

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Drawings and Prints: Selections from the Permanent Collection

Curator: Carmen Bambach

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

14 July to 19 October 2008

Newly Discovered Drawings After Vitruvius

As the only major text about architecture from Classical Antiquity to survive, the importance of Vitruvius for the understanding of ancient building in the Renaissance cannot be overestimated. Eight Italian Renaissance drawings after Vitruvius's *De architectura libri decem* (*Ten Books of Architecture*), recently purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, were recently on view as part of the regular gallery rotation in the Robert Wood Johnson Galleries. The curator dates the drawings to the 1530s or 1540s and attributes them, for the first time, to a member of the Sangallo family of architects, suggesting perhaps Bastiano "Aristotle" da Sangallo (1481-1551). Four printed Renaissance editions of Vitruvius (Fra Giocondo, 1511; Durantino, 1524; Cesariano, 1521; Barbaro, 1556) from the Metropolitan's collection of early architectural books complemented the drawings and included interesting contemporary annotations.

In the early sixteenth century, Rome provided fertile ground for nascent archaeological interests. Architects and philologists called for an overhaul of the corruptions that plagued existing translations of Vitruvius, and argued that the text needed to be checked against the actual ruins of antiquity. *De architectura* combines a discussion of materials, construction, building types and aesthetic components interspersed with historical narratives. Of the eight drawings on display, three reconstruct examples of ancient temples in perspective elevation, and in one instance, plan. Two show city views of Alexandria and Athens. Two describe mili-

tary and fortification concerns, while one rather enigmatic illustration may relate to Vitruvius's discussion of the effect of the wind on the foundation of cities.

The drawings, accompanied by a partial Italian translation of Vitruvius's text, may suggest a project to publish a new edition in *volgare* that never materialized. The illustrations, however, do not exhibit the kind of precision in architectural reconstruction one might expect from a study based in archaeological research. Attempts at perspective are awkward, especially in the case of the temple elevations. The relationship between text and image is at times difficult to interpret. The illustration for the pseudodipteral temple has six columns, but in the accompanying Vitruvian text, eight are prescribed. The temple also has no stylobate; columns appear as if growing directly out of the earth, like artificial tree trunks. The buildings are reconstructed from the text but presented as ruins, perhaps in an effort to convey an air of material authenticity to hypothetical reenactments.

But to judge the drawings by the standards of modern archaeological correctness is to overlook how an artist, when forced to imagine the magnificence of classical antiquity from fragmentary evidence, makes the past come alive. The illustration for the Battle of Larignum, which in the text is brief and unspecific, is a complete reenactment of an ancient battle using Vitruvius's *testudo* war machines, but with a reconstruction of a medieval larch-wood tower. Both Athens and Alexandria are set with Roman monuments, as if these stand in as signs for "antiquity" and give the topography an unmistakable local reference. The plan for the prehistoric hut on the Areopagus resembles a Roman tomb modeled out of mud and the drawing of city walls shows structural innovations related to issues in modern warfare unfathomable in Vitruvius's time. Here, antiquity becomes indistinguishable from the contemporary world of the sixteenth century, reminding the viewer that ancient architecture was often marshaled in the service of magnifying the present, rather than understood as an entity distinct in time and form.

The exact attribution of the drawings is problematic. Paleographic evidence suggests a Florentine artist, but the attribution to Aristotle da Sangallo is based on a



Attributed to a member of the Sangallo family,
On Timber, the Battle of Larignum, ca. 1530–45, pen and
dark brown ink (Vitruvius, book 2, chap. 9, nos. 15, 16)
Photograph: Courtesy of The Metropolitan
Museum of Art (2008.105.4)

perceived visual relationship between the Metropolitan's drawings and those after Vitruvius in the *Corsini Incunabulum* dated to the 1530s and 1540s (Rome, Biblioteca Accademia Lincei e Corsiniana, MS Corsini 50.F.1). However, the drawings in the *Corsini Incunabulum* are not by Aristotle but are rather autograph annotations by Giovanni Battista da Sangallo ("Il Gobbo," 1496-1548), brother of Antonio the Younger. In addition, the drawings in the *Corsini Incunabulum* are far more developed in terms of skill in architectural representation and accuracy in archaeological reconstruction. The Metropolitan's drawings present a lively, if improbable, illustration of the Vitruvian text, standing at the intersection of traditional antiquarian studies and newer archaeological interests emerging in the early decades of the sixteenth century.

The acquisition is an important addition to the Metropolitan's splendid collection of Renaissance architectural books and sketchbooks. The exhibition gives us the opportunity to reconsider the legacy of Vitruvius's *De architectura* in architectural thinking as merely prescriptive. Drawings such as these highlight the creativity the text engendered during the heady years of the early sixteenth century in Rome.

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Attributed to a member of the Sangallo family,
The Aeropagus in Athens with Cave Houses,
ca. 1530–45, pen and dark brown ink (Vitruvius,
book 2, chap. 1, no. 5). Photograph: Courtesy of
The Metropolitan Museum of Art (2008.105.5)