all, the most circuitous route ever taken by an architectural theorist to arrive finally at the theme of architecture.

In section 3 of *Der Stil* he distinguished between “four categories of raw materials . . . (1) elastic . . . , (2) soft . . . , (3) of . . . a relative solidity (ductile), (4) hard . . . of retroactive (tensile) strength. Correspondingly, there are four main activities of industrial art. . . (1) textile art, (2) ceramic art, (3) tectonics (joinery), (4) stereometry (stone building), etc.”

Thus in *Der Stil* Semper followed the development of the human hand from its processing of elastic and soft materials to that of ductile and hard ones, in the sense of an evolutionary process of “technical skills.” From our perspective it is striking that he conceived this theory of the evolutionary history of production by the human hand at the very moment when in the countries of the western world so-called machinery became dominant, when the work of the hand was copied and at the same time supplanted by the machine.

### *Semper and Nonverbal Semiotics*

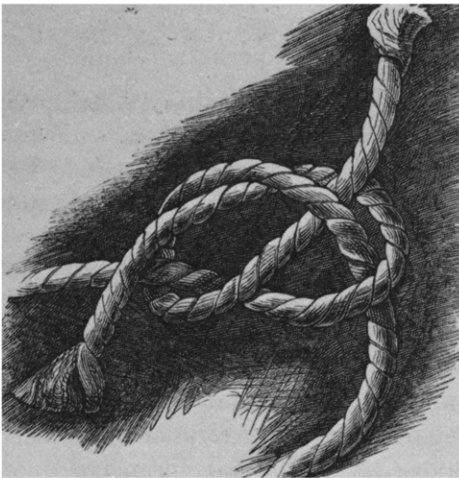
For the most part, Semper was conscious of his own motivation. In the London lecture mentioned above he stated: “When I was studying in Paris I used to walk in the *jardin des plantes*, and there I always felt drawn as if by a magic force away from the sunny garden and into the rooms where the fossilized remains of the animal kingdom of prehistory . . . are arranged in long rows. In this magnificent collection, the work of Baron Cuvier, one finds the types of even the most complicated forms of the animal kingdom.” This “magnificent collection” of Cuvier’s suggested to him, apparently once and for all, the

framework of his theoretical work. It triggered the question: “From the observation of (animal) nature . . . shouldn’t we be allowed to conclude by *analogy* that in the *creations of our hands*, in the *works of art*, approximately the *same kind* of process is to be found?”

It is this analogy to Cuvier’s classification of the forms in the animal kingdom that made Semper’s work fascinating for his readers for many decades. Berlage in the Netherlands, Otto Wagner in Vienna, the followers of the Bauhaus, the architects of the Chicago School, among them Sullivan especially, were all influenced by it. Seen in retrospect, Semper created a concept somewhat parallel to Darwin’s—not inspired by Darwin, however, but by Cuvier, who had advanced his typology forty years earlier.

An example of Semper’s precision in his observation and differentiation of the early manifestations of “industrial art” is his distinction between knotted and plaited work. In section 52 of *Der Stil* he described the knot, which “at first had served as the device of tying together the two ends of a thread” (figure 2); in section 54 the plaited work (figure 3), which interested him especially because it “creates a two-dimensional fabric” and thereby also makes possible woven mats and thus, finally, the textile-wall.

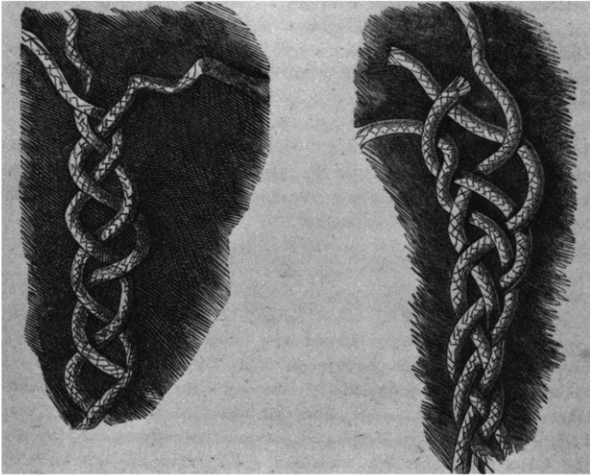
Viewed in light of present-day semiotics, and in particular zoosemiotics, which points out similar phenomena (plaited, however, not by human hand but, for instance, by the beak of a weaver bird), Semper appears as a pioneer (figure 4). He was the first to deal with



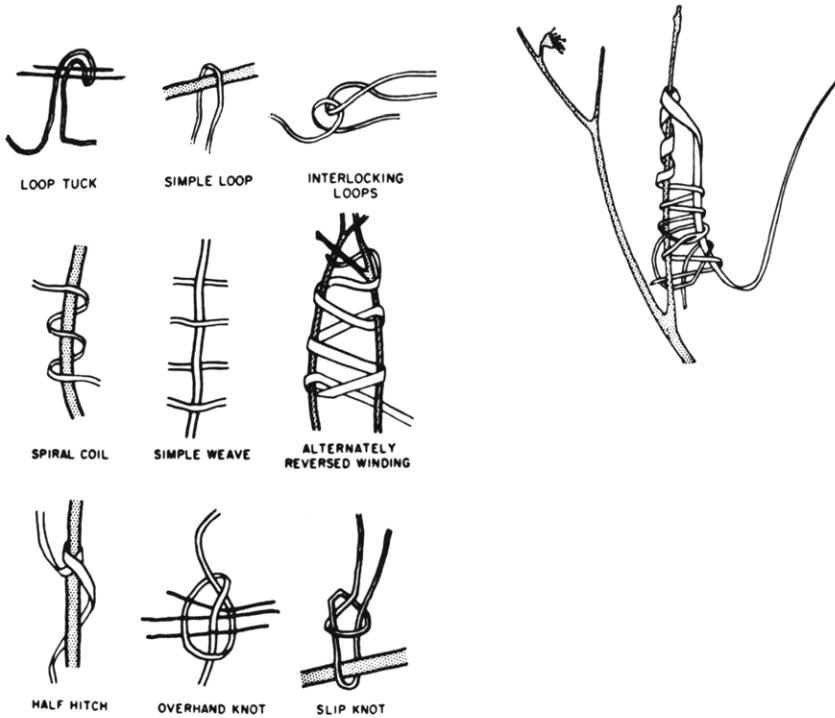
2

Knot. (*Der Stil* 1)





3  
Plaited work. (*Der Stil 1*)



4  
Plaited work built by the weaver bird. (From Thomas A. Sebeok, *Prefigurements of Art*, 1979, after Hancocks, 1973)

some questions whose relevance for today and the near future needs to be discovered anew—as soon as nonverbal semiotics has regained its independence from verbal semiotics. For as long as the phenomena of industrial art are examined exclusively insofar as they allow analogies to language—as in the case of French Structuralism—they yield only limited aspects. The totally different analogy, which fascinated Semper and was triggered by the work of Cuvier, grants to the human hand its own “language” that is independent of verbal structures and receives its own dignity and importance from the very fact that it is structured in a way that is different from the human capacity for verbal language. The Anglo-Saxon semiotic scholars, Thomas A. Sebeok for instance, have always been skeptical of the predominance of the linguistic model and have pointed out its limitations and one-sidedness. There is no doubt that Gottfried Semper belongs to the circle of those pioneers who recognized the nonverbal sign and its own specific nature and began to interpret it.

Adolf Max Vogt  
translated by Radka Donnell

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## *Acknowledgments*

I wish to express once more my deep-felt gratitude to Adolf Max Vogt, whose resolute efforts made the prospect of an American edition come true. My thanks above all to my wife, Anni, who helped with the translation as gladly and well as she did with the initial research at the Semper-Archiv, to Barbara Weinberger, who took an early interest in the translation, revising it with much care, and to Robin Bledsoe, who never tired of struggling with Semper's (and my) prose.

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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.

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# ***Gottfried Semper***

# I

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*Semper's Life and Work*

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*The Beginnings: Semper in Dresden, 1834–1849*

Semper was offered the post as head of the school of architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden when he was thirty-one years old. He had never taught before, nor at the time of his candidacy had he built or published anything. Yet he was finally appointed. No doubt he owed his success in some degree to the strong recommendation of his teacher Franz Christian Gau who, born in Cologne, had moved to France, like many artists of his generation, and had settled in Paris as an architect.<sup>1</sup> Semper had studied under him intermittently for three years, from 1827 to 1830. But the facts that Gau had even been approached by the director of the Academy, Graf Vitzthum, and that his recommendation was taken up so eagerly in Dresden point to another reason for the decision in favor of Semper.

The repercussions of the French revolution of 1830 (which Semper witnessed) brought about the start of a liberal trend in Saxony. Reforms were demanded and at least partly carried out—in the political field by the grant of a constitution drawn up by the chief minister von Lindenau, in the cultural field by a more enlightened policy. This also affected the Academy, as von Lindenau and Graf Vitzthum wished to see the changes necessary for the accommodation of progressive ideas. For this reason they had hoped to persuade Gau to accept the post for himself and, when he declined, had rightly assumed that a student recommended by him would be inspired by French liberal ideas and be well qualified to carry through the much-needed art educational reform. They were not disappointed.

As soon as Semper arrived in Dresden in September 1834, was officially installed in his post, and took the oath as servant to the Crown, he submitted proposals for a reorganization of the teaching method in his department. There were to be no separate classes but instead a close collaboration of all students on one given project.

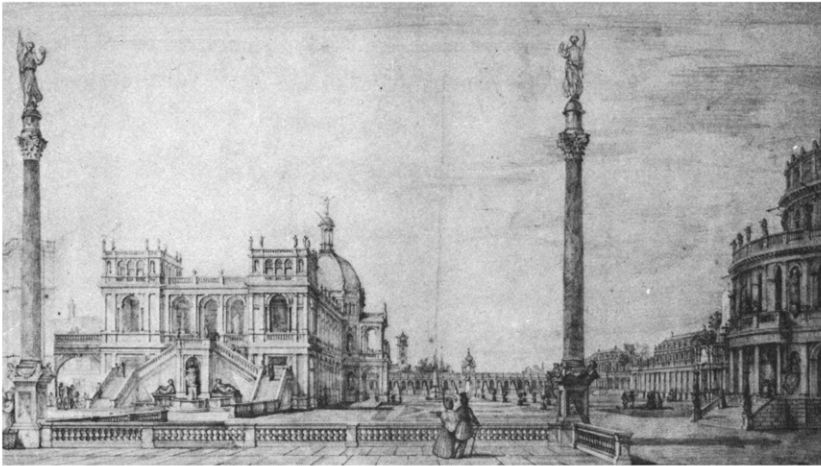


Another essential feature of his system was close interrelation of theoretical and practical instruction. (Twenty years later he was to apply the same method successfully at the Department of Practical Art in London.) Soon after his arrival he gave his inaugural lecture, which served also as an introduction to a course of lectures on the history of architecture.

There is every reason to suppose that all went well: Yet, when the first excitement about the appointment had passed and Semper became aware of the many duties he was expected to discharge, he was beset by doubts as to whether he was equal to the task. He turned to Gau, who in reply tried to restore his self-confidence, telling him that his predecessor, Joseph Thürmer, far from being superior to Semper, had lacked, like all German architects, Semper's great ability "to accommodate high artistic aspirations . . . to the reality of practical needs."<sup>2</sup> These reassuring words helped to allay his doubts.

Semper received further encouragement, of far more consequence, from an unexpected quarter. During the first months of the year following his appointment he was occupied with completing a design for a large theater, which he had probably been working on when still at home in Altona.<sup>3</sup> The value of such an exercise must have been pointed out to him when on a visit to Berlin the previous year by Graf Brühl, the superintendent of the royal theaters in Berlin, because when the set of designs was completed he sent them to Brühl. Brühl asked for more copies, which he presented to the royal dilettante architect, the crown prince, and to Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Thereupon Schinkel recommended Semper's plan to Brühl's counterpart in Dresden, Wolf Adolph von Lüttichau.<sup>4</sup> Only then, it seems, did the authorities in Dresden fully realize the great talent of the young man whom they had had the good sense to appoint as teacher at the Academy. To us, who take Semper's fame for granted, this circuitous form of recognition seems strange. But it is really quite understandable. Here was a young architect with very little practical experience apart from a small private gallery that he himself belittled as "a hothouse for statues."<sup>5</sup> At the same time there were many experienced architects holding official appointments who would have been, and in some cases were, the obvious choice when it came to the execution of an important building. It is a sign of Semper's superior talent that his project was given preference.

Semper was not content with simply submitting a plan for the Hoftheater and indicating a suitable place for a monument dedicated to the memory of a former king. His plan went far beyond what had been requested of him (figure 2). He incorporated the famous baroque

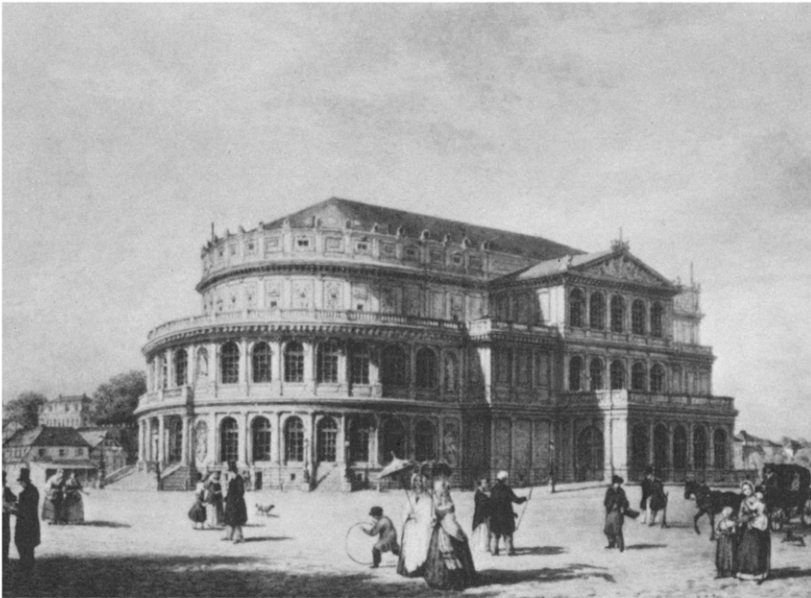


2

Semper. Design for Zwingerforum, Dresden, 1842. (Semper-Archiv Zurich)

building the Zwinger by making its splendid open-ended courtyard the festive entrance to a wide space, reaching down to the Elbe. The space was flanked on one side by a guardhouse designed by Schinkel, by the baroque Catholic Hofkirche, and by parts of the royal palace, and on the opposite side by his new theater linked to the Zwinger by a low wing containing the orangery. By means of this loose assembly of various buildings (to which at a future date a monumental Picture Gallery would be added) he intended to provide Dresden with a cultural center that was fashioned in spirit though not in form after the urban forum of antiquity, where no building dominated but all related to each other as parts of a total organism. He once told his students that the most difficult but also the most essential part of architecture was to create a harmonious whole, which meant that “the architect must take into account the environment which should, as it were, blend with the building as much as possible. . . . In recent times little attention has been paid in Germany to this aspect of architecture; as an art it has been confined to a beautiful facade planted there without any attempt at integration.”<sup>6</sup>

Following these principles, Semper created a masterpiece. The site he chose for the theater clearly indicated an interrelation with the existing structures, but the building itself had an individual character. He achieved this by adapting, though in no way imitating, the festive and rich quality of the surrounding monuments and by consciously rejecting the contrasting stylistic forms then in fashion, a style he had



3

Semper. Hoftheater, Dresden. Watercolor by Christian Gottlob Hammer, ca. 1845. (Potsdam-Sanssouci, Aquarellsammlung no. 4012)

recently described as “meager, dry, severe, and lacking in character.”<sup>7</sup> He “consistently followed the principle of making [the theater’s] exterior appearance dependent throughout on the needs of the interior organization.”<sup>8</sup> In this way he achieved a composition of great diversity: the outer display of the semicircular auditorium with its two bands of deeply recessed arcaded windows was the dominant feature; rising above it were the walls and roofs of the upper tiers and the stage house, flanked by prominent entrance pavilions; the whole was adorned with a structural display of the then unusual motives of the Italian Renaissance and by ample figurative decoration as a prelude to the festive interior decor by three leading French designers, Edouard Despléchin, Jules Dieterle, and Charles Séchan. When the Hoftheater, Semper’s first major work, was opened in 1841 with a performance of Goethe’s *Torquato Tasso*, it made a deep impression and established his reputation in Germany and abroad (figure 3).

By then Semper was engaged on another important project, the design for a new museum. Several locations were proposed. The one Semper most favored was to place it, a free-standing monumental building, near the Zwinger where it would form an integral part of

the assembly of buildings, thus lending the forum still greater significance. However, for financial reasons this site was turned down. Reluctantly Semper accepted the final decision to make the Picture Gallery the fourth side of the Zwinger court, although the spatial unity of Zwinger and forum and with it his grand plan of urban development were thereby destroyed.<sup>9</sup>

Semper's position as head of the department of architecture at the Academy and the fact that he had been charged with the planning of important public buildings led to private commissions. In the same year in which work on the theater began, he built two homes for the banker Martin W. Oppenheim: the Villa Rosa, its plan a skillful adaptation of the Palladian villa, and a more substantial town house in the style of a Florentine or Roman Renaissance palazzo.<sup>10</sup> When in 1837 the Jews in Dresden were allowed to erect their own synagogue, it was no doubt through Oppenheim, who was Jewish, that Semper's design was accepted. The building was centrally planned, left plain except for a few Romanesque features.<sup>11</sup> When he took part in a competition for a synagogue in Paris ten years later, he repeated the plan but gave the exterior a much richer "Byzantine" decoration, as he called it. In view of the interest Semper was later to take in industrial art, it is worth noting that he designed the furnishings and interior decoration of the Oppenheim houses and Dresden synagogue as well as the furniture of the theater.

Within less than a decade the name of the inexperienced young professor had become well known in Germany and abroad. When the duke of Mecklenburg decided in 1843 to have his medieval castle restored and partly rebuilt, he asked Semper to submit plans. Although in the end they were not accepted, the extensive project, on which Semper spent considerable time, is of interest not least because it gave him the opportunity to lay down in a memorandum his remarkably advanced ideas on the principles that should guide restorations of ancient buildings. Read in connection with the views expressed by his contemporary Viollet-le-Duc they are especially interesting.<sup>12</sup>

It was natural that Semper, a native of Altona, was invited to compete in planning the rebuilding of Hamburg, in great part destroyed by fire in 1842. Again he saw as his task the integration of the main buildings, the town hall, and the church into one organic whole with the provision of new open spaces, streets, and living quarters.<sup>13</sup> He did not win. Even more frustrating were, two years later, the circumstances connected with the competition for the rebuilding of the church of St. Nicholas in Hamburg, a sad story that will be related in more detail below in "Semper's Position on the Gothic."

In spite of these failures, Semper must have been well satisfied with life. As the architect in charge of a building program that would give new life to Dresden, he had become a respected member of the community; his teaching went well, and there was a prospect of his lectures being published; more important still, a splendid publication about the Hoftheater was already in the press. In 1835 he had married Bertha Thimig, seven years younger, who at times, it seems, had a steadying influence on his rather erratic temper. With his growing family he had settled down to an apparently comfortable life. But there was a cloud on the horizon—the political situation. The liberal trend that had brought Semper to his position proved to be short lived. The men who had set their hopes on reform either accepted the fact of their waning influence or withdrew from the political stage altogether. This Semper could not do. For him political and professional attitudes were closely linked, one the expression of the other. After a revolution rocked the monarchy in Berlin in March 1848 and storm clouds began to threaten Dresden, Semper openly joined the opposition forces that prepared to fight reaction. In May 1849 the storm broke loose. The ensuing uprising ended in the defeat of the democratic forces—and brought the most successful and productive phase of Semper's life to an abrupt end.

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