Introduction, by Erle Loran

THE CREATIVE IDEAL THAT “form follows function” is now commonly associated with architects like Frank Lloyd Wright. We trace Wright’s development back to Sullivan and thence to Richardson, who was born in 1838. To most, it will come as a surprise to learn that the American sculptor, Horatio Greenough, born in 1805, had formulated ideas on art and architecture that read, even today, like the words of a progressive contemporary.

The primitive setting of art in America in Greenough’s time is portrayed in the first essay, “Aesthetics at Washington.” We find him pleading for the establishment of the first school of design in America! “I believe that these States need art as a visible exponent

INTRODUCTION

of their civilization." Greenough is well aware of the obstacles standing in the way, and he recalls that "the first work of sculpture by an American hand exhibited in this country, executed for the illustrious [James Fenimore] Cooper, was a group of children. The artist [Greenough himself] was rebuked and mortified by loud complaints of their nudity." Perhaps, because he is afraid of aiming too high, he does not ask for a school of fine arts. Instead, he modestly says, "I desire to see working normal schools of structure and ornament, constantly occupied in designing for the manufacturers, and for all mechanics who need aesthetical guidance in their operations." This program is not unlike that of the pre-Nazi German Bauhaus. He thus addresses himself to the practical, business-minded American, arguing that only when American goods are designed with distinction will they be able to compete with English and French importations.

He proceeds immediately to a severe criticism of the lack of *functionalism* in the building and landscape architecture in Washington. Criticizing the high-relief sculpture in the tympanum of the Capitol building, he says, "it is the translation of rhetoric into stone—a feat often fatal to the rhetoric, always fatal to the stone."

INTRODUCTION

With words that might be spoken by a contemporary and progressive architect he outlines the requirements of important public "edifices." In terms of function the rule must be "to plant a building firmly on the ground," that is, to adapt its size and form to the terrain (site); "the monumental character of a building has reference to its site—to its adaptation in size and form to that site. It has reference also to the *external expression* of the *inward functions* of the building." The most advanced modern architects could aspire to no higher ideal.

In answer to the question whether Greek art should be imitated his answers are timely and pertinent, for this, alas, is no dead issue, as we can see by looking around us on campuses and business streets. To clarify his point of view he turns to problems of locomotion, then so timely. He says, "I contend for Greek principles, not Greek things. If a flat sail goes nearest wind, a bellying sail, though picturesque, must be given up. The men who have reduced locomotion to its simplest elements, in the trotting wagon and the yacht *America*, are nearer to Athens at this moment than they who would bend the Greek temple to every use." The inevitable result of such misguided designing "is a make-believe. It is not the real thing. We see the marble

INTRODUCTION

capitals; we trace the acanthus leaves of a celebrated model—incredulous; it is not a temple.” And again, in words that belong to this very moment, “let us *encourage experiment* at the risk of license, rather than submit to an iron rule that begins by sacrificing reason, dignity, and comfort.”

Greenough offers practical guidance for his program of functionalism. He says, “let us consult nature—in our search after the great principles of construction.” In the animal world “there is no arbitrary law of proportion, no unbending model of form. There is scarce a part of the animal organization which we do not find elongated or shortened, increased, diminished, or suppressed, as the wants of the genus or species dictate, as their exposure or their work may require.” The logic and rightness is found in the “consistency and harmony of the parts juxtaposed, the *subordination of details to masses*, and of masses to the whole. *The law of adaptation is the fundamental law of nature in all structure.*”

Therefore, in designing architecture, “instead of forcing the functions of every sort of building into one general form, without reference to the inner distribution, let us begin from the heart as a nucleus, and *work outward*”—“the unflinching adaptation of a building

INTRODUCTION

to its position and use gives, as a sure product of that adaptation, character and expression." In contemporary words, "form follows function." As Greenough admires the flawless functionalism observed in nature, he also praises the American construction of ships, machines, and bridges. He is unsparing in his ridicule of those who would mask bad architecture with the "sneaking copy of a Greek façade." An inappropriate and borrowed architectural style produces an effect similar to the "African king, standing in mock majesty with his legs and feet bare, and his body clothed in a cast coat of the Prince Regent." Mr. Thomas Jefferson, who "recommends the model of the Maison Carrée for the State House at Richmond," is consequently not praised for his suggestion. Greenough wanted America to invent her own forms, to suit her own climate and needs. '

Greenough is always aware of the distinction between purely monumental structures "addressed to the sympathies, the faith, or the taste of a people" and those more practical structures that "may be classed as organic, formed to meet the wants of their occupants." In buildings of the latter group "the laws of structure and apportionment, depending on definite wants, obey a demonstrable rule. *They may be called machines.*" And this was not Le Corbusier talking in 1930, but

INTRODUCTION

Greenough before 1850! In the essay, "Relative and Independent Beauty," Greenough has a good deal to say about meaningless decoration, the curse of architecture in many lands and times. In French, *chinoiserie* means tomfoolery as well as elaborate Chinese decoration. In American architecture, "gingerbread" has come to mean something like excrescence, to be removed like a cancer. But Greenough could see its falseness while it was having its heyday. He speaks of "embellishment as false beauty"—"the instinctive effort of infant civilization to disguise its incompleteness, even as God's completeness is to infant science disguised." Whitman was hardly more than borrowing from Greenough when he wrote in the preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855): "In paintings or mouldings or carvings in mineral or wood . . . , or to put upon cornices or monuments . . . or to put anywhere before the human eye indoors or out, that which distorts honest shapes . . . is a nuisance and revolt. . . . Of ornaments to a work nothing outré can be allowed—but those ornaments can be allowed that conform to the perfect facts of the open air and that flow out of the nature of the work and come irrepressibly from it and are necessary to the completion of the work. Most works are most beautiful without ornament."

INTRODUCTION

To the modern artist and architect, function and organization are either synonyms or firmly interlaced concepts. Now, beauty is a word sparingly used by modern creative men, but Greenough has a definition that is very easy to take: "Beauty is the promise of Function." Similarly, God is a concept that modern men usually try to express in some indirect way, but when Greenough speaks of the existence of "one truth, even as there is one God, and that organization is his utterance" we can at least transpose his meaning without difficulty. "Now, organization obeys his law. It obeys his law by an approximation to the essential, and then there is what we term life; or it obeys his law by falling short of the essential, and then there is disorganization. I have not seen the inorganic attached to the organized but as a symptom of imperfect plan, or of impeded function, or of extinct action."

"The normal development of beauty is through action to completeness. The invariable development of embellishment and decoration is more embellishment and more decoration. The *reductio ad absurdum* is palpable enough at last; but where was the first downward step? I maintain that the first downward step was *the introduction of the first inorganic, nonfunctional element, whether of shape or color*"—"the aim

INTRODUCTION

of the artist, therefore, should be first to seek the essential"—"the essential will be complete."

Greenough refers to the shape, color, and markings of animals and birds with sublime confidence that in God's world there is no meaningless embellishment, no decoration for its own sake. It remained for another American, the painter Abbott Thayer, to publish in 1907 the first treatise on animal markings as concealment. (Adaptive coloration and concealment in animals form the basis for the modern approach to camouflage in warfare.) Thus purpose and function are seen as law in animal forms and man is urged to achieve harmony with that law in his own creations. Organization through function must be the guiding rule in art and architecture. "God's world has a distinct formula for every function, and we shall seek in vain to borrow shapes; we must make the shapes, and can only effect this by mastering the principles."

Not every page in these essays will be equally rewarding. Occasional quaintnesses of expression and obscurity in the presentation of ideas mar the generally valuable material in hand. Nor is the reader urged to look up the sculpture produced by Greenough, even though it is an unaffected, straightforward product. His ideas on painting are likewise uninteresting. But

INTRODUCTION

it is of great historical interest to discover that an early American artist of repute in his own day was not in agreement with practices that might otherwise appear to have been accepted without question. He even dared to put Thomas Jefferson's ideas on architecture in an unfavorable light. It is reassuring also to know that such an artist showed the same appreciation of truly native American forms that the sophisticated in our day admire for their directness and simplicity. We know these forms now—notably the furniture—as “Early American.” The lesson of Greenough has yet to be learned, especially by many architects who still hold power. What a bitter pill it should be for them to know that they are at least a hundred years behind the times, by standards set up by one of our own good ancestors in America! Instead of putting up resistance to the innovations of the European International School, with its “machines for living,” and to the boldness and rashness of Frank Lloyd Wright, they might all this time have turned their fury against the farseeing Horatio Greenough.