Degli edificj antichi e moderni di Roma. Vedute in contorno, 1817. Notes on an Graphic-Architectural Experimentation by Giovanni Battista Cipriani

Degli edificj antichi e moderni di Roma. Vedute in contorno, 1817. Notes on an graphic-architectural experimentation by Giovanni Battista Cirpiani

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Abstract. The contribution proposes a critical analysis of some architectural engravings by Giovanni Battista Cipriani, Sienese architect, draftsman and engraver, working in Rome between the 1780s and 1830s. In particular, I related, by means of engravings as visual language, Cipriani's graphic production '*in contorno*' (outline drawing) - representing classical and modern Roman architecture, published in the 1810s - to the figurative experiences by the French painter Bénigne Gagneraux and the English sculptor John Flaxman, both in Rome around 1792. A 'formal' link is therefore hypothesized, highlighting Cipriani's originality from the point of view of the architectural representation for the communication of artifacts and deviation from the communicative paradigm promoted in Rome in that period, still strongly influenced by the striking visual outcomes of Giovani Battista Piranesi.
Cipriani emerges as an experimenter of a communicative practice drawing its origin from the consolidated practice of architectural drawing and from the debate on the supremacy of drawing between the arts. In this sense, Cipriani can be highlighted as an ideal anticipator of the much more famous works by Paul-Marie Letarouilly, as well as a simplifier of the visual code aimed at popularizing architectures as an extreme graphic-visual reworking of the cultural trait of neoclassicism.

Keywords: Giovanni Battista Cipriani, *vedute in contorno*, outline, Bénigne Gagneraux, John Flaxman

1 Introduction

Drawing, intended as the graphic expression of an intellectual practice of representation which involves the mind and the hand, has always been one of the main linguistic tools of the visual communication of Architecture and, since the earliest times, many efforts have been made to make its results reproducible, at most for widen the diffusion of the messages conveyed [1]. Over time, we witnessed the multiplication of opportunities that allowed us to «arouse those *stimuli* and those communicative opportunities that extended the practice of representation [and therefore of Drawing] to all human activities, especially those relating to the use of image, both as a qualified objective of aesthetic communication/information and as a design tool for all sorts of artefacts» [2].

This primary led to the birth of the various techniques of reproduction of graphic messages by means of printing (xylography, etching, lithography, etc.) [3].

The research exposes the results of part of my doctoral thesis related to the analysis of the collection of prints *Degli edificj antichi e moderni di Roma. Vedute in contorno*, by the architect, draftsman and engraver Giovanni Battista Cipriani (hereinafter GBC), published in Rome, starting from 1817 (Fig. 1a, b).

Fig. 1. Frontispieces of the two volumes of *Vedute in contorno*: **a.**, vol. 1, f. 1r; **b.** vol. 2, f. 2r.

This set of small *vedute* is an example of technical and formal innovation in architectural representation addressed to the communication of buildings and environment, in the light of the possible influences (also by means of concordant dates and places) of the French Bénigne Gagneraux and the Englishman John Flaxman on the subject of representation of subjects in pure outline (*trait*, outline).

2 Giovanni Battista Cipriani (1766-1839)

Born in Siena, 1766, GBC devoted himself to fine arts and started his studies at Giuseppe Silini's atelier (Sienese sculptor and architect). In the early 1780s, he moved to Rome in order to continue his studies with the architect Giuseppe Palazzi, by winning the prize in memory of Marcello Biringucci and Giulio Mancini [4]. GBC's sketchbooks preserved at BiASA confirm its presence in Rome at least starting from 1784. From 1790 he was «half scholar» of the philosopher Leonardo De Vegni [5]. In the same period, he met the architect Giandomenico Navone, with whom he was the author of the *Nuovo Metodo*, Rome 1794 [6]. Possibly, GBC studied engraving and etching at Raffaello Morghen's atelier, together with his brother Galgano or, at least, by gaining indirect experience from him [7]. GBC was also a member of the architect and art historian Francesco Milizia's salon, gathering many intellectuals and artists [4]. GBC worked with Milizia for drafting the first full set of illustrations for *I principj di architettura civile*, published in Rome by Salomoni with the title *Indice delle figure relativi ai principj di architettura civile di Francesco Milizia* in 1800 [8]. As far as is known, GBC never took part in the composition or re-signification of a built artefact,

on the other hand he dedicated his career to applications of what we could now name as indirect survey, not in the sense of a set of operations mediated by an instrument other than the 'meter' for direct survey, but as a result of careful critical observation of other authors' representations of architectural artefacts. In the same time, he worked on a continuous comparison between his perceptual survey and such graphical sources [9].

During his career, he frequently put himself at the service of that branch of Architecture dedicated to the study, representation and communication, also for explicit educational purposes. In this regard, it is necessary to say that in the last decades of the 18th century, a new focus on training tools was developed in Rome, whose cultural environment was dominated by studies and comparisons on the fine arts related to drawing [10], in order to provide architects and architectural students with up-to-date didactic tools.

Among his works, that often reproduced the works developed by other famous architects and draftsmen, for example Antoine Desgodetz and Julien-David Le Roy [4] among all, the originality of the aforementioned *Vedute in contorno* have to be highlighted for originality. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that GBC was used to publish his original books almost always in «*commodo sesto*» («comfortable sesto») [11]. This was for two reasons: to be able to «easily study» on such volumes and to offer the reader affordable products. Within this paper I do not enter within the graphic production of GBC's notebooks and manuscripts, that were already the subject of some studies by Bentivoglio [12] [13], Debenedetti [4] [14], Pasquali [5], Olschki [15] and that I analyzed in my doctoral thesis [16]. Sample Heading (Forth Level). The contribution should contain no more than four levels of headings. The following **Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.** gives a summary of all heading levels.

3 Cultural context and visual preludes

The graphic production of GBC is very vast. Here I propose a critial analysis of the volumes *Degli edificj antichi e moderni di Roma*. This collection is characterized by the absolute clarity and linearity of many of the representations produced by mean of etching, as well as by their particular, almost experimental visual outcome. For such reasons, GBC can be defined as an experimenter in the field of graphics for architecture, configurator of new visual hypotheses on the use of the sign as formalized graphic track [15].

Here, the analysis of the graphic value of the linear component of the drawing is required, by framing it in its theoretical debate of the second half of the eighteenth century. Winckelmann in his *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755) established a completely new and original relationship between History and Nature (in a strict relation to Art), by linking the concept of 'beauty' to History and not just to an Idea. In 1786, in his text *Principi del disegno* [18], Raffaello Morghen underlined the importance of drawing, to be understood as the highest and purest expression (also visual) among the Arts, specifying how it was easier (for him) to understand Nature by means of other artists' representation of it, rather than by Nature itself [19].

Without forgetting the graphic typology of the illustrations of Winckelmann's work – mostly illustrated with linear and outline drawings – a few years later, in 1792, the German writer Karl Philipp Moritz argued that «as it happens in our thought, the 'cultivated' spirit loves order, light, clarity, so, in the Art, what is well ordered, what is easy to observe and to understood without effort, must necessarily come first over what is intricate, enveloped, bulky» [19]. In other words, and with the ultimate aim of recovering the original purity, he intended to elevate the Antiquity to be a model of a clear and linear thought [19].

Furthermore, in the 1790s, artists and etchers working on new editions of classical literature, such as Hesiod, Omero, Aeschylus, began to reconsider the pre-classical art in order to create new illustrations for these works. This debate was mainly developed in the artistic, non-architectural field: in a sense, it followed the best known legend on the origin of painting, reported by Pliny the Elder (in the first century BC) [18] and by Athenagóras (in the second century BC) [21]. It such myth the concept of outline drawing is already exposes since painting originated by the act of tracing the projected shadow of a man on a wall; in this way the Corinthian girl Diboutades obtained the *silhouette* of her lover [22], who was leaving for the war, in order to preserve his visual memory [23].

3.1 Bénigne Gagneraux (1756-1795)

Born in Dijon in 1756, Gagneraux was trained as a painter within François Devosge's *Académie de peinture et sculpture*. With the sculptor Alexandre Renaud, Bénigne Gagneraux was the first winner of the scholarship banned in 1776, thus having the possibility of moving to Rome (where he had already been in 1774) to continue his studies as a *pensionnaire* of Burgundy. Just like that of his colleagues in the *Académie Royale*, Gagneraux's Roman training included visits to churches, monuments and important art collections (Albani, Borghese, Farnese, Ludovisi, Mattei, etc.) while drawing, copying and verifying the ancient and the modern masters (Raffaello, Carracci, etc.) [24].

At the same time, he devoted himself to numerous activities, including the graphic reproduction of ancient statuary elements for Francesco Piranesi (in 1781) [25]. In 1784, thanks to him, Gagneraux became the official 'art supplier' of Gustav III, King of Sweden [26]. In this way, the French artist found his maximum professional gratification, becoming the reference man for the Swedish nobles who were about to visit Rome. In addition, he had several meetings with Pope Pius VI, who appreciated his production and commissioned him some works and copies. Because of the revolution against French power, he was forced to leave Rome in early 1793 and moved to Florence, where he remained until his death [25].

3.2 John Flaxman (1755-1826)

Born in York in 1755, John Flaxman was one of the sons of a craftsman specialized in the manufacture of plaster casts. Since when he was a child, he was interested in the possibilities that clay and wax offered to the plastic modeling and started his study with his father, soon proving to be an artist of great talent [27]. Between 1770 and 1775,

John Flaxman attended the Royal Academy School of Art and worked as designer of Etruscan-style ceramics at Josiah Wedgwood Workshop [11]. This last experience was fundamental for its artistic education, since the concept of outline drawing passed from the reproduction of figures copied from the Etruscan and Greek potteries [28].

Between 1787 and 1794 he undertook his *Grand Tour* in Italy, where he met William Young Ottley. Here he traveled all around the Peninsula and visited Florence, Rome, Naples, getting into contact with many of the most significant examples of Italian art, from Cimabue to Raffaello, up to the classical antiquities of Herculaneum and Pompeii, developing a series of notebooks rich in sketches reproducing pieces of art, buildings and views in general [29].

In 1794 he returned in his homeland, where he was appointed an associate member of the Royal Academy in 1797, then an academic in 1800 and a professor of sculpture in 1810. At the same time, he worked for numerous private clients [27]. Since his return he no longer devoted himself to outline drawing, with the exceptions of the figuration of the poem by John Milton in 1810 and of the poems of Hesiod, in 1817. He died in London in 1826.

4 The importance of Gagneraux's *trait* and Flaxman's outline

In this context, the interest for Gagneraux's and Flaxman's works is absorbed by the production of printed representations, thus engravings. In fact, thanks to the study of ancient vascular painting, Flaxman and Gagneraux realized the non-indispensability of color for a non-mimetic reproduction of reality. In this sense, the pure outline and the «paratactic rhythm» of those vascular representations were able to replace the rigorously perspective reconstruction of Renaissance-style representations, thus simplifying the composition of the images, still maintaining their naturalistic characteristics [19].

The French painter published his *Dix-huit estampes au trait* in Rome in 1792 [31] [32]. The interest in this collection is not dictated by the subjects represented, but by the graphic characteristic of the engravings, here understood as a true formal connotative language. Such language proclaims the superiority of the line over all the other elements of the image created by the artist, even on the drawing itself. Being aware of the fact that the «reduction of a figure to an outline drawing, without shading or modeling [...] is a procedure as old as the artistic practice» and that the practice of engraving does not lack examples of «linear drawings» formalized by simple, demonstrative and sufficient traits at the same time, this typology of representation is defined as «in direct function of the economy of the (graphic) medium» [23]. It is therefore important to remember that the *trait* drawing of Gagneraux does not constitute an absolute novelty in the panorama of representation, having already been widely used, for example in the tables of the 16th century architectural treatises [32], among all the *De Architettura* by Cesare Cesariano and *The Four Books of Architecture* by Andrea Palladio.

The eighteen prints, of different sizes [33], illustrate single episodes and show a synthetic use of the line: the *trait* surrenders its meaning from simple graphic expedient to the true essence of the representation. The approach to the line restores an analytical procedure that «contravened any speculative tension» [32]. Gagneraux was not the first

interpreter of this formulation of communication: as early as 1778 the sculptor Jean Jacques Lamarie claimed that «drawing is all in the stroke» [30].

Fig. 2. Engravings from the *Dix-huit estampes au trait*, Musée des Beaux Artes, Dijon: **a.** *Portrait des deux filles de M. Le Comte de Sellon. De Genève*, 115x157 mm [33]; **b.** *La peinture*, 132x178 mm [33]; **c.** *Hébé*, 196x156 mm [33].

In Fig. 2 it is possible to notice how the attention for the use of the outline/*trait* appears both in the figures that animate the representations, as in the context, which is not specified (Fig. 2a), or a landscape (Fig. 2b) or a pseudo-architectural one (Fig.2c). It is precisely this last case (one of the largest engravings of the series) that becomes the ideal link between the use of the outline in the previous or contemporary architectural treatises and the specific use, or rather the graphic expression, which GBC will interpret few years later.

Fig. 3. Drawings by Gagneraux: **a.** Ante 1783, *Adam et Eve pleurant sur le corps d'Abel*, pen and black ink on paper, 350x260 mm, Musée des Beaux Artes, Dijon [33]; **b.** Ante 1782, *Le festin des dieux champêtre*, pen and black ink on paper, 521x697 mm, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizzi, Firenze [33]; **c.** 1787 circa, *La cérémonie du jeudi-saint*, black ink and carcoal on paper, 360x530 mm, Musée des Beaux Artes, Dijon [33].

The peculiarity of these representations is also reflected in many original drawings by Gagneraux, that confirm his graphic intention, describing a possible transformation over time, from a sign still looking at the natural context (Fig.3a), (Fig 3b) to a sign probative of the simple physicality of a *predella* (Fig. 3c).

Concerning Flaxman's work, here I focus on the production of collections of engraved prints which might have provided a visual and cultural pretext to GBC for the realization of his *Vedute in contorno*.

In 1793 Flaxman, helped by the engraver Tommaso Piroli, published the first illustrated volume in Rome: *The Iliad of Homer*; *The Odissey of Homer*, (Fig.4a, b). In the same year (or perhaps in 1802) Flaxman illustrated Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*, (Fig. 4c) still published in Rome.

With this type of representation he had set himself the goal of eliminating visual irregularities due to the figuration of the incidence of light and the effects of the texturing of the drawing, bringing his graphic vocabulary to the basic level of a rudimentary language formed by the pure sign/outline drawn on monochrome paper [23]. It is therefore clear that the intention to simplify one's visual research shines through the printing of «atmospheric quality» and «analyticity of chiaroscuro» which reflect all the «tension» and attention «to volumetric restitution» which will be subsequently completely overcome by the search for pure outline [10]. With this techno-graphic expedient Flaxman was able to place the reader, for example in the case of the *Divina Commmedia*, on a level that was now ethereal, now infernal compared to the representations of the same subjects that had happened up to then.

In 1795 he published the *Compositions from the tragedies of Aeschylus* in London (Fig. 4d). Still in 1817 he illustrated the *Compositions from the Works and Days, and Theogony of Hesiod*, engraved by his friend William Blake [23].

Flaxman's representations were «witnesses of the same fervent search for elemental purity and […] of the same mannered and exquisite results» [23], regarding the rediscovery of the classical canons in Greek art, likewise of architecture, the figurative arts of the late eighteenth century. As Piera Tordella states: the remarkable «diagrammatic reduction of form», being the symptom of Enlightenment rationalism, allowed Flaxman to operate a definitive process of «simplification and synthesis» [10], reaching the more important visual formalization of the most known «attempt to reduce the visual arts to a minimum vocabulary» [11]. The clever dosage of the thickness and the intensity of the outline, sometimes combined with the schematic shadows shown on the scene, allowed the flat Flaxmanian figures to create an intricate overlapping of parallel planes, [23], thus allowing the Artist to produce a style that is absolutely not mimetic, aimed at reducing the vision of objects to punctual information.

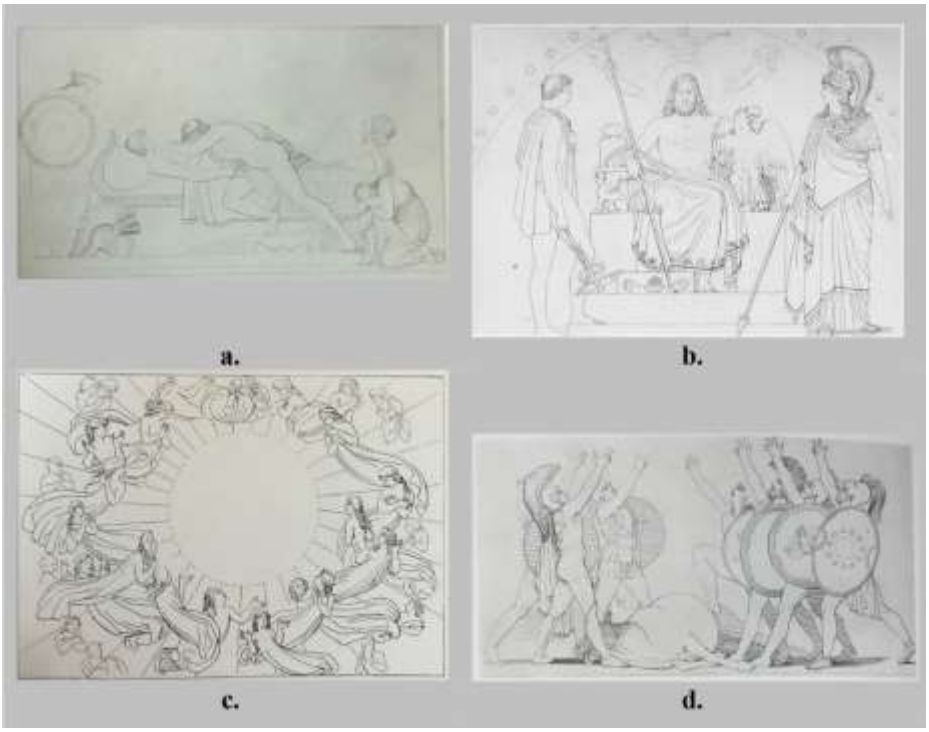

Fig. 4. Engraving by Tommaso Piroli on John Flaxman's drawings from: *The Iliad of Homer; The Odissey of Homer*: **a.** 1793, *Thetis finds Achilles mouring over the corpse of Patroclus* [23]; **b.** *Council of Jupiter, Minerva and Mercury* [34]; **c.** *Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri*: 1793, *Circle of Angels around the sun* [23]; **d.** *Compositions from the tragedies of Aeschylus: Oath of the Sevens against Thebes* [23].

At this point is clear that Flaxman succeeded in the extremely synthetic intent of composing the image in all its forms by using line as a «visual device of modernity […] (highlighting) contours, shape, chiaroscuro, composition, movement, etc.» [35]. Precisely those images with a pure outline, configured as «linear abstractions of shapes and volumes» were able to define, at the end of the 18th century, a new type of «visual text sometimes sharply re-edited, often intensely accepted, even by artists of other movements» [10] (like Henri Fuseli, Jaques-Luis David, William Blake). In this case, this anti-mimetic specification, in my opinion, will meet the interest of GBC. Furthermore, the two artists, like architects [35], were the proponents of the main theoretical and practical speculation of the neoclassical idea on the superiority of drawing and line over all other type of languages in the field of visual communication, particularly in the field of printed graphics and the representation of the human figure.

5 Giovanni Battista Cipriani: *Degli edificj antichi e moderni di Roma. Vedute in contorno*

This collection of *vedute* of the city of Rome consists (in the specimen I consulted at the BiASA of Rome) of two volumes, each containing 62 prints plus the frontispiece, for a total of 124 *vedute* of the dimensions of approximately 110x90 mm.

Within GBC's vast graphic production, these volumes can be considered as breaking elements in the consolidated language of representation and communication. In fact, these views translate Flaxman's communicative theory into paper by representing the architectural subjects in a single outline, even if not in a consciously elaboration. This abstraction leaves room for the interpretation of the graphic sign, allowing the author to make an extremely significant eidetic synthesis.

GBC applies this methodology of representation to architectural subjects, for example the *Anfiteatro Flavio* (Fig. 5a), as well as to subjects more related to landscape thems, such as the *Circo di Caracalla* (or *Circo di Massenzio*) (Fig. 5b).

His experimentation starts from *vedute* characterized by a light, almost air, graphics [14]. In such occasions, however, the attempt to simplify the graphical 'act' does risk falling into a semantic contradiction of superabundant signs describing buildings, for example in the case of the view of the *Basilica di S. Pietro* (Fig. 6a). This kind of experimentation arrives at representations where the difficulty of rendering the infesting vegetation on ancient ruins becomes a pretext to bring up the pure volumes of the building masses, as in the case of the *Bagni di Paolo Emilio* (Fig. 6b).

Fig. 5. GBC, examples of *disegno in contorno* (outline drawing): **a.** *Colosseo*, vol. 1, f. 5r; **b.** *Circo di Caracalla*, vol. 1, f. 23r.

Due to the previous considerations, I believe that GBC obtains the best application, or rather the most convincing and strong communicative results, in the representation of architectural interiors.

Fig. 6. GBC, examples of *disegno in contorno* (outline drawing): **a.** *Basilica di S. Pietro in Vaticano ed Obelisco Egizio*, vol. 1, f. 61r; **b.** *Bagni di Paolo Emilio*, vol. 1, f.18r.

Here, I bring for example the views of the hall of the Pantheon (Fig. 7a) and of the *Tempio di Claudio* (Fig. 7b). In both cases, it is evident how GBC manages to make the architectural space of the two interiors clearly legible without using chiaroscuro and contrasts but using only lines. Obviously, these views are quite rigid, but, in their small dimensions, fully embody the severe taste of neoclassicism based on Winkelmann's aesthetic theories. And, again, the view of the *Tempio di Claudio* takes this concept to its extremes by placing at the center of the picture not the intercolumniation, but the column; this vertical element is the base of the rigorous symmetry of the image produced GBC.

Fig. 7. GBC, examples of *disegno in contorno* (outline drawing): **a.** view of the hall of the *Pantheon*, vol. 2, f. 4r; **b.** view of the interior of the *Tempio di Claudio*, vol. 2, f. 42r.

Therefore, this collection of *vedute* is a very interesting expressive declination of what the city of Rome was able to arouse in each single interpreter of its views, also thanks to the innumerable stratifications of its urban facies. Moreover, the *vedute* acted the role of possible forerunners of the – now somehow obsolete – postcards.

The Author himself, within the preparatory manuscript of the textual descriptions to be attached to the *vedute*, provides us with another possible hint for their interpretation. In fact, he reveals his innovative communicative intentions regarding pure outline drawing by declaring his rigorous inclination to 'simplify' the reading – or the visual comprehension – of such images, while taking care of the 'economy' of the cultural and material production process. Still, he highlighted that all the views represented the as built as surveyed by him [37].

6 Conclusions

Thanks to the analysis here presented, it is clear how GBC implemented a continuous mediation between the aesthetic of Giovanni Battista Piranesi' archaeological curiosity and of the Karl Friedrich Schinkel's neoclassical rigor. Moreover, sometimes he mediated these with visual expressions with other that, somehow, anticipate the Romanticism which its dawn int that years. This anti-mimetic visual specific, in my opinion, met the interest of GBC, whom, on the other hand, elevated the vision as a probative instrument of the goodness of his work and, consequently, of the visual and communicative result of his *vedute in contorno*.

Here, GBC emerges as an experimenter of a communicative practice that found its origin both from the consolidated practice of architectural Drawing and from the debate on its supremacy over the other Arts. Still, he arises the ideal anticipator of the much more famous works by Paul-Marie Letarouilly, as well as a simplifier of the code of visual communication aimed at popularizing the architectural fact as an extreme graphic-visual reworking of the cultural prerogative of neoclassicism.

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