

The View From Rome

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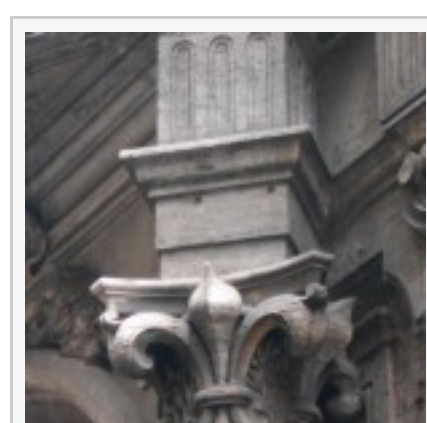
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Varieties of the Classical Orders in Rome

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Capital from the order flanking the entrance to the Palazzo Doria-Pamphili on the Via del Corso in Rome, by Gabriele Valvassori (1730-35). Here the familiar outlines of the Corinthian capital have been altered, the conventional acanthus leaves and volutes replaced by a spreading fleur-de-lis – an imaginative substitution of one familiar form for another that makes compositional sense. Author photo.

For a lover of Classical architecture, one of the great pleasures of living in Rome is how one is constantly reminded of the variety and expressiveness of the orders. They are not a group of fixed forms to be downloaded onto facades as needed but, rather, a family of distinctive ways to organize the proportions, ornament and character of buildings in limitless ways. Naturally, Rome provides numerous examples of each of the five canonical types – Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and Composite – but there are also numerous examples of variations on these, or what appear to be entirely new orders, demonstrating the elasticity and generativity of the Classical language.

This variety is not a modern innovation: Indeed, it is even more apparent in ancient Roman work, given the great advantage the architects and builders of the Republic and the Empire had of not knowing what an "order" was. Instead, as Vitruvius writes in his treatise from the days of Augustus, what we recognize as "orders" were "types of building" associated with different origins, meanings and characters.

While giving some very specific formulas for the proportions of their various parts, Vitruvius also repeatedly asserts that these prescriptions must be adjusted for each application. The proportions of a building on a hilltop differ from those on a building in a valley; a building normally seen from a distance differs from one usually seen up close; a large building will have different proportions than a small one – all these adjustments amounting to the principle that *the order is designed for the building*. The surviving examples from antiquity bear this out: no two examples of any of the five types are the same: overall form is generally consistent, but variation in ornament and proportion is the rule rather than the exception.



Order used for the corner treatment of the Palazzo di Borsa, the 19th-century Chamber of Commerce in Rome, which incorporates the remains of the ancient Temple of Hadrian. Around the corner from the temple is the modern facade of the building designed in 1870 by Virginio Vespignani and remodeled in 1928 by Tullio Pasarelli, with this abstracted version of the "reverse-volute Corinthian" developed in antiquity (as at Hadrian's Villa) and often identified with Borromini, who made frequent use of it. Author photo.

The architects of the Renaissance (like Palladio, Vignola and their followers), seemed to focus more on the prescriptions than the adjustments. They were puzzled by the apparent contradiction between the formulas given by Vitruvius and actual

surviving examples. Their unease was, paradoxically, the fuel that propelled their creativity. The authors of the treatises sought to define what each of them thought were the optimal proportions for each of the orders, defining a set of "canonical" forms based on a selection of the "best" attributes of various ancient examples.

The treatises were manuals that instructed readers how to construct the canon for themselves; they were not intended as a set of rules for the exclusively "correct" way to design. The authors themselves departed from their own formulas in their built work, but the prestige of the images as presented on the pages of the treatises was permanently lodged in the minds of generations of architects and supplied a necessary reference point for pursuing excellence. The dialogue between the "canonical" and the "experimental" became one of the principal themes of Classical architecture and is once again a topic of debate.

Today we have a greater



Cast-iron order on the ground-floor retail shop fronts of a late-19th-century mixed-use building near the Galleria Sciarra, designed by Giulio De Angelis. Here, the different materials – cast iron and stone masonry – define different orders expressing their respective slenderness ratios. Like the ancient Romans, the Classical architect can find a Classical expression for any material without imitating the familiar proportions derived from stone. Author photo.



Order flanking the entrance to the Teatro Quirinetta, adjacent to the Galleria Sciarra but designed in the 1910s by Marcello Piacentini. In this cast-iron capital surmounting pink marble shafts, Piacentini evokes the leaves of the "Tower of the Winds" version of the Corinthian, but also a necklace of eggs producing a charming effect perfectly in scale (and in character) with the entrance to the theater. Author photo.

appreciation for the looser interpretation of Vitruvius, taking him at his word that the "symmetries" (i.e., the proportional formulas) must be tempered with "eurythmy" (the variation and adjustment needed to give vitality to designs). Instead of seeing buildings that don't conform to the formulas as necessarily "incorrect," we can appreciate them as examples of a living language that can, in skilled hands, adapt itself to each situation.

Here the eye, rather than the theoretical understanding, is the ultimate arbiter of good form. From this viewpoint, the formulas of Vitruvius or those of the Renaissance treatises establish a canon of best practices, to which all individual versions refer and to which individual examples may be compared. The canons of the treatises (all of them different, naturally) are like the grammar textbooks that teach us how to read; the works of the great Classical architects through the centuries are like a vast and ever-expanding literature.

Pictured are some of my favorite examples of orders in Rome, ancient and modern, and evocative of a spirit of inventiveness that enriches the Classical language.

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