

**George Hersey, *Architecture, Poetry, and Number in the Royal Palace at Caserta*. Cambridge (Mass.), The MIT Press, 1983.  
318 pp., 216 illus., 16 in colour, \$63.00 (cloth)**

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other scenes of preaching, healing or blessing, the 'sinners' gathered on different levels around and below Christ vary from those of substantial stature to those who through deprivation, infirmity or genetics are short or bowed down. The care-devoured faces and bodies of the sick or crippled here reflect their vulnerability. The glory of God's omnipotence works its way in the world under the veil of the ordinary.

Related to the author's approach to realism is his readiness to assign emotional and moral states to individual figures. One example is the imposing male spectator, identifiable by his attire as a scholar or Pharisee, in the lower left corner of the *100 Guilder Print*. He stands apart from the (other) Pharisees and watches those approaching Christ from his left. The introduction of a figure – usually male – with his back to the viewer in a corner and close to the picture plane is a fairly conventional figure in Rembrandt's compositions; it traditionally functions as a *repousson* element and is discussed in contemporary theoretical precepts concerning narrative composition. Halewood ignores such usage and invests the man with characteristics supporting his contentions as to Rembrandt's projection of man's abased nature. Halewood labels him as 'a fat, foolishly elegant figure with large hat and walking stick, who stands conspicuously with his back to the viewer in a position suggesting indifference to the proceedings and imbecile self-content.' The vocabulary used in this passage suggests a fairly direct adaptation of an even more rapid characterisation of this figure by Visser't Hooft.

In representing the estates of humankind and their relationships to Christ – this humble, yet dignified figure at the vortex of a gesticulating encircling crowd – Rembrandt sensitively portrays humanity in its diversity of ages, conditions, gestures, emotions, proportions. In this respect as in others, the composition, in its staging of this significant event, conforms to the traditional recommendations of art theory, more specifically as put forth by Karel van Mander in his *Schilder-boeck* of 1604.

This kind of issue is not a concern of Halewood's, although it should be. Surely such precise assignments of intentionality as he offers call for a careful discounting of the impact

both of traditional pictorial values or conventions which transcend the particular subject matter and of the rhetoric an artist may bring to bear in making a persuasive or moving image.

A less extensively considered factor thereof is that of setting. In this regard the author asserts that Rembrandt made his figures 'too small for their space' to render clearer their diminished state. As with parallel claims, it is not supported. With this perception of scale one wonders what Halewood would make of Raphael's *School of Athens*. The query is not irrelevant as it is a commonplace to discuss Rembrandt's compositions from the 1640s and 1650s in terms of their espousal of the basic architectonic and spatial values of the High Renaissance. In the case of the *100 Guilder Print* as in most Rembrandt compositions, the setting itself is unobtrusive. Examined in the context of tradition, however, these looming, abstracted architectonic forms can be accepted as the shadow-streaked walls or palatial ruins of Roman Palestine. Aside from such suggestions of place, the subtle sense of scale and mass contribute markedly to the singular sense of moment by which the ordinary are not diminished but, on the contrary, exalted as witnesses to Christ's power.

These and other questions have to do with assessment of intention. It is a difficult task – these are, after all, works of art before they are works of exegesis – and Halewood's approach makes clear the importance of devising a method for evaluating evidence that can account for both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. In this regard research is now being carried on from a variety of angles; other than the few references introduced above, one might note as representative studies: M.C. Deutsch, 'Rembrandt as a Meditative Print-maker,' *Art Bulletin* (1982); E. Larsen, *Calvinistic Economy and 17th Century Dutch Art* (1979), and publications of the Luther year as the catalogue of the Hamburg exhibition *Luther und die Folgen für die Kunst* (1983). There is a renewed momentum to these enquiries which should result in significant synthetic work, benefiting as well from enquiries into meaning in Dutch depictions of the 'everyday world' as illuminated by the work of

E. de Jongh as well as the questioning of the nature of realism, exemplified by the controversial contributions of S. Alpers.

The accent Professor Halewood places on the theology of grace (and sin), especially in the imagery of Rembrandt, is stimulating. It is therefore all the more unfortunate that his treatment of the art in question and its history does not afford a confirmation of his proposals and is finally more provocative than persuasive. As the author himself notes in the preface, this is a 'blunter instrument than art history is used to.'

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GEORGE HERSEY *Architecture, Poetry, and Number in the Royal Palace at Caserta*. Cambridge (Mass.), The MIT Press, 1983. 318 pp., 216 illus., 16 in colour, \$63.00 (cloth).

*Architecture, Poetry, and Number in the Royal Palace at Caserta* by George Hersey is an admirable analysis of the underlying architectural intentions which generated the geometric ideas and the sculptural program of this very significant 18th-century building (Fig. 2). Throughout the beautifully illustrated book, Professor Hersey's text poetically guides the reader from mythical framework to realized order in subtle and revealing ways.

The author's scholarship is profound, and his attempt to avoid conventional (and irrelevant) historiographic and stylistic categorizations is laudable. Hersey understands and discloses the intellectual and cultural roots of the palace, particularly as it draws from the writings of the famous Neapolitan philosopher, G.B. Vico. Crucial is the author's interpretation of the garden and palace as parts of one major intention of order, thus avoiding the pitfalls of conventional art history or history of landscape, along with his understanding of the *coherence* between the representational universe of the structure (proportions, geometry) and the iconographic program of fountains, sculpture and fresco painting. Also illuminating are the lucid explanations of

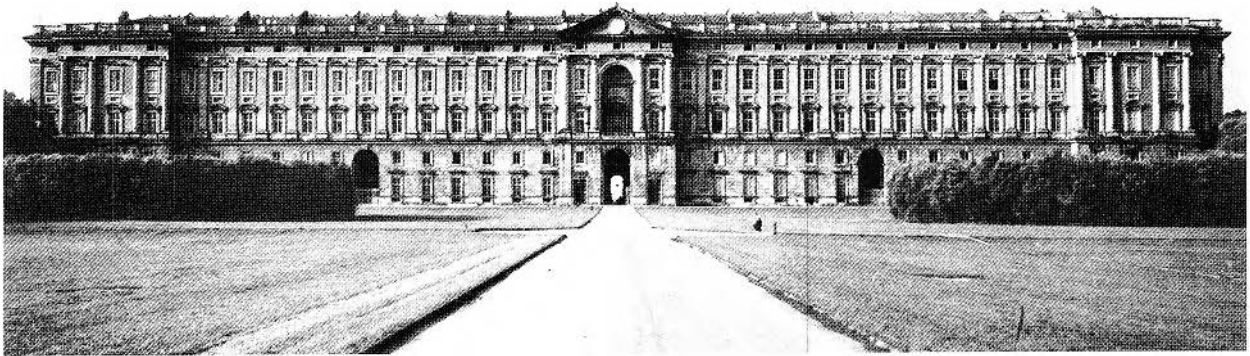


FIGURE 2. The Royal Palace at Caserta (Photo: A. Percz-Gomez)

the life of the court, the rituals, and other situations that the building was intended to frame.

Professor Hersey begins with a description of some of the local Neapolitan myths seen to be relevant to the Royal Palace. There is an excellent account of the myths of city, place and water, all expected to be embodied in the architecture of a *nea polis*, a new seat of government for a foreign king. Hersey clarifies the appropriateness of narrative to the palace, an issue which has proven to be elusive in 19th- and 20th-century architecture.

The book proceeds to describe the geometric plan of the building and its precedents. It analyses the artistic situation in Naples during the early 18th century and the personalities and realizations of the King, Carlo di Borbone, and the architects, Mario Gioffredo and Luigi Vanvitelli, all three important protagonists in the genesis of ideas for the project. This is followed by a description of the palace, beginning with the garden, and by a careful consideration of the myths represented in the iconic groups and their relationships to local traditions, the ruling house and the Vichian interpretations. There is speculation on the geometric principles involved in the plan and elevations of the building, including possible sources and intended meanings. This is followed by a tour of the inside of the palace ascending through the famous royal stairs, through the anterooms and culminating in the apartments of the king and queen. The book ends, most appropriately, with a discussion of the theatre and of a performance

of Metastasio's *Didone abbandonata*, which Hersey considers as the 'supreme metaphor' for his interpretation, disclosing the essential theatricality that underlies 18th-century architecture.

In review, rather than reiterate the themes of the book in a reduced language that would not do it justice, more significant discussion could be made of the assumption that Vico's interpretation of classical myths lies at the root of conception of the palace. It is obvious, in many instances, that the concerns and orders revealed by the building and its garden coincide with the myths discussed by Vico. But Vico's intention in exploring myths was not to remain attached literally to them: his interest was to disclose the 'truth of reality' which lies under the surface of apparent cultural diversity. Andrea Memmo, the most accomplished of Carlo Lodoli's disciples, showed in his *Elementi* how the critical spirit of Vichian thought could be incorporated in 18th-century architectural theory by actually *questioning* the traditional myths of the orders (of Vitruvian ancestry) and understanding that the truth hidden by the myths concerned a proto-phenomenological perception of building as *poiesis*, positing an architecture no longer classical in either its ornament or structure.

Is it possible that the classical myths represented in the architectural iconographic program of Caserta are the result of the same critical attitude? Hersey himself writes: 'Although no doubt Vico's mythological approach influenced Caserta's imagery, perhaps it would be better

to put it the other way around.' This is, in fact, important. Many of the themes and symbolic intentions present at Caserta, including the attitudes vis-a-vis nature, i.e., a dominating geometry and the revelation of infinity to perception, have obvious roots in the 17th-century Baroque cultural horizon. Just as Vico's philosophy was not truly understood by his contemporaries, and necessitated of 20th-century hermeneutics to be re-evaluated, it is possible that in many instances the connections between Caserta's mythic program and Vico's discussion of myth are rather superficial. With the depiction of the progress of civilization through the myths recalled by the garden fountains along the 'river-road,' relationships to the most substantial aspects of Vico's thought seem very likely. This is also true concerning the interest to reveal the universality of the human condition as it is subjected to the unpredictability of the gods' will reiterated through different narratives in diverse sculptural groups.

At a more general, deeper level, however, important distinctions beg to be made if one compares, for example, Piranesi's critical 'explosion' of the theatrical world of 'perspectiva per angolo' in the *Carceri* etchings, probably inspired by the legacy of Lodoli and the 'Rigoristi,' to Vanvitelli's overall idea in which the spectacle of courtly life is deployed in a perspective world. Vanvitelli's transformation of architecture into a stage-set is unquestionably significant: the theoretical framework for his enterprise appeared most explicitly in F. Galli-Bibiena's *Architettura*

*Civile* of 1711. Caserta can be read as a desperate attempt to salvage the intersubjective realm of meaning (convention, the public realm) as the *locus* of architecture still possible in the 18th century. This rhetoric is particularly clear in two very original features of the palace: the emphatic diagonal junctures of the massive vaulted corridors and entrances that link the courtyards, and the theatre, where the literal stage-set of a mythical play and the king's 'proscenium-box' engage in a dialogue, pointing to the transformation of the entire palace-theatre-garden complex into a stage-set. Taking for granted architecture as 'convention' in a perspective world, Vanvitelli's palace is far apart from the critical transcendence of the limitations of relativism and convention which was propitiated by Vico's hermeneutics and, correlatively, in the architecture of Lodoli, the 'Rigoristi' and Piranesi.

Vico's interest in number as *mathesis*, as a primordial form of symbolization, is obvious in his work on Pythagoras. His suspicion and criticism of apriori systems, exemplified by the philosophies of the 17th century, however warn us against reading into his concern for number an interest for systems of mathematical logic. It is well known that there are inconsistencies in Vico's oeuvre, but we can safely assume that he was being critical of the method of natural science, postulated as a model for all types of human knowledge. Having this in mind, Hersey's description of proportional relationships in the palace as 'close packing, plaid graphs, nesting, and vectors' seems inappropriate. It would be useful to differentiate between the author's reading of architectural order in terms of a vocabulary of functionalised mathematics (such as geometric planning) and the disclosure of the intentions as can be gleaned from the texts, architectural treatises and scientific culture of the time.

The perception of Caserta in the tradition of Renaissance palaces ruled by proportion, particularly seen in the reference of Gioffredo's scheme to the Escorial, and through it, to the primordial Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, is all very convincing. Gioffredo wrote that architectural order is 'the union of several things that by commutative proportions create the formation of a whole.' Hersey illuminates the sym-

bolic horizon of the rhythms, proportions and symmetries of the palace. These proportional relationships draw from the inveterate mythopoetic power of numbers to embody the ideals of order and justice of the monarchy through a synthesis of geometric structure and classical ornament in ways that seem to echo Vico's thought. What is less obvious, however, when one recognizes the *uncritical* use of Vitruvian traditional principles and metaphors in the building, is the assumption of both the most substantial (critical) aspects of Vichian philosophy, and the use of some planning methodology that may have promoted the reduction of plans and elevations to mathematical systems or series.

Perhaps the major lesson to be learned from Hersey's book is that the 'house' is architecture by virtue of it being a symbol. The concern of the architect is not comfort or aesthetics as subjective opinions to be realized in the private realm. For the house to be architecture it has to embody a transcendental myth and operate in the realm of the public – the domain of intersubjectivity – regardless of the contradictions that this may entail in the contemporary world. Only established in this domain does meaning appear, constituted by its own 'syntactic' horizon, historically layered, with all its richness and ambiguity.

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VICTOR CHAN *Leader of My Angels: William Hayley and His Circle* (exhibition catalogue). Edmonton. The Edmonton Art Gallery, in conjunction with the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / The University of Alberta, 1982. 89 pp., illus.

This exhibition catalogue is an outgrowth of Victor Chan's doctoral dissertation on George Romney's drawings of *John Howard Visiting Prisoners*. Like other such catalogues, it is a substantial publication which breaks new ground. The Edmonton Art Gallery (in conjunction with the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and The University

of Alberta) is to be commended for producing the catalogue and mounting the show itself.

'Though Hayley was not a major poet,' Chan notes in the Introduction, 'his better ideas were ... frequently filtered through his friends and expressed in their works,' ideas which in many ways, 'helped in the national crusade to create a new artistic identity through the formation of a school of history painting' (p. 9). Yet, except in connection with his patronage of William Blake – who once named him 'Leader of My Angels,' the title of this book – Hayley's role in the development of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English art has not been adequately assessed. Chan's object, therefore, is to examine Hayley's relationships and artistic involvements in an effort to bring to light some of the major issues confronting artists of the period. Dividing his essay into two main parts (plus Introduction and Conclusion), he deals with sensibility, sublimity, and modernity in the context of history painting, then specifically the Hayley circle itself. Eleven artists are represented by 151 drawings, prints, books and paintings, but the eleven surprisingly include Jean-Honoré Fragonard, to my knowledge unacquainted with Hayley, while an important omission is Joseph Wright of Derby, not to mention Jeremiah Meyer. Moreover, the author's observations are somewhat limited in scope, though his thesis is well founded and convincing, as he reconsiders for the first time all previous ideas from this meaningful point of view.

Part I serves primarily as background, being concerned with sensibility, the Sublime, the religious revival, and literature in relation to a search for dramatic subjects; the 'modern' concept of a national school of history painting is seen as their converging point. Particular reference is made to the artists of Hayley's own circle: Thomas Stothard, John Flaxman, and Romney in the eighteenth century. The poet's life is summarized – Chan neglecting to mention that he was an enthusiastic amateur artist, a salient point – and his publications especially *The Triumphs of Temper* presented as projects which involved both artists and literary figures. However, the first biographer of Romney was not Hayley, as stated (p. 11), but