

## ARCHITECTS AND ACADEMIES

*Architectural Theories of Imitatio and the Literary Debates on Language and Style*

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In 1528, in his *Book of the Courtier* (published in Venice by Aldo Manuzio), Baldasare Castiglione moved the courtly dialogue of his semi-fictitious characters to the then much debated issue of language. Thus, through the mouth of Count Ludovico Canossa, Castiglione argued:

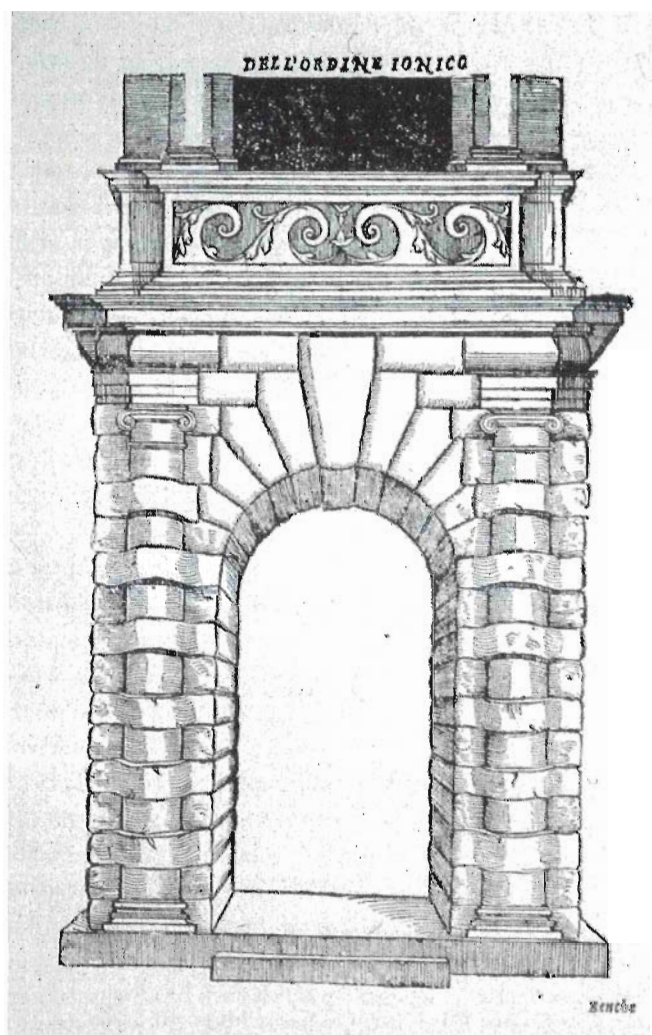
and if [the language] were not pure old Tuscan, it would be Italian, common, copious and varied, and like a delicious garden full of flowers and fruit . . . I believe that the good common practice [*buona consuetudine*] of speech is born of men who have *ingegno* and who with doctrine and experience have acquired good judgement, and with it concur and agree to accept those words that seem good, and which they know through a certain natural judgement [*un certo giudizio naturale*] and not from any rule. Don't you know that the figures of speech that give so much grace and splendour to the oration are all abuses of grammatical rules, yet are accepted and confirmed by use, because, without being able to give a reason, they please and bring gentleness and sweetness to the ear? And this is what I think is the good common practice . . . I praise highly those who know what should be imitated, nevertheless I do not think it is impossible to write well without imitating.<sup>1</sup>

Imitation (*imitatio*), good common practice (*la buona consuetudine*), purity versus the pleasure attending the abuses of rules, and natural judgement make up the space within which Castiglione develops his argument. Most important, perhaps, is the fact that the figures of speech, the ornaments of language, take a central place in this position statement.

Some years later, in his book on the orders published in 1537, also in Venice, Sebastiano Serlio echoed the great Castiglione when he commented on his unorthodox conflation of columnar orders:

In addition, without distancing oneself from what was done by the ancients, one could also mix and connect [*communicare*] this Rustic work [*opera*] with the Doric, and also with the Ionic, and sometimes with the Corinthian, according to the wishes of who wanted to satisfy a personal fancy [*capriccio*]. This, however, would be, one must own, more according to licence [*di licentia*] than according to reason: because the architect must proceed with great modesty and reserve, especially in public buildings and those of dignity, where it is always praiseworthy to respect decorum [*decoro*].<sup>2</sup>

All translations in the text are by myself; all emphases in the quotes are also mine.



39. Sebastiano Serlio,  
Book 4, Rustic Ionic.

Again, the breaking of rules, the pleasure associated with such a *capriccio*, the common practice (*consuetudine*) of the ancients, and the author's cautioning voice calling for the architect's judgement frame his proposal for ornamental composites – for all intents and purposes, mixtures of dialects, of Tuscan, Dorian, Ionian, and Corinthian (Figure 39).

By 1550 these themes had lost none of their relevance. In his life of Michelangelo, Vasari traverses the same ground, and even more importantly, he uses similar language when he narrates the impact of the Medici chapel and the Laurentian Library in Florence upon the artistic community of the 1530s or so. In Vasari's words, with his idiosyncratic ornament ("ornamento composito") Michelangelo departs from the common practice of the ancients and creates one of his own. Born of personal judgement, of fancy above rule and imitation, this ornament is so accomplished that it not only elicits admiration but more generally acts as a catalyst that allows all archi-

fects to liberate themselves from the tyranny of the common way (“*commune strada*”), that is, from the tyranny of the ancient models. In short, for Vasari the perfection and variety of Michelangelo’s architectural ornament validate artistic freedom or licence as strategy vis-à-vis the imitation of Antiquity.<sup>3</sup>

There is evidently a case of linguistic symmetry between these three texts, and one that merits a more concentrated analysis. And it does so because it suggests three important things: first, that the process of formation and consolidation of the Italian literary language and style encoded in a series of famous debates collectively known as the *questione della lingua* found an echo in the architectural *querelle* on what I would like to call the *questione dell’ornamento*; second, that the literary debate preceded the architectural one and that a coherent argumentation, complete with a developed terminology, was in place long before the architectural one reached a similar level of sophistication; and finally, that terms employed in one context and laden with specific theoretical connotations travelled to another with great ease and inseminated it while they themselves mutated.

From this starting point then I would like to propose that we take a closer look at the traffic in words and concepts that crossed disciplinary boundaries and – I wish to argue – made a decisive impact upon thinking *about* architecture in the Renaissance. My purpose is twofold: to acknowledge architectural texts as literary artefacts that belong to the verbal domain; and to stress that once we look at them in this way, it is not only necessary but imperative to locate them within the medium that is theirs, to examine the possibilities and consequences of their interaction with other verbal discourses, as well as the channels and mechanisms that facilitated exchange and migration. Lorenzo Giacomini’s move to include architecture among letters in his *Della nobiltà delle lettere e delle armi* of 1576, though eccentric to be sure, should alert us to the fact that there is, and was, another way of looking at architecture.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE PROBLEM OF NEOLOGISMS AND *MESCOLANZE* OF STYLE

It is evident from the passages just quoted that among the many things their authors shared was a concern with the selection, evaluation, and creation of the units characteristic of the two media (language and architecture): on the one hand words, on the other the carved profiles that make up ornament. Indeed, starting in the fifteenth century and increasingly in the sixteenth, both disciplines were drawing up a thesaurus of possible, acceptable, and aesthetically superior forms – literary and visual. And in both cases, the principal issue was how to deal with the available thesaurus that had come down from Antiquity and the great authors of the Trecento, respectively: to imitate or be original? And if so, what and how?

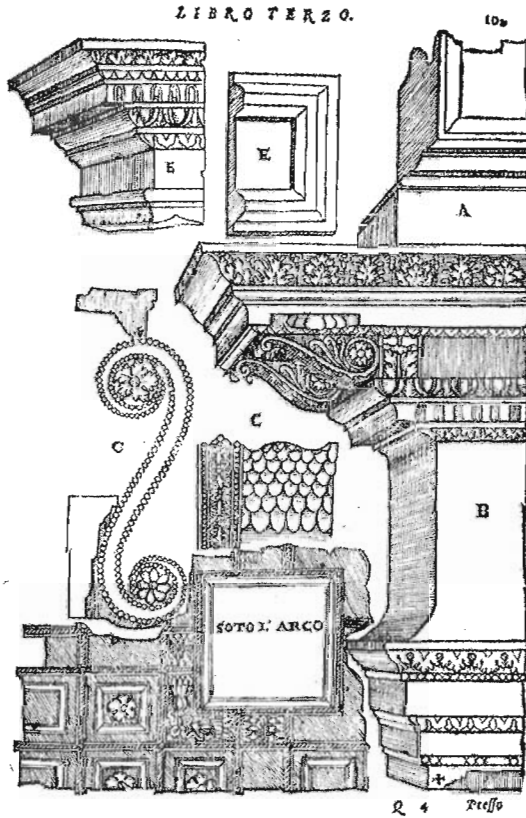
For the architects this predicament was enhanced by the fact that imitating Antiquity proved to be a utopian enterprise. Not only were the great buildings of ancient Rome lying broken up at their feet, but the smaller units – entablatures, cornices, pedestals, bases – varied greatly from ruin to ruin and gave few clues as to their optimum composition. It is true that Vitruvius’s *De architectura* and the occasional intact building such as the Pantheon seemed to provide a reassuring set of rules among this visual chaos. Yet

neither ruins nor buildings corresponded to the text, and the text itself was a perennial enigma. As a result, some held with one, some with the other, some invented freely; debates proliferated. Pietro Cataneo's sharply worded attack of 1560 on the practices of his contemporaries who "compose and order on their own (*da se*)" instead of following either Vitruvius or the ruins is only one instance among many.<sup>5</sup>

However, more important perhaps, Cataneo testifies to the fact that the physical act of reassembling a broken architectural sequence of forms had precipitated the realisation that an entablature or a cornice *was* an assemblage of discrete parts, that is, a compound of profiles stacked one upon another and that some logic necessarily controlled this arrangement.

What we routinely designate as the vocabulary of ornamental forms – brackets, modillions, volutes, neck mouldings, bead and reel, egg and dart, and so on – were essentially interchangeable pieces and as such could be composed and recomposed to suit any whim (Figure 40). Even if representing architectural profiles as a kit of parts took a couple of centuries to come into being, the underlying notion of their relative independence was there all along. Thus the practices Cataneo attacks lay at the very heart of the problem, for they were the consequence of a free manipulation of forms, the new inventions or 'neologisms' introduced by more adventurous architects. To be sure, these architects did use the units of classical ornament, and in this sense remained close to the ideal of *imitatio* that characterised their entire culture; yet, when all was said and done, theirs were not exact replicas of any one approved example but displayed deliberate acts of artistic virtuosity (Figure 41).

The predicament of the *letterati* was not unlike that of the architects, for they too had to select a corpus of units (words) and styles to produce their own compositions. And here too the primary issue was to choose between two strategies of artistic production: on the one hand, strict imitation of the ancients (for style) and of the Trecentisti (for language); on the other, loose imitation laced with free invention and use of modern idioms. *Imitatio* was the fundamental strategy for both approaches;



40. Sebastiano Serlio, Book 3, Arch of Titus, Rome, details.

yet such a focus meant that much of the discussion revolved around the relative merits of single or pure versus multiple or eclectic use of models.<sup>6</sup> Ever since Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* (and especially after its translation and publication by Trissino in 1529) where he defends the use of the living language, and his *Divina commedia*, which was itself regarded as a mixture of genres, the issue of a *mescolanza* (mixing) of language and form entered the literary debates as it did later the debates on architecture.<sup>7</sup> At the root of the discussion lay the issue of how pure an imitation to seek, or in other words, how much licence a writer might claim, how far on the road to *aemulatio* (emulation) he might tread vis-à-vis time-honoured tradition.

With respect to the vocabulary perhaps the most pertinent debate for our topic was that between the living language and the hallowed language of the Trecentisti or, put another way, the debates between the moderns and ancients. The question they faced was not so much if the Trecentisti should be heeded or not, for this was a *sine qua non*. Their problem was whether this vocabulary could and should be constantly enriched with the new words produced 'on the street' by a constantly changing society. Evidently the issues of court language (*lingua cortigiana*) versus that of the *vulgo* (*lingua commune*) and that of the value of neologisms were drawn into these debates.<sup>8</sup> And it is here that they touched the architectural debates most closely.

The discussion of stylistic invention and neologisms in language and architecture were not only analogous but actually intersected, for in the routine comparison between painting and literary style architecture also claimed a place. Some analogies between the letters and architecture had come up periodically since Antiquity, but in the Renaissance they were used more systematically in discussions about appropriation, that is, in discussions about cultural *imitatio*.<sup>9</sup> Already in the fifteenth century Alberti and Filarete had compared language and letters with architecture on the basis of their similar dependence on a fragmentarily surviving thesaurus. One had equated architectural fragments and their recomposition into new entities with that of linguistic ones; the other had turned to the purification project undertaken by the humanists as his simile for architectural recuperation.<sup>10</sup> In any event, Pietro Bembo was clearly picking up the thread of this *ut architectura lingua* comparison when he imported it into his *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), that is, into a text destined to become a *locus classicus* for the language debates of the sixteenth century. Thus, in the midst of his polemic on the imitation of literary models, he turned to the archaeological project of the period to draw a more powerful, because visual, analogy with language: fragments of baths, theatres, and arches are copied and used by architects to achieve nearness to *cose antiche* (ancient things) in new work; the same should be the case for the use of language, he argued.<sup>11</sup>

Patricia Rubin and others have noted that the language of artistic criticism – especially Vasari's – owed much to the literary debates of the period.<sup>12</sup> Yet the fact of an *exchange* between them and, in particular, the place of *architecture* in this exchange has not been sufficiently stressed. Indeed, when literary discussions turned to the issue of new inventions – and the amorphous boundaries between them meant that *mescolanze*, *compositi* (composites), neologisms, and transgressions of all manner in language as in literary composition blended into each other – architecture really came into its own.<sup>13</sup>

And conversely, when Vasari wrote his *Vite* in the 1540s and tabulated licence as the leading strategy for contemporary art, not only was he drawing on an accumulated tradition of literary criticism well known to him through his ties with the Florentine Academy, but he turned to architecture to describe his meaning most fully.<sup>14</sup>

Not coincidentally, Michelangelo took centre stage in both discussions and offered a means of communication between them. Of course, that this was so should not be surprising since he was very much the leading artist of the Florentines and therefore an obvious choice any time the supremacy of the Tuscan surfaced as an issue. The analogy of Michelangelo/Dante became a rallying cry for both artistic and literary debates and a characteristic feature of the output of the Florentine Academy.<sup>15</sup> But more was at stake, for Michelangelo was an artistic cause célèbre, and not only for the *fantasia* that he displayed in his paintings and sculptures but especially for his paradoxical relationship to the ancients. Bembo had used him as a case of exemplary assimilation; and the notion that his sculptures disinterred could be taken for antiquities had become something of a *topos*.<sup>16</sup> But if Michelangelo's practice of *imitatio* was the ostensible reason for adducing his work in these literary contexts, his successful *aemulatio* of the ancients was as much at stake in these encomia. And nowhere was his idiosyncratic use of the classical vocabulary more visibly displayed than in his architectural ornament.

Thus, when a member of the Florentine Academy like Cosimo Bartoli or Carlo Lenzone sought to illustrate the value of the *composto* in language or to promote literary *aemulatio*, that is, an *imitatio* modified by assimilation and personal interpretation, they turned to architecture, and the example of Michelangelo in particular. In his lectures on language delivered at the Academy between 1542 and 1551 and subsequently published in revised form as *Ragionamenti accademici sopra alcuni luoghi difficili di Dante* (1567), Bartoli specifically defended Michelangelo's unorthodox Doric at the Laurentian Library and more generally argued that "when in architecture styles are varied, and this satisfies the majority, or those that have more judgment than others, then this is certainly most praiseworthy."<sup>17</sup> Nor was this all, for he proceeded to justify his own architectural inventions in the house of Bishop Giovanbattista Ricasoli in Florence – male and female herms with complex iconographical meanings, smooth stones with bands of rough blocks, and *finestre inginnochiate* – with the authority of his paragon. However, the most striking aspect of this dialogue is not that Bartoli praises and imitates Michelangelo, but that he embeds these views on architectural licence in a discussion where topical language issues turn up frequently. Indeed, one can detect a sense of urgency when he twice defends the use of foreign words in almost identical terms: "You must know, that who wants to deal with the sciences in this language, will be forced to steal not only this, but many other Greek words, as did the Romans in this case and in others, and as did in this language also Dante, who used it in his tenth canto."<sup>18</sup> Though not stated in so many words, Michelangelo's architectural inventions, Pierfrancesco Giambullari's views (*Il Gello*, 1546) on the Florentine language as a *composto* of many foreign tongues, and Bartoli's own permissive attitude to neologisms come across as speaking to the same truth and buttress each other below the surface of the actual narrative.<sup>19</sup>

Like Bartoli, Carlo Lenzoni also turned to architecture and Michelangelo (to whom he dedicated his *In difesa della lingua fiorentina et di Dante*) when he addressed the language issues of the day. True enough, the introductions written by Bartoli and Giambullari, who saw the book through the press after Lenzoni's death, make more of Michelangelo as a painter and sculptor.<sup>20</sup> Yet Lenzoni himself had focused specifically on architecture when he defended Dante's mixture of styles in the *Divina commedia*:

But if people want to be so severe; and so dependent on the things made identical to the ancient; such that no new thing may be found; or those already existing recomposed so that they may be good and delight just like them, let the architects submit to their first four orders [*generi*]; and abandon the Composite [*composto*]: let the mathematicians stop at the instruments made by Ptolemy; and not only abandon looking for others, but, throw away those already found, though they are as good or better: and let the farmers [*agricoltori*] stop grafting various types of fruit so as to obtain more grace, size, goodness and life in their trees. And let them stay quietly at the things made and found by the ancients and celebrated authors without trying others.<sup>21</sup>

The irony drew its strength from an implied and self-evident conception of architecture as an art uniquely dependent on progress. Unlike painting and sculpture, which sought to attain an ideal set by nature, the arts Lenzoni chose in this example have no externally set limit for their inventions once the ancients and common practice are waived; every generation can improve upon the previous one. In this sense linguistic *imitatio* and architectural *imitatio* shared a fundamental feature that drew them much closer together and left the mimetic arts out of the analogy. More important still, Lenzoni's reference is quite specific. He does not address architecture in general, that is, everything from building layouts to construction technique that necessarily reflect a newer and different set of customs, rituals, and practices. Instead he points to ornament, even more specifically, to the Composite order. Such emphasis was certainly not accidental, for this order had recently attracted a body of theory in architecture that made it especially relevant for Lenzoni. Left nameless by Vitruvius, it had been named and drawn into the canon by Serlio (1537), who had defined it as a catch-all for inventions that he (and many after him) had dubbed *mescolanze*.<sup>22</sup> Seen from this perspective it becomes clear that Lenzoni's choice of vehicle for his analogy is not innocent of a more complex set of references. Both progress (the last order invented by the ancients) and style theory are at stake in this passage, and the equation between style of ornament and literary style, architectural and literary *composto*, is evident even if not stated in so many words.

What allowed Lenzoni to draw his comparison between language and architecture was precisely the recognition that both were assemblage-driven: words, like profiles, could be selected and assembled; orders, like literary styles, could be mixed and matched. As much was already part of the established architecture-language *paragone*. For example, Castelvetro acted upon it when in his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* (1570) and in the midst of the discussion of *imitatio* he compared the architect and the poet, the house and the poem, and finally turned to a construction metaphor to

compare words with architectural materials (words/bricks). But ever since Serlio had posited his architectural “composito” (1537), it had seeped into literary criticism as a more visually specific metaphor, and the *paragone* had also taken a more sophisticated turn. Thus, in his *Della vera poetica* of 1555 Giovan Pietro Capriano offered a more subtle example of the symmetry between language and architecture when he argued that

infinite numbers of poets, Greeks as well as Latins and of other languages as well, not considering these things with care, have mixed, like ignorant architects a composite of architecture [*composito d'architettura*], one species of poem with another without order [*inordinatamente*], and one sort of poem with the subjects of another, without any sense and without artistic judgement.<sup>23</sup>

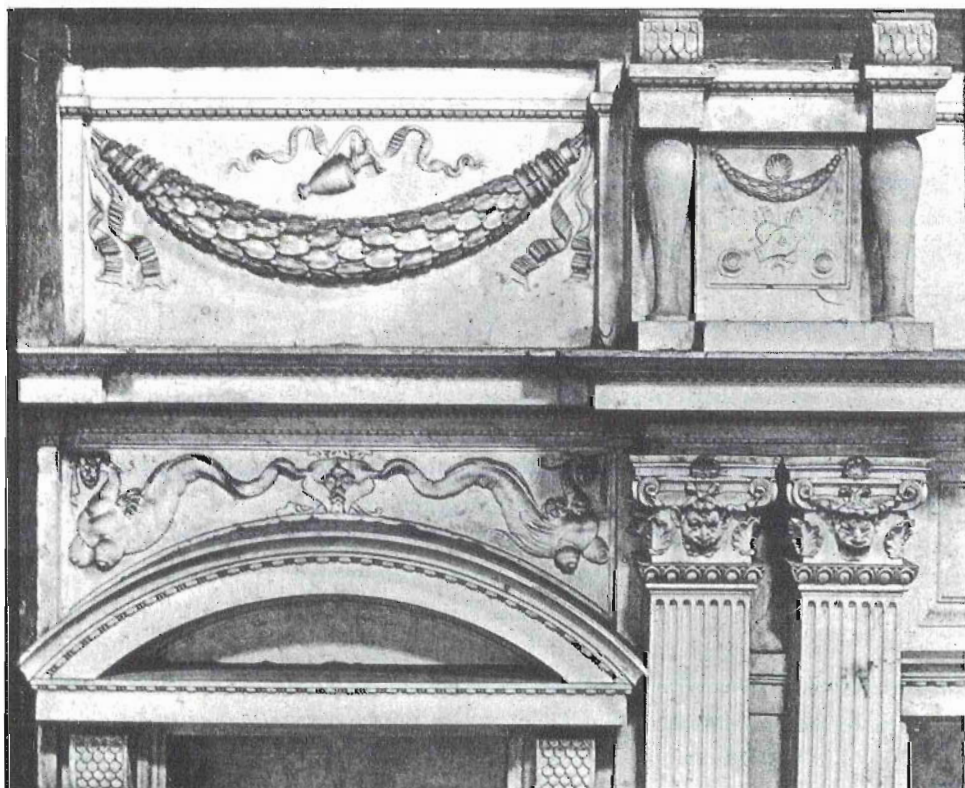
It is most revealing that Lenzoni (like Trissino, who described neologisms as a case of composition [*comporre*]) used the term *composto* (a version of *composito*), that is, he used the very same word that turns up in Vasari's Introduction to *Le Vite*, where he identifies it as the order that allows for invention and progress.<sup>24</sup> Nor was this all. *Composito* was also Vasari's term for the form that Michelangelo's groundbreaking inventions took (“fece dentro uno ornamento composito”) when he showed his contemporaries how to sever “the bonds and chains” that had previously confined them to the creation of traditional forms.<sup>25</sup> The linguistic ambiguity between the Composite order and *ornamento composito* (and elsewhere *composto*) that suggests equivalence was probably intended: the result of assembling ornament into ever different compositions, they showcase the same process of artistic invention.<sup>26</sup> And, for Vasari, these forms are the most tangible, vivid, and self-evident examples of artistic originality (*licenzia*) at work: much though Michelangelo had taken liberties with the human body by twisting it in various impossible directions, he had not reshuffled it, for it still had a head, eyes, limbs, and so on in the requisite places.<sup>27</sup> But he *had* refashioned classical ornament both by inventing new profiles that he incorporated into traditional assemblages and by scrambling them. When he carved and tapered pilasters, placed miniature balusters for capitals, introduced cyma details that no ancient ruin had seen before and brought them all together into a plausible assemblage, he was showing precisely how *imitatio* and *aemulatio* worked (Figure 42).<sup>28</sup>

That Michelangelo should be singled out in this manner was no novelty, for his work was under attack around the very same time that Vasari exalted it for precisely such transgressions from the rule; nor should we underestimate Vasari's debt to architectural literature (particularly to Serlio) on the artistic significance of the *composito*.<sup>29</sup> However, nowhere had the issue of architectural licence and Michelangelo's exemplary invention practices been brought to bear on a comprehensive view of artistic progress, especially not on one with a Tuscan overtone. That Vasari should do so at this point in time and that architecture should play such a significant role in showcasing what was a fundamental concept for the whole *Vite* must be seen as a direct consequence of his involvement with members of the Florentine Academy and of his exposure to the theoretical backdrop to the debates on language. Moreover, not only had analogies between architecture and language helped him translate one





41. Bernardo Buontalenti, Uffizi, Florence, Porta delle Suppliche.



42. S. Lorenzo, Florence, New Sacristy, detail.

body of theory into another, but the prominence of architecture in the debates on neologisms in the period when Vasari was writing also facilitated such transference. It had become painfully clear that a specialised vocabulary of technical terms was absent in the language of the Trecento poets that the academics were so keen to canonise. Construction and the sciences had moved on and new words were necessary to name new concepts, new materials, and new techniques. Nor had the situation improved with time. In 1556 Barbaro could still compare the fragmentary state of ancient buildings with the poverty of language and recommend “*honesta licenzia*” in inventing new terms.<sup>30</sup> As a result, there were those like Giambullari, Varchi, and Bartoli who proposed expanding the limits of the *volgare* by borrowing from Latin; and there were others, like Giovanni Norchiati, an early member of the *Accademia degli Humidi* (the predecessor of the Florentine Academy), who attempted to collect a glossary of such current Tuscan construction terms. Even later, great pressure was put on the *Accademia della Crusca* to include them in their definitive *vocabolario* (they did not do so until the fifth edition).<sup>31</sup> In this sense, architecture played an important role in academic debate, for not only its ornament but also its language offered perfect vehicles to buttress the notion of the composite (*composto*) language that both Giovanni Battista Gelli and Giambullari had done so much to promote.

It is clear that between Serlio’s publication in 1537 and Vasari’s in 1550, that is, in the period when language debates were raging and the lines between the camps were drawn, influence operated both ways, and architecture furnished some very useful visual backup for opposing views on mixtures and composites.<sup>32</sup> But as regards the use of the axis *composto/licenzia*, it is clear that Vasari absorbed more than he had offered. After all, like his literary peers, Lenzoni used the architectural analogy to illustrate a point, whereas Vasari imported, assimilated, and channelled into the literature of architecture not only the vocabulary of the literary debate but its whole framework.<sup>33</sup> What the Florentine Academy had shown him was how architecture and language could come together.

### THE *IMITATIO* DEBATES

If through Serlio, Vasari, and others the terms of the language debates on neologisms, *composti*, and stylistic *mescolanze* seeped into the literature on architecture, no less can be said of the poetic theory of *imitatio*. Indeed, although much of the debate on language involved issues of etymological detail and caused a continuous stream of *vocabolarii* to see the light of print, much of it drew heavily on issues of poetic theory.<sup>34</sup> Again, the academic environment provided the catalytic ingredients for such transference. One particularly interesting oeuvre that arose from this literary milieu and that inscribes itself in this web of exchanges is that of the Florentine Gherardo Spini, whose principal work, *I primi tre libri sopra l’istituzioni intorno agl’ornamenti* (c. 1569), was a treatise on the architectural orders that he brought to near completion but did not ultimately publish. However, as secretary to Ferdinando de’ Medici, as a member of the Florentine Academy and author of sonnets and *rime*, as com-

mentator on Ignazio Danti's *Astrolabio* and critic of Cellini's *Vita* and Bernardo Gamucci's *Antichità di Roma* (1565), Spini pursued wide-ranging activities that fell very much in line with those of his fellow academicians Bartoli or Varchi. Moreover, among his most intimate friends – and indeed, those who supported his architectural venture – were those like Giovanni della Casa and Paolo Rossi, both prominent players in the Tuscan language debates of the period. In this sense, then, he literally embodies the interaction between literary and architectural discourses.<sup>35</sup>

Spini's treatise offers interesting insights at many levels, for he intended it to be no less than an encyclopaedia of architectural ornaments, their members, origins, variations, and uses in ancient and modern work. However, what constitutes its most singular aspects for our concerns are his isolation of the category ornament as the subject of an independent treatise and his almost exclusive focus on *imitatio*. To be sure, ornament had taken up a major share in Renaissance architectural treatises ever since Alberti had ostensibly devoted the second half of his *De re aedificatoria* (Books 6 to 10) to this topic. What this meant was a concentration on what we have come to call the orders but what Vitruvius separated into columns with their immediate appendages (capitals and bases) and the *ornamenta* (the assemblage of profiles above the column and in the pediment of the temple). Francesco di Giorgio had been particularly eloquent in isolating the orders (*colonne*) among the many subjects he broached; and Serlio had been even more outspoken on the subject, for although his *Quarto libro* (1537) involved everything from ornament to façade design, in his title he had nevertheless placed the emphasis on the orders. So had Vignola, whose *Regola delli cinque ordini* (1562) was exclusively devoted to them.

But most of these efforts were directed towards communicating how to design, proportion, and assemble the orders, and none of the architects had so crisply and decisively attempted to develop a comprehensive and systematic theory of ornament as Spini set out to do.<sup>36</sup> With him, architectural ornament explicitly claims a theoretical domain all its own, much like the category ornament in the language arts, rhetoric, and poetics.<sup>37</sup> That a *letterato* rather than an architect should conceive of ornament as a distinct theoretical environment and bring this clarity to an existing if submerged discourse is perhaps not surprising given the formidable apparatus that ornament claimed in the language arts. Moreover, Barbaro (whose commentary on Vitruvius Spini greatly respected) had already drawn attention to the interchangeability between literary/rhetorical and architectural ornament when he stated:

Another type of sentences, artifice, words, figures [*figure*], parts, numbers, compositions and terms are used when one wants to be clear, pure and elegant in speaking, another when one wants to be great, vehement, rough, and severe, and yet another seeks the charm [*piacevolezza*], beauty and ornament of speech. Similarly, in the ideas of buildings [*idee delle fabbriche*], other proportions, other arrangements, other orders are required, when stature or veneration are called for in the building than when beauty or delicacy or simplicity are demanded . . . Such that with purity one can have greatness, in greatness one can have ornament, in ornament simplicity, in simplicity splendour, indeed this is the greatest achievement of the orator, and it is done mixing [*mescolando*] the numbers of one form with the words, figure and artifices of another, as is demonstrated by the true architects of rhetoric.<sup>38</sup>

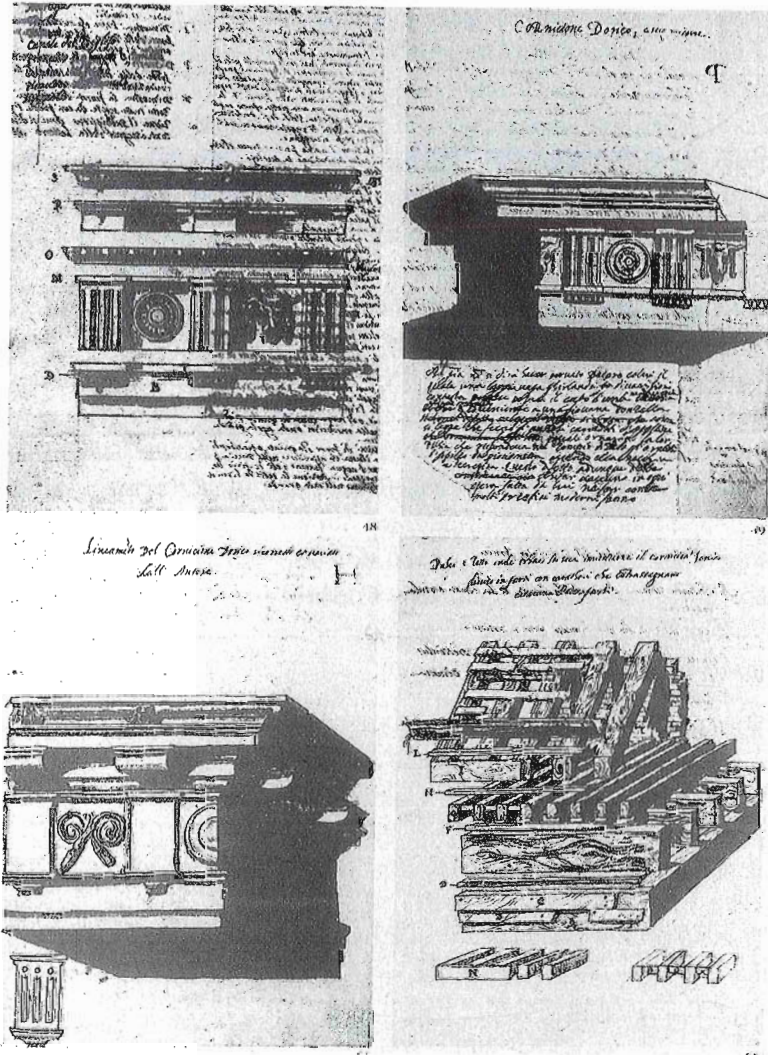
However, if Spini took note of Barbaro's comparison it led him elsewhere, for, a poet himself, he had less interest in rhetoric than in poetics.<sup>39</sup> The shift was not unduly difficult. Already in 1529 Trissino's "childlike, masculine, feminine, rustic and urban words" (*parole puerili, virili, feminili, silvestre, cittadinesche*) offered a parallel to the classification of architectural ornaments; and Lenzoni's own very visual and near-anthropomorphic vocabulary to describe the effect of consonants in words ("very few produce weakness, lowness and sweetness; few, lowness mixed with sweetness; the moderate and well distributed, sweetness and dignity; many produce dignity and greatness; too many, swelling [*gonfiamento*] and difficulty") invited comparisons with the effect of individual profiles in architectural ensembles.<sup>40</sup> Such attention to the units of the *composto* and their effects upon the reception of an artefact (be it literary or architectural) is certainly evident in the vocabulary for the description of ornament that Serlio developed between 1537 and the 1550s and that included terms such as *soda* (solid), *gagliarda* (robust), *semplice* (simple), *schietta* (plain), *dolce* (smooth, gradual), and *morbida* (softly textured) for good architecture; and *debole* (weak), *gracile* (slender), *delicata* (delicate), *affettata* (mannered), *cruda* (roughly textured), *oscura, confusa* (confused, disordered) for bad.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, in his *Arte poetica* of 1563, Alessandro Minturno had used the self-same words as Barbaro to describe poetic language (*parlare poetico*) and to recommend that styles be mixed to suit "the thing itself, and the person" (*la cosa istessa, e la persona*).<sup>42</sup> With such a linguistic apparatus at hand it is no wonder that Spini should turn to the theory of poetic *imitatio* when he sought to set architecture's own mimetic theory on a firm footing.

In addition, Vitruvius provided a series of imitation stories scattered throughout his ten books that gave Spini much to fuel his discourse. The male form as paradigm for the Doric, the female for the Ionic, and the maidenly Corinthian came from one such set; the correspondence between the wooden trabeation and the stone ornaments of the entablature and pediment of temples offered another.<sup>43</sup> But on this Vitruvian scaffolding Spini constructed a rather different imitation theory, and uniquely, he attempted to translate the highly developed theoretical apparatus available from poetics into architectural terms. Thus he proposed an outspokenly Aristotelian definition as its basis:

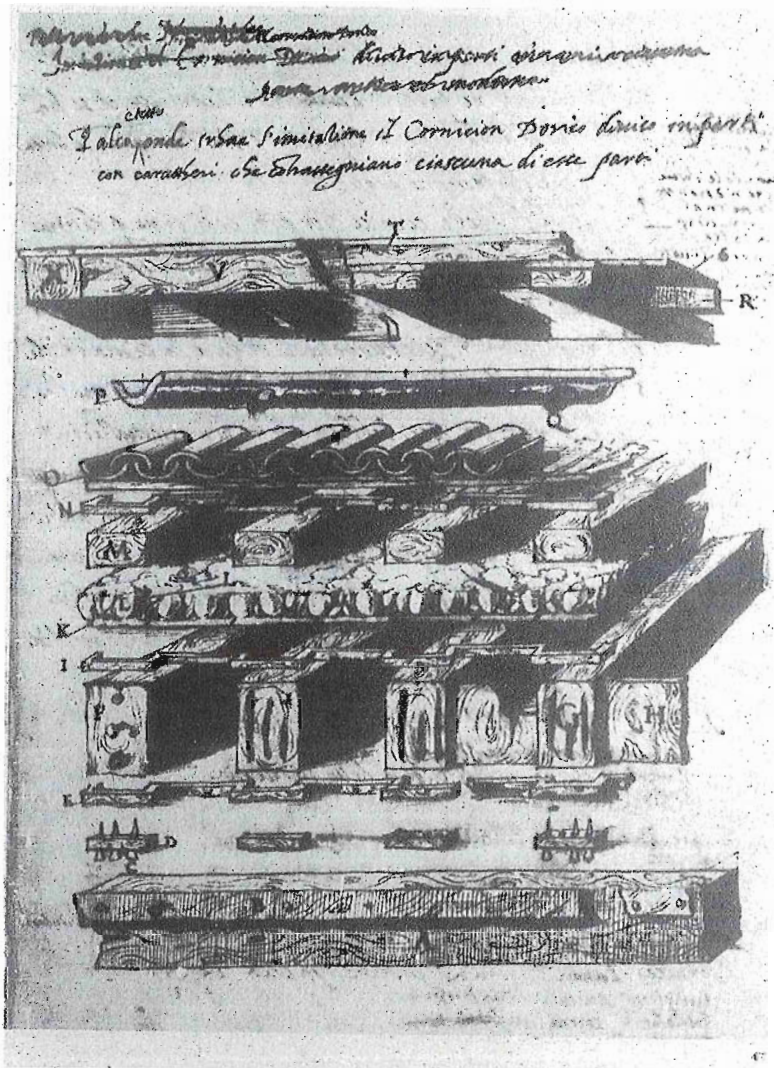
Imitation is the representation and similitude of something that has been first produced by Nature or by Art . . . And indeed imitation has great force to move man to pleasure and delight, given that his nature is intellectual; because while he recognises through the means of the work which is being represented the intention of the artist, he feels delight above anything else, as there is no pleasure that equals that of the intellect and of learning . . . it will suffice that in imitating something the architect gives another the opportunity to recognise it, and who recognises learns and concludes what everything is, as human beings naturally find pleasure in recognising [*si rallegnano nel riconoscere*] the things that they see.<sup>44</sup>

For Spini, what reaches the viewer, is recognised, and causes pleasure in architecture is ornament. From this departure point Spini pulls together all possible (and some impossible) imitation stories available in Vitruvius and his reception and, with a consistency that is unprecedented, puts forward a comprehensive theory of archi-

tectural construction and its representation in ornament. In his view all aspects of the ornamental vocabulary are drawn from the wooden trabeated structure: architraves are beams, as are triglyphs; dentils are purlins; and the egg and dart represents stones piercing through mortar in traditional floor construction (Figures 43, 44). But these similes bequeathed by Vitruvius and Alberti are not enough, and to reinforce his argument Spini adds a few of his own making. For instance, in a radical move, he gives precedence to the entablature (as the representation of the floor platform or *palco*) in the invention of the orders: heavier beams required heavier columns to support them, and lighter ones, more graceful proportions; thus the columnar orders were born.<sup>45</sup> The *homo bene figuratus* that lay at the origin of the Doric column is left



43. Gherardo Spini, *I tre primi libri* . . . Book 4, 38, trabeation of the Doric order.



44. Gherardo Spini, *I tre primi libri* . . . Book 4, 38, derivation of egg-and-dart motif.

behind and the human analogy is only applied to derive the proportions of the overall system, not its mimetic message.

Not only does Spini draw a coherent picture of structural members as ensembles, but he raises the issue of their behaviour: the key ornaments (bases, friezes, capitals, shafts) swell, deflect, and compress as they resist weight, that is, they punctuate the system's narrative and explicate it. Thus, the bases are described as representations of muscles under stress, the curved Ionic frieze as a consequence of its loading, and the capitals – evident points of junction between weight (architrave) and support (column) – as *schacciatti* (squashed, squeezed).<sup>46</sup> Integrated within a system, these moments of architectural eloquence constitute so many *figure*, which communicate

its logic and give it an almost tactile presence, thus enhancing the pleasure factor associated with the imitation of a known state. For Spini, architecture and poetry thus meet on the terrain of the plausible (*verisimile*): if the architect adequately imitates nature (as construction) so as to produce a plausible image, the viewer, evidently familiar with this nature twice removed and enchanted with its re-presentation as artefact, will experience pleasure.

Though an evident source, Aristotle's *Poetics* and its Renaissance reception is not Spini's only reference point. Thus when he sets out the cardinal points of the architect's activity to be *imitatione*, *corrispondenza* (matching), *invenzione*, and *decoro*, he stays close to Minturno, who in his *Arte poetica* had similarly directed the poet. Moreover, to import the *verisimile* as the fundamental condition of successful architectural imitation from poetics did not require an altogether radical leap, for it was already latent in Vitruvius. Barbaro had only voiced what was implied in *De architectura* when he absorbed both Horace's arguments and his vocabulary on the monstrous poem from the *Ars poetica* to explicate Vitruvius's famous criticism of Second Style Pompeian wall painting that represented irrational (monstrous) structures.<sup>47</sup> And for an eye trained in the benefits of imitation, there was only a small step from here to a wholesale definition of architectural imitation and its pitfalls: Vitruvius's words recalled powerfully his description of the Doric entablature as image (*imago*) of a real wooden structure.<sup>48</sup>

But Spini's indebtedness to a literary tradition did not stop here. Perhaps the most striking aspect of his treatise is that its concentration on imitation is such that it could have earned the work the title *De imitatione architetonica*, in the manner of the familiar treatises *De imitatione poetica* of contemporary authors like Bembo and Pico, Camillo, Giraldi Cinzio, Partenio, or Borghini.<sup>49</sup> Thus the choice of genre itself signals that a prevailing vehicle of literary criticism central to the debate on *imitatio* in language takes over centre stage in an architectural context. In fact, Spini himself signals to the reader that his text belongs in this company when he cites the Pico/Bembo *Epistola de imitatione* (backing Pico) as an authority for censuring servile imitation of ancient models in architecture.<sup>50</sup>

It cannot be argued that Spini's text affected the course of architectural theory since, unfinished and unpublished, it was probably known only to a small circle of local acquaintances.<sup>51</sup> Yet his concentration on a comprehensive theory of ornament for architecture that drew on literary theory was no isolated instance. As I have shown elsewhere his theoretical premises, complete with the emphasis on the plausible (*verisimile*), and his proposals of an expressive tectonics can be identified in the work of Palladio and Scamozzi most notably, even if they do not reference literary theory as readily as does Spini.<sup>52</sup> But if not significant in the text chain that spanned the period of the Renaissance into the Baroque, Spini nevertheless showcases an important phenomenon of exchange between the literary and architectural domains. Indeed, his quasi-anonymous status speaks even more powerfully of shared theoretical commonplaces and of the presence of a learned audience that entered into a dialogue with practitioners, and recorded categories of perception and interpretation

that were shared by artists, *letterati*, and the public but may not have shown up in the professional's treatise.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately Spini's work demonstrates the vectors along which architectural theory could move once a sophisticated vocabulary of criticism such as Vasari proposed had come into being, a theory that moved freely between the literary and artistic domains.



I have drawn attention elsewhere to the midwifely role of academies in bringing together artists, especially architects, with antiquarians, archaeologists, and humanists and thus facilitating a confluence of methodologies and discourses between the various disciplines.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, publications such as Philandrier's annotations on Vitruvius (*De architectura annotationes* [1544]) and Vignola's *Regola delli cinque ordini* (1562), arising from the large 'recovery' programme planned by the Accademia della Virtù, display its consequences: one virtually image-less, a textual compendium of *loci*, the other virtually text-less, a visual dictionary, their systematic, encyclopaedia-like quality displays the transfer of the *vocabolario* mentality from language to architecture. However, these academies characteristically flourished in cities where Antiquity had a far more visible presence than in Florence, and their profiles were shaped by the large-scale project of its literary, topographical, and material recovery. At the Florentine Academy and within the larger community upon which it drew, the focus was more decidedly upon language issues, especially upon a form of linguistic imperialism that accompanied Cosimo de' Medici's political ambitions and 'diplomacy of taste'. It was therefore here that *imitatio*, the *composto*, and neologisms were in most urgent need of formulation, and it was also here that this process ignited the most acrimonious debates.<sup>55</sup> In an environment uniquely shaped to sustain exchange, the worlds of politics, arts, and letters interacted and not only caused architecture to emerge as a bridge between verbal and visual disciplines but fundamentally affected its discourse.



# ARCHITECTURE AND LANGUAGE

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*Constructing Identity in European Architecture*  
*c. 1000–c. 1650*

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