

MARC-ANTOINE LAUGIER, *ESSAI SUR L'ARCHITECTURE* (1753)
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Chapter 1: General Principles of Architecture

It is the same in architecture as in all other arts: its principles are founded on simple nature, and nature's process clearly indicates its rules. Let us look at man in his primitive state without any aid or guidance other than his natural instincts. . . . He wants to make himself a dwelling that protects but does not bury him. Some fallen branches in the forest are the right material for his purpose; he chooses four of the strongest, raises them upright and arranges them in a square; across their top he lays four other branches; on these he hoists from two sides yet another row of braches which, inclining towards each other, meet at their highest point. He then covers this kind of roof with leaves. . . . neither sun nor rain can penetrate. Thus, man is housed.

Such is the process of simple nature; by imitating the natural process, art was born. All the splendors of architecture ever conceived have been modeled on the little rustic hut I have just described. It is by approaching the simplicity of its first model that fundamental mistakes are avoided and true perfection is achieved. The pieces of wood set upright have given us the idea of the column, the pieces placed horizontally on top of them the idea of the entablature, the inclining pieces forming the roof the idea of the pediment. . . . From now on it is easy to distinguish between the parts which are essential to the composition of an architectural Order and those which have been introduced by necessity or have been added by caprice. The parts that are essential are the cause of beauty; the parts introduced by necessity cause every license, the parts added by caprice cause every fault.

Let us never lose sight of our little rustic hut. I can only see columns, a ceiling or entablature and a pointed roof forming at both end what is called a pediment. So far there is no vault, still less an arch, no pedestals, no attic, not even a door or a window I therefore come to this conclusion: in an architectural Order only the column, the entablature and the pediment may form an essential part of the composition. If each of these parts is suitably placed and suitably formed, nothing else need be added to make the work perfect.

We still have in France a beautiful ancient monument . . . called the Maison Carrée (Nîmes). Everybody, connoisseur or not, admires its beauty. Why? Because everything here accords with the true principles of architecture: a rectangle where thirty columns support an entablature and a roof – closed at both ends by a pediment – that is all; the combination is of a simplicity and a nobility which strikes everybody.

Chapter IV: On the Style in which to Build Churches

Of all buildings churches give architects the best opportunity to display the marvels of their art. Since our churches are meant to receive into their midst a multitude bringing with them the religious image of the God they are going to worship, these churches give the architects scope for working on a large scale and do not in any way restrict the nobility of his concept. It is surprising that, whereas in any other class there are buildings worthy of admiration, so few of our churches deserve our enlightened interest. For myself, I am convinced that until now we have not developed the right style for this class of building. Our Gothic churches are still the most acceptable. A mass of grotesque ornaments spoils them, and yet, we are awed by a certain air of greatness and majesty. Here we find ease and gracefulness; they only lack simplicity and naturalness. We have rightly recounted the follies of Gothic and have returned to the antique, but it seems we have lost good taste on the way. Moving away from the Gothic architects we deserted gracefulness; turning towards the antique we encountered clumsiness. . . .

I have tried to find if, in building out churches in the good style of classical architecture, there is not a way to give them an elevation and a lightness equal to those of our beautiful Gothic churches. After much thought it seemed to me that not only would it be possible but that it would be much easier for us to succeed in this with the architecture of the Greeks than with all the fretwork of Gothic architecture. By using free-standing columns we will achieve lightness and by setting two Orders one above the other we will reach the required height.

. . . . This then is my idea and here are the advantages: A building that is entirely natural and true; everything is reduced to simple rules and executed according to great principles: no arcades, no pilasters, no pedestals, nothing awkward or constrained. The whole building is extremely elegant and delicate; the plain wall is nowhere to be seen, therefore, nothing is bulky, nothing is offensive. The windows are placed in the most suitable and most advantageous position. All intercolumniations are glazed, above and below . . .