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THE ARCHITECTURE  
OF  
HUMANISM

A Study in the History of Taste

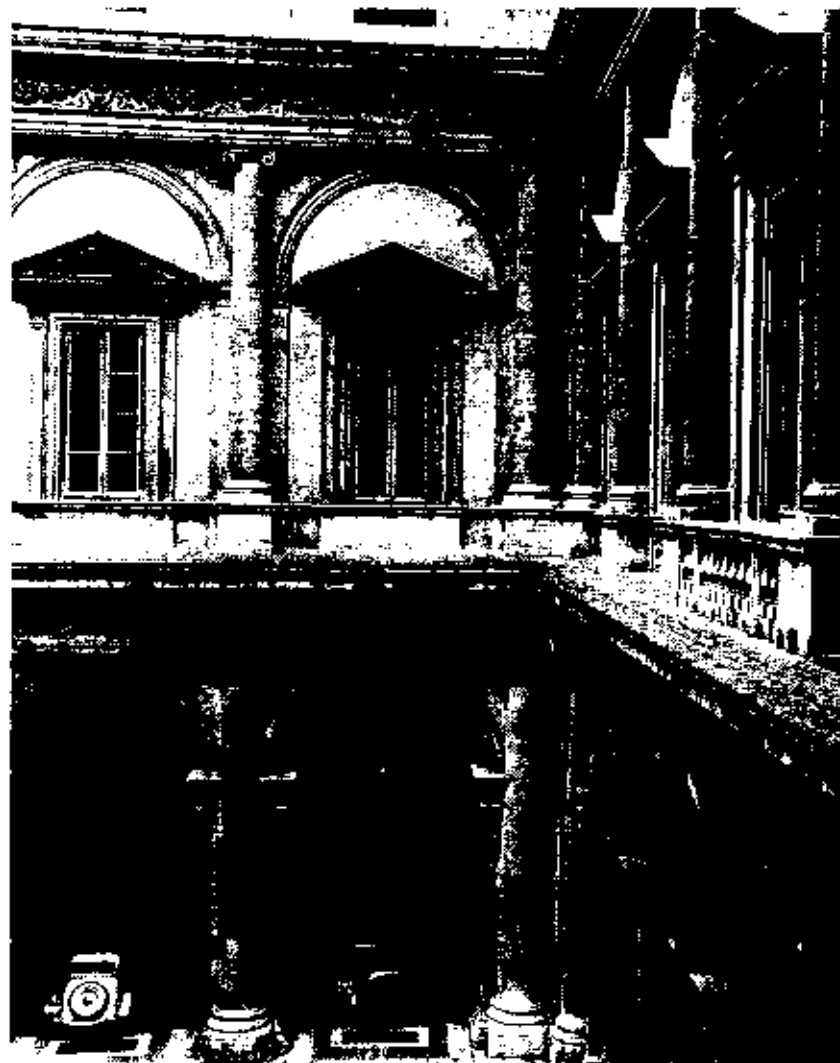
By Geoffrey Scott

*With a portfolio of photographs*



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1. *The Architecture of Humanism*. Interior court of the Palazzo Farnese, Rome.

## FOREWORD

When *The Architecture of Humanism* by Geoffrey Scott appeared in 1914, it was hailed by some as the finest book on architecture since the days of John Ruskin. Others, less generous, at least conceded that it was certainly to be admired for the beauty of its prose. Whatever the reception and subsequent opinion, it remains among the outstanding works of this century on the subject of architecture.

The book's fascination stems largely from the fact that Geoffrey Scott offers the clearest analysis of the theories and ideas behind much of 19th- and 20th-century architecture—theories and ideas universally held today. But the reader must not let the brilliant analysis obscure what is really the heart of the book: a discussion of the classical tradition as reflected in the architecture of Renaissance and Baroque Italy and the role given the human body in contributing to that tradition.

Geoffrey Scott was well fitted for the ambitious job he set himself. He was born on June 11, 1884, at Hampstead, London, the son of a prosperous flooring manufacturer. He obtained a standard classical education at Rugby School and, in 1903, he entered New College, Oxford. There he won the Newdigate Poetry Prize and the Chancellor's English Essay Prize, the latter for an essay entitled "The National Character of English Architecture."

Quite obviously architecture was an early interest. He could easily have gone into journalism, because C. P. Scott, editor of *The Manchester Guardian*, was his uncle. Instead, however, he went off to Italy in 1907, joining the landscape

architect, Cecil Pinsent, in Florence. That same year he became librarian and secretary to the art expert and historian, Bernard Berenson. "B.B." had only just negotiated a contract with Joseph Duveen by the terms of which, for the handsome retainer of £20,000 a year, he would pass on the authenticity of pictures and other objects of art submitted for evaluation by the dealer. With the money Berenson bought the villa, *I Tatti*, in nearby Fiesole (it is now owned by Harvard University) and there he and his wife, Mary, received and entertained on a most generous scale. Scott became part of the household.

The pre-1914 world of Anglo-American Florence was not all parties, cards, gossip, and sightseeing; energy and money were often spent in renovating and building villas and gardens. It was there that Diego Suarez, one of America's great landscape architects, did his first gardens, revealing the genius that was to produce the magnificent gardens of Villa Vizcaya (the Dade County Art Museum) in Miami. Geoffrey Scott himself was to practice architecture modestly in association with Cecil Pinsent. Together they designed the library and gardens of *I Tatti* and the neighboring villa and gardens of *Le Balze* for Professor Charles A. Strong, George Santayana's close friend, who had married the oldest daughter of John D. Rockefeller. (*Le Balze* is now owned by Georgetown University.)

"Though I lived in partnership with him for four or five years," Pinsent recalled of Scott, "ours was a partnership of opposites, complementary gifts, each one having what the other did not have . . ." It was while sharing quarters with Pinsent that Scott wrote *The Architecture of Humanism*. Yet it was not with his partner, to whom he gave the dedication, that he talked of the book but with Mary Berenson, "and with her at *I Tatti*," Pinsent wrote, "he used to sit up till all hours of the night discussing it." Mary Berenson, the sister of the essayist Logan Pearsall Smith, had encouraged her husband in his writings and now she provided incentive for Scott.

With the riches of Italy at his door he absorbed the classical tradition in all its forms, ancient and modern. He knew, as so many have since forgotten, that it represents the mainstream of Western art. From the vantage of the Italian scene Scott became aware that the stream had been muddied by such men as the Gothic revivalist A. W. N. Pugin, the exponent John Ruskin, the French restorer and theorist Eugène-Émile Viollet-le-Duc, William Morris, and others. Their ideas were derived from sources outside of art—namely from poetry, science, morals, and philosophy. These ideas, from which the dominant concepts of contemporary art are derived, Scott put into perspective by the device of calling them "fallacies."

Typical of the concepts is Louis Sullivan's well known "form follows function." It means that a building's use and its type of construction must dictate the outward appearance. Although still a popular axiom, it is not accepted with quite the degree of reverence it was a generation ago. Scott saw such a concept and its variations as originating in science and engineering, and, therefore, he set it in the category of "The Mechanical Fallacy." Part of the same "Fallacy" would be the contemporary notion that only by adopting new materials and new methods of construction can a new style of architecture be attained. The widespread use of marble, travertine, and limestone facing in modern design shows that the idea, while current in theory, is often disregarded in practice.

The very notion of the self-conscious pursuit of a new, a unique style—aside from questions of method in attaining it—has its sources in literature. It is part of the notion of originality, more especially originality for its own sake, seen in the cult of self-expression. As a concept it matured in Romantic literature, and for that reason Scott listed it as part of "The Romantic Fallacy."

The term, *fallacy*, has an element of shock because it throws into question ideas that we have come—perhaps too casually—to accept without reflection. This can be seen

when "The Romantic Fallacy" is extended to make the architect society's prime mover and shaker. In recent times no one has stated this aspect of the profession more definitely than the late Le Corbusier, a disciple of Viollet-le-Duc: "It is a question of building which is at the root of social unrest today: architecture or revolution." Then there is also the strong anti-urban outlook of such American architects and city planners as Frank Lloyd Wright, whose acceptance of a simplistic interpretation of nature as a philosophical mainspring for urban design is very romantic.

If one were to identify the common denominator of contemporary architecture it would probably be the absence of ornament. It is even so in the United States where one of the heroes of present-day American architecture is Louis Sullivan, recognized in his own time as the country's most fertile ornamentalist. Contemporary theory regards ornament as "false" since it conceals the "true" nature of construction and materials. For Scott, however, this theory was a misapplication of a moral concept to things physical, and he called it part of "The Ethical Fallacy."

To the last of his four fallacies Scott gave the name "Biological." For him it meant the application of 19th-century theories of scientific evolution to the history of architecture—and to all of art history, for that matter. The evolutionary approach seeks to explain styles, buildings, and objects of art by examining antecedents. It is shown in the frequent use of the words, "influence" and "problem" in art history, the "influence" being the antecedents and the "problem" their identification. Buildings and art objects are regarded as parts of an historical sequence, and thus little emphasis is given to arriving at value judgments or to analysing why an object of art is beautiful.

If Scott has put us on the defensive with his fallacies—and for some he may appear harsh as well as mistaken—we instinctively come back with a query: if so much of the theory that governed the architecture of the last century and that still governs architecture today is fallacious, we ask,

what is the alternative? Scott anticipates us on this score by asking us to consider the classical tradition.

We today are not quite so disdainful of the classical as were the more outspoken architectural critics of the last century and of a generation ago. Even the "American Renaissance" that began in the 1880s and disappeared around 1930—the last full flourish of the Renaissance that had begun in Italy in the 15th century—is being shown a new respect. Evidence enough for that is found in the growing battle for the nation's great landmarks, the outstanding example being the abortive attempt to save Pennsylvania Station in New York City several decades ago. So when Scott proposes that Renaissance and Baroque architecture had its source in academic tradition we are curious rather than mocking. The academic tradition, in his thesis, consists of a "canon of forms"—that is to say, a standard fixed by the great buildings, monuments, and sculpture of Imperial Rome. There is no theory to study. Instead, study means examining, drawing, and even measuring ancient works. The method produced the classical wonders of Italy; it also produced our national Capitol and the chief ornaments of the American Renaissance.

Our inclination is to dismiss Scott's alternative because the academic tradition is simply not part of art today. But Scott went further and dwelt on the importance of an awareness of the human body's role in art. This awareness goes beyond the use of the human form in painting and sculpture and consists in our unconsciously transcribing our physical selves into terms of architecture and architecture into terms of our physical selves. This is what he understood to be humanism. For him the virtue of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque was the importance given the visual response of the beholder. The direct physical reaction to what we see Scott called taste, "the disinterested enthusiasm for architectural form."

Admittedly, the human figure, when it appears in contemporary art, does so in fragments and distortions, and it

"true"

historicist

sometimes seems that humanism has been wholly rejected by today's architects. Yet Scott, going beyond the immediate presence of the human body, pursues the role of our physical response to more abstract humanist values, those of mass, space, and line. He dwells particularly on the sense of space, a part of his humanism that has a very familiar ring. Scott anticipated much of the current discussion among architects of this key element. It is true that what he had in mind was space replete with ornament, or he would not have based his argument on the Renaissance and the Baroque. No matter the style, space is a monopoly of all architecture, he pointed out, and for that reason must be considered a primary factor.

Nothing is more volatile in our time than artistic fashion. What appears to be so successful at the moment is forgotten tomorrow. The growing enthusiasm for the preservation of landmarks bespeaks a restlessness with current architecture on the part of both the public and the profession. For those who are seeking an answer, Geoffrey Scott offers a most attractive one, the architecture of humanism.

Scott's subsequent career had little to do with architecture. The outbreak of the Great War at the time of the book's publication forced him into other paths. He remained in Italy, attached to the British Embassy in Rome. In 1918 he married the widow of William Bayard Cutting of New York, and his connections with *I Tatti* came to an end. In 1920 he was again at the British Embassy, as Press Secretary.

He talked of a sequel to *The Architecture of Humanism*, and of a book on Bernini (Bernini's Piazza San Pietro was his favorite work of architecture in Rome. Other favorites were the interiors of the Gesù and San Ignazio) but they were not to be. A small volume of verse, *A Box of Paints*, did appear in 1923 and two years later he saw published *A Portrait of Zélide*, the story of Madame de Charrière, a lady who had enchanted the young James Boswell. His friend, Edith Wharton, read the book in manuscript and was warm in her

praise, as were many others. By now settled in England, he started on a biography of Boswell when he was approached in 1927 by Colonel Ralph H. Isham to edit the famous Boswell papers, now in the Sterling Library of Yale University. Scott accepted the invitation and worked on the papers, editing the first six volumes. In the summer of 1929 he was in this country when he came down with pneumonia. He was taken to the Rockefeller Institute in New York City, and there he died on August 14th at the age of forty-five. (Those interested in Scott's career should turn to Richard M. Dumm's *Geoffrey Scott and the Berenson Circle* [1998]).

It may well be asked: Why is it possible to have an American edition? The answer is to be found in the fact that the classical tradition persists vigorously in America—in new churches, in new suburban homes, in new buildings on a number of university campuses, in much restoration work of recent years, and especially in interior decoration. It may be an important sign that a society called Classical America has been founded to promote the classical in American art. The society assumes that it is now time to plan a future which will be largely classical in the visual arts, for the classical tradition will continue to be the main artistic current of Western culture. For Americans who take this view, *The Architecture of Humanism* is an essential text.

HENRY HOPE REED, New York City



3 The American Renaissance. Dome of the Pasadena City Hall, by Arthur Brown, Jr.

## THE AESTHETIC CRITICISM OF GEOFFREY SCOTT

Geoffrey Scott's *The Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste* is one of the classics in the modern literature on architecture. A book that defines critical issues in our understanding of architecture, Scott's study has had a significant impact on thinking about architecture throughout the twentieth century. Even though Scott wrote about the classical tradition of the Renaissance and its aftermath in the modern period at a time when the classical was under attack by modernists, he still speaks to us today because he addresses fundamental questions about the nature of architecture and how we experience it. Scott's book should still arouse the curiosity of anyone who cares vitally about architecture and its role in shaping our very lives.

As an attack on the idea of architectural theory or principles that resulted in the various fallacies committed by Ruskin and his followers—romantic, mechanical, ethical, and biological—Scott's treatise serves as an antidote to all the theoretical posturing in the modern period, in which architects, critics, and art historians alike have professed to discover the principles of architecture.

When in 1962 Rudolph Wittkower published his wonderful, deeply influential *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, which analyzed the principles of Palladio's architecture in relation to the broad understanding of harmonic proportions in architecture, he attacked the idea of architecture as pure form and along with it Scott's proposition that

"the Renaissance style is an architecture of taste, seeking no logic, consistency, or justification beyond that of giving pleasure." Wittkower's attack makes a caricature of Scott's book, which is far more subtle and complex than he would have one believe.

Whether or not the architecture of humanism is based on the principles of music, there can be little doubt, as Scott averred, that architecture is intended, in the words of Sir Henry Wotton, based on Vitruvius, "to delight." In other words, to give pleasure. This is not a principle but a fact, whether we are looking at Bramante's Tempietto, Sansovino's Library, or the United States Capitol.

It is easy for the academic critic to dismiss Scott's work for its hedonism or aestheticism, but it is precisely Scott's attention to the pleasure we take in architecture, to the delight or enjoyment, that should speak to us today when the idea of beauty has been brutally and mindlessly assaulted in so many quarters, not least of all in the groves of academe. Scott is an avowedly aesthetic critic attentive to one's experience of architecture, that is, to how one experiences its solids and voids, its composition, its textures, its lights and shades. His writing is situated in the tradition of Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and Vernon Lee; it is a criticism responsive to the act of looking attentively and, as such, it is highly significant, since in the recent muddle of politics and culture, art and architectural critics are more likely to build theories than look closely at buildings, as Scott encourages us to do.

Scott's essays on the fallacies of architecture still repay our close attention because they are superb, eloquent disquisitions on cultural history and taste; they are still timely. When he confronts, above all, Ruskin, Scott reminds us that the latter was far and away the single most influential writer on architecture in the modern era. Even when he quotes Ruskin's condemnation of the Renaissance aesthetic, Scott is not unsympathetic to the power of Ruskin's language, which he quotes extensively and to good effect: "gods without honour, men without humanity, nymphs without innocence, satyrs

without rusticity gathered into idiot groups on the polluted canvas and scenic affectations encumbered the streets." For all his distaste for Ruskin's ideas, Scott's criticism serves as a marvelous introduction to Ruskin's aesthetics, if not social philosophy of art in general.

Scott condemns the effect of Romanticism on architectural criticism, since it too easily confused architecture with literature or literary symbolism. In this regard, his notions are not unrelated to the rising doctrine of modernism, which would purify architecture of traditional symbolism, even though it never fully succeeded. Scott's distaste for the confusion between architecture and literary associations is relevant to the study of architecture today, to post-modernism so-called, which is laden with symbolic connotations. Scott's distaste for the effects of literature in architecture is indebted to his mentor, Bernard Berenson, who was hostile to the idea that painting should be evaluated by its dependency on its subject or what he called "illustration."

Berenson stands behind another important aspect of Scott's criticism. When he speaks of "Humanism," Scott does not just use the word in the narrow sense of the Renaissance curriculum cultivated by those scholars called Humanists. Rather, he is speaking of how human beings transcribe architecture into their own bodily terms, as when we speak of the "swell" of a dome or the "spring" of an arch. This humanism of architecture is rooted in the modern psychological theory of empathy, which had taproots in Theodor Lipps but which came directly to Scott, as he acknowledges, from Berenson's study of the Renaissance painting.

Condemning the mechanical fallacy of architecture, which dwells on the constructive purpose at the expense of aesthetic pleasure that form arouses, Scott clearly follows Berenson and, for that matter, Walter Pater, the premier figure in the modern story of aesthetic criticism. In the same way, Scott is eloquent in his defense of the aesthetic against the ethical fallacy, appreciating, especially the aesthetic values of Renaissance and Baroque architecture. Here Scott rises

to great heights as a writer when he celebrates the play of Baroque architecture, in particular, the "laughter of strength" in its playfully grand forms, or when he delights in the effects of a triple pediment, like chords in the final bars of a symphony, the ultimate tumult of form before calm is restored to the viewer's eye.

\* Of all the fallacies addressed by Scott perhaps the most insidious and elusive is the biological myth, which compares artistic growth to that of a living organism. This false simplicity, as Scott calls it, has often been attacked, precisely because it is so pervasive—from Vasari to modern art historical texts. In our own supposedly theoretically sophisticated age (one defined by the dubious assumption of superiority over past ages, which are thought to be more naive or primitive in their thinking), we fancy that we are beyond committing such fallacies, but it is more than likely that the biological fallacy lingers in much apocalyptic post-modern utterance, which speaks of decadence or death.

Above all, what impresses Scott's reader is the clarity of his mind, the sharpness and edge of his forceful prose, which gives pleasure in its own right. He pulls us up short with his aphorisms, which put us in mind of Logan Piersall Smith, if not Oscar Wilde, when he writes, "architecture is the art of organizing a mob of craftsmen" or asserts of the mechanical fallacy that "it looks in poetry for the syntax of naked prose." Scott is nowhere more interesting than when he challenges platitudes, some of which have been reinvented in our own day. Long before it became commonplace, as it is now, to reduce the study of architecture and art in general to patronage, Scott warned that it is easy to overestimate the role of the patron in the study of architecture. He readily admits that Julius II and Leo X were significant patrons, because they were responsive to the ideals of art then current, but he is quick to stress that these ideals were in existence prior to and independently of their patrons. It was more, he shrewdly observes, the force of architecture itself to create and define the imaginative character of the papacy than it was the

encouragement of the popes that contributed to art. As Scott so succinctly puts it, "the influence of patronage is misstated," for, as he further observes, the "paramount imagination" in art is that of the artist, not that of the patron. This claim will be disputed, but it must be brought back into play in our current discussions of art and architecture, in which the artist's imagination is often trivialized or ignored, and art is seen as a mere reflex of the patron's wishes, the artist's own creativity undervalued.

Scott anticipates other current issues in the study of architectural history. Nowadays, it has become a cliché to dwell on the role of accumulated capital or wealth in the flowering of the Renaissance, but the point is too easily overemphasized at the expense of the architecture itself. Yes, the increase of wealth no doubt helped to create the demand which architecture satisfied but, as Scott insists, it was ultimately the artistic uses to which the wealth was put that were important. "Prosperity," as Scott puts it with characteristic brevity and clarity, "is a condition of great achievements; it is not their cause." This single sentence is an antidote to an entire generation's recent obsession with the history of Renaissance architecture as a product of wealth, reflecting our own preoccupation with the free market and the accumulation of wealth, at the expense of architecture as such, the artistic uses to which wealth was put.

Along with wealth, Scott focuses on power as one of the crucial issues in the history of the Renaissance. As if reinventing the wheel, a number of scholars, echoing Scott, have recently dwelt on the ways in which Renaissance art and architecture make manifest this aspiration to power. As Scott justly observes, however, the aspiration to power in architecture is manifest aesthetically, and he is nowhere more eloquent than in his celebration of the dome of St. Peter's which, in his terms, is less a reflection of papal power as such than it is a sign of architecture's power to define the papacy.

Geoffrey Scott's treatise on architecture is as challenging a book today as it was when first published nearly a century ago.

It endures as a classic of rhetoric about architecture in the tradition of Ruskin, even though he attacks many of Ruskin's ideas. Scott endures, above all, as an aesthetic critic, who draws us back to the reasons why we care about architecture in the first place. For Scott humanist architecture is not the illustration of a musical theory, nor is it an illustration of the principles of construction or an example of morality in stone; rather, it is the arrangement of forms and ornament in beautiful compositions that give pleasure. Scott realizes, as he said, that "it would be absurd to demand that we should limit our enjoyment of an art to the delight which it is the peculiar and special function of the art to provide." He is aware of the larger social, political, philosophical, theological, and literary context in which architecture flourishes, but he insists that we not lose sight of the aesthetic, of how we respond to architecture with our very bodies. He offers his insights with a commanding rhetoric that, mirroring the architecture he admires, gives pleasure. Indeed, Geoffrey Scott endures because, devoted to art, he is himself a master rhetorician.

PAUL BAROLSKY, Charlottesville, Va.

## CONTENTS

	Foreword by Henry Hope Reed	vii
	The Aesthetic Criticism of Geoffrey Scott by Paul Barolsky	xv
	Preface	11
	Preface to Second Edition	13
	Introduction	15
ONE	Renaissance Architecture	25
TWO	The Romantic Fallacy	40
THREE	The Romantic Fallacy ( <i>continued</i> ): Naturalism and the Picturesque	60
FOUR	The Mechanical Fallacy	79
FIVE	The Ethical Fallacy	97
SIX	The Biological Fallacy	127
SEVEN	The Academic Tradition	141
EIGHT	Humanist Values	157
NINE	Conclusion	178
	Epilogue, 1924	184
	Analytic Summary	191

Illustrations between pages 96 and 97