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Ruins—An Aesthetic Hybrid

1.

RUINS HAVE HELD for a long time a unique position in the visual, emotional, and literary imagery of man. They have fascinated artists, poets, scholars, and sightseers alike. Devastated by time or willful destruction, incomplete as they are, they represent a combination of man-made forms and of organic nature. Thus the emotional impact of ruins is ambiguous: we cannot say whether they belong aesthetically in the realm of art or in the realm of nature. They can no longer be considered genuine works of art since the original intention of the builder has been more or less lost. Neither can they be taken as an outgrowth of nature since man-made elements continue to exist as a basis for what nature later on has contributed.

The "Pleasure of Ruins"1 was widespread, from the time of the Renaissance on and was intensified in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, during which periods the interest in and love for ruins were based on very different concepts. It goes without saying that the interest in ruins, from the proverbial revival of antiquity in the Renaissance on, is most closely connected with the understanding of the impact of history on the living. However, the remembrance of the past changes continuously, from mere archeological interest to a general indulgence in eerie moods or emphasis on the decorative values of ruins—sometimes more intellectual, sometimes more emotional. These changing attitudes mirrored equally in pictorial and literary creations, were rooted, of course, in general emotional currents and spiritual trends of the respective epochs. It certainly cannot be explained by the de facto changing appearance of ruins themselves. To elaborate on the written word should be left to the literary historian, whereas we are dealing here with the visual manifestation of these various psychological attitudes.

Today the popular approach to ruins still reflects the traditional 18th- and 19th-century images. For that very reason some highbrows like to call the interest in ruins old-fashioned, since the popular concept of ruins in our time has been created by the Romanticism of the 18th and 19th centuries, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Horace Walpole on. The shimmer of a silvery moon, turbulent dramatic clouds, and melancholic lonely maidens became almost contingent requisites.

The different ways in which ruins were seen and interpreted at different times should not induce us to any generalizations and to forget exceptions and overlappings. Even an individual artist sees and interprets ruins often in different ways.

Sources for the interpretation of past periods are contemporaneous poems, novels, diaries, letters, and other literary documents as well as paintings and works of graphic arts. Some examples may very briefly be

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mentioned although I do not intend to give here a history of the ruin in figurative art. In a brief summarization and without trying to pigeonhole dogmatically the not always rationally definable approaches of the individual artist three main categories can be established:

(1) The ruin as a vehicle to create a romanticizing mood with all its associations;

(2) the ruin as document of the past—from its architecturally interesting details to the overall architectural form of a specific building;

(3) the ruin as means of reviving the original concept of space and proportion of periods past.

Actually these three basic aesthetic attitudes are seldom pure and consistent; transitions from one to the other are frequent.

II.

The Renaissance evaluated ruins, beyond their importance as source for archeological research, essentially as documents of the glorious pagan past. During this period the clarification of archeological forms was left to the basic architectural treatises such as the new editions of Vitruvius, Leone Battista Alberti, Serlio, Vignola, and Palladio. But not always did one clearly distinguish between the historical and the aesthetic importance of a ruin, a confusion still frequently encountered today. The reaction of modern sightseers on the Forum Romanum is a classical proof of such oblique reaction.

When ruins appear in painting first, around the middle of the Quattrocento, they were employed to depict the place of the birth of Christ, the stable, as part of a delapidated building. These ruins have only circumstantial meaning. In the Nativities of Fra Filippo Lippi, of Botticelli, Ghirlandajo, and their contemporaries, the ruin in the background serves to indicate the humble environment where Christ was born, as do oxen and ass. No interest is ever evident in the structure as such but only in its ruinous state, strongly emphasized (fig. 1).

In the 17th century, however, the function of the ruin in painting changes completely: now, one and a half centuries after its first appearance as a mere prop, the ruin itself becomes a legitimate topic for painting, with painters like Monsù F. Desiderio (act. c. 1617–1631)² and Salvator Rosa (1615–1673).³ Mannerism and Baroque conceived ruins primarily as stimulating motifs of painterly bravura, and opportunities for the scintillating interplay of light and shadow, of nuances of color, provided for by the interesting contrasts between the tonal values of withered stones and growing vegetation which naturally could not be found in unimpaired works of architecture. With Monsù Desiderio, columns, architraves, aediculae, reliefs, and other details become clearly recognizable objects of interest, though quite obviously the appearance of withering destruction fascinates the Neapolitan artist more than architectural exactitude (fig. 2). The combination of destroyed architectural elements with bushes and other plants growing out of the stone, and their contrast to living and moving human beings—as “staffage” under the pretext of telling a religious or mythological story—mirror clearly the mood, the appeal to emotional sensitiveness that later on should be called Romanticism. One generation later, with the oeuvre of Salvator Rosa, painter, poet, and musician, the ruin as topic, beyond its details, became the fashion and thefad of European collectors. Still one hundred years after the painter’s death, Horace Walpole of Strawberry Hill fame considered Salvator Rosa one of the greatest painters.⁴ Later, Sebastiano Ricci (1659–1734) in his work approached the ruin from a similar viewpoint and sentiment.

Yet, to keep us from unjustified generalizations, based merely on the work of those three Italian painters, let us briefly compare the concepts of two other masters in whose work the ruin plays a decisive part, though in very different ways, factual vs. romanticizing: Nicolas Poussin and Jacob van Ruisdael. The “classicist” Poussin (1594–1665)⁵ in his typical “heroic landscape” likes to employ ancient fragments and ruins in the foreground, complete architecture in the background. Geometrically organized, these structural elements serve as three-dimen-sional checking points to establish a har-
Fig. 1. Fra Filippo Lippi (?) or Fra Diamante (?). *Nativity.* Paris, Louvre.

Fig. 2. Monsù Desiderio. *The Burning of Sodom.* Courtesy, Durlacher Bros. New York City.
monious balance between horizontals and verticals. No attempt is made to evoke romantic associations. The northern baroque artist, Jacob van Ruisdael (1628–1682), on the other hand, is interested neither in architectural forms for their own sake, nor in their volume qualities. He uses them only as mood-creating props on one level with trees, clouds, and rainbow.

111.

The 18th century represents the climax of the widespread interest in ruins, now seen essentially as elements of a landscape rather than as architecture, and the romantic approach prevails. With the Genoese painter Alessandro Magnasco (1667–1749) Romanticism triumphs definitely. Moreover, the depiction of ruins takes on a didactic meaning, comparable to the earlier vanitas still lifes of the Spanish, a memento mori, for the purpose of moral edification. The beholder should be reminded of the transience of all life. Ruins and even the surrounding nature, dramatized by menacing clouds and whirlpools of dust and an eerie light, intensify the mood.

Compared with Magnasco’s demonic personality, other 18th-century painters of ruins seem to be less dramatic, though they have become far more popular. Since a complete survey of the numerous painters of ruins during that century would not contribute aesthetically anything new, we confine ourselves to a few. Giovanni Paolo Pannini (1691/2–1765) changes in his concept from a starkly romantic approach, emphasized by the oscillating play of light and shadow and by the carefully calculated incompleteness of each architectural element, to clearly delineated almost archeological vistas of ruins. In his Ancient Roman Monuments (1735) from the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum in Berlin (fig. 3) he stresses architecture as its main topic and the emotional romantic element is almost completely suppressed. Here Pannini’s poetic imagination is confined to an entirely fictitious topography as he tries to display as many famous monuments as possible. Even today, tourists in Italy can buy similar vistas in machine-made mass-produced tapestries showing all architectural highlights of a town combined, independent of their actual location—all that money can buy. In contrast to his romanticizing paintings, the “documentary” with its famous ruins—quite obviously a commercial production intended for tourists as were so many by the same artist—is artistically inferior to those with romanticizing emphasis on the expression of a specific mood.

The comparison of such paintings by Pannini and of other contemporaries with stage settings of the period is cogent (fig. 4). Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, operas and plays—quite stereotyped in their settings for specific scenes—presented always at least one prison scene or a wild landscape with ruins. Thus the mutual influence was quite natural.

How pedantic and biased it would be to identify the concepts of ruins by one individual artist with one or the other approach is proven by the etchings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778). Although Piranesi envisions principally ruins from the factual archeological point of view and his main publications, Antichità Romane (1756) and Della Magnificenza ed Architettura de’ Romani (1761) are generally considered documentary proof of the state of Roman ruins in the second half of the
18th century, yet Piranesi is an emotional romanticist. Whereas he mostly depicts architecture in an entirely objective and realistic manner, in painstakingly exact likeness, subordinating even their human staffage, restraining his subjective, free-floating imagination, he cherishes in other prints natural growth, trees, and human figures in motion, from a purely painterly viewpoint (fig. 5). He looks at these with the same interest as he looks at arches, vaults, and columns of antiquity. This split in the approach to Roman ruins can be observed in many of the numerous engravings and etchings from the end of the 17th to the beginning of the 19th century.

Francesco Guardi's (1712–1793) ruins serve merely as a decorative background for his playful scenes. Contrary to the majority of his oeuvre, the well-known vistas from Venice, the ruins in his fantastic tableaux are imaginary, neglecting completely any architectural, archeological, as well as any emotional values.
IV.

On the whole, the concept of art had changed during the 18th century with the stronger emphasis on visual properties. Thus we can understand the “picturesque” almost as a step toward abstraction and even, in a certain way, as a kind of “practical aesthetic for gardeners, tourists, and sketchers.” The yearning for the romantic qualities of broken columns, delapidated brick arches, and of half-destroyed bridges is probably nowhere more clearly expressed than in artificial ruins. We read already in Vasari’s Lives that Girolamo Genga, architect, sculptor, painter, stage designer, and archeologist had built, in 1510, for the Duke of Urbino a house out of Roman columns, arches, and architraves, actually a sham ruin. Although sweet reason naturally should condemn all kinds of eclectic artificiality, faked ruins appeared in the 18th century in all English, French, and German parks, where, of course, no genuine ruins existed. This fad was most intimately interrelated with the development of the so-called English garden. In contrast to the formal “classical” French park, the English garden with its ambition to emulate natural growth is inseparably interlaced with the creation of artificial ruins—the love for them based on two trends: the emotional, romantic “mood” creating potentialities and an honest worship of the splendor of the past.

In England, a burning interest reappeared in the works of the great landscape painters of the 17th century, in the oeuvre of Salvator Rosa, Poussin, and Ruisdael. The translation of these imaginary landscapes into reality became an ambition of the English gentry. Sir John Vanbrugh, one of the greatest English architects at the end of the 17th century, had paved the way for romantic concepts with his revival of Gothic forms in some of his architecture and with
his new feeling for landscaping as expressed in the gardens of Stowe, Buckinghamshire, 1719, so much admired by Alexander Pope.

Somewhat later we find the same preference for artificial ruins among the pioneers of the great English landscape architects of the 18th century: William Kent (1685–1748), in spite of his simultaneous propagation of Palladian ideas under Lord Burlington’s sponsorship, and Sir William Chambers (1726–1796). In one of Chambers’ first creations, in Kew Gardens, one encounters besides Chinese pagodas and mosques the unavoidable artificial ruin, in this instance a faked Roman triumphal arch in decay (1758–1759). Even earlier, 1746, the Duke of Cumberland had built a magnificent artificial ruin, Virginia Water near Windsor, where genuine ancient columns had been brought from Leptis Magna, Africa, augmented by artificial parts in faked ruinous state with most elaborate architectural details—all newly built and then willfully destroyed (fig. 6).

The contemporaneous literary trend with its emphasis on tender emotion and playful melancholy stimulated this interest in ruins to an even higher degree. Poets and prose writers in England tended to use continuously architectural images as metaphorical vehicles. In the background of their imagination there was always the ruin, classical or Gothic, such as Westminster Abbey, Fountains Abbey, Sanderson Mills, Hazley Park, etc. From a moralistic and religious viewpoint the philosopher Third Earl Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury (1671–1713) recognized the symbolic quality of ruins. Joseph Addison (1672–1719) followed in his footsteps and, last but not least, Alexander Pope (1688–1744). It would go beyond the intention of this paper to analyze the emphasis on ruins in English 18th-century literature which becomes most obvious in the works of Thomas Gray (1716–1771). Thomas Wharton writes of the Pleasures of Melancholy (1747) and Horace Walpole mirrors in his Essay on Modern Gardening (1785) identical tendencies. Glorifying the charms of decay and indulging in pensive meditation, they all see a ruin as a “mighty picture in three dimensions.” The rapidly increasing historical consciousness of the 18th century contributed to the spreading interest in ruins and is proven most obviously in Gibbons’ Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776).

In France, the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau had prepared not only intellectuals but also the general public for the frozen sentimentality, associated with such artificial ruins. The best French examples can be found in the famous Parc Monceau, organized by Philipp of Orleans, around 1780 with Gothic and Greek artificial ruins around an artificial lake; or at the “Hamlet” of Marie Antoinette in the Park of Versailles, in combination with fake peasant huts and their playful rural atmosphere. The clearest identification of ruins with symbols of the philosophy of history will be encountered in Constantin François Chasseboeuf de Volney’s Ruins or Meditations on the Revolution of Empires, first published in 1791.

In Germany, the new fad was emotionally prepared for especially by the poets Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) and the Swiss Salomon Gessner (1730–1788). The Triumph der Empfindsamkeit (triumph of sentimentality) as this period was called in Germany, represented a typically German systematization and almost dogmatic standardization of the new attitude toward nature and landscape. It found its concise expression, as far as the new style of landscaping and ruins were concerned, in the writings of Christian G. L. Hirschfeld, professor of philosophy and simultaneously landscape architect. His Theorie der Garten Kunst (1777–1782) was of the greatest influence not only in Germany but also in other European countries. The ever-present mood of Romanticism, in its specific German version, was glorified in Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder’s Herzenergiessungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders, 1797.

Princely parks in Germany, planted during the 18th century, still today show an abundance of artificial ruins, the most beautiful and famous in the parks in and around Potsdam, actually plastered with artificial fanciful Gothic and classic ruins; Woerlitz; the Ilmpark in Weimar; Schwetzingen; Veitshoheheim; Wilhelmshoehe near Cassel; and many others. A counter-
part to these artificial ruins are decorative murals in Pommersfelden Castle by Giovanni Francesco Marini where the walls of one room are covered with illusionistic ruins, represented as if they were tumbling down upon the visitor (fig. 7).

What in the North was generally called the age of Romanticism showed itself there in painting relatively late, actually later than in literature, gardening, etc., roughly between 1790 and 1840. A tremendous number of paintings could be quoted here as examples, from the English Joseph M. William Turner, William Pars, W. H. Bartlett and John Constable, to the German Philipp Hackert, Friedrich August Tischbein and, most characteristic, David Caspar Friedrich (1774–1840). In his work the obvious symbolism of ruins in the landscape carries the humble, ulropoetic lyricism of the specific German Romanticism to a climax (fig. 8). It is only natural that the American Romantic school showed much less interest in ruins, only in the work of Thomas Cole (1801–1846), and hardly ever in the paintings of Washington Allston and Albert Bierstadt.
The interest in and longing for the picturesque charm of ruins was so strong that even actually existing structures were envisioned by artists as ruins. Thus Joseph Michael Gandy (1771–1843) drew the Bank of England, demolished and weatherbeaten as he imagined it in the future. Or, in France, Hubert Robert painted the Louvre Gallery as it looked in 1796 and, as counterpart, another canvas showing the same gallery as he imagined it later in a ruinous state (figs. 9 and 10). Nothing could characterize better the attitude of this era where genuine and artificial ruins catered equally to the lacrimose sentimentality of the century.

To balance the prevalent romantic attitude the interest in factual statement of archeological discoveries had never died out. Most typical of this approach is the famous publication of copper engravings of Athens by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, published after their sojourn there, 1751–1754. It spread over the whole of Europe and represents, together with the theoretical writings of Johann Joachim von Winckelmann, actually the beginning of true archeological research. The drawings in their objectivity go far beyond the sequences of earlier Roman publications and even of Piranesi; they are entirely factual. The ruins are depicted and carefully measured as they were then in situ. The more the general interest in scholarly archeology grew, the more often we encounter documentary depiction besides the romanticized ruin.

Fig. 9. Hubert Robert.
The Gallery of the Louvre.

Fig. 10. Hubert Robert.
The Ruins of the Louvre. Formerly at Tsarkoje-Tselo.
V.

The extreme opposite of the romantic-emotional concept of ruins accentuates their intrinsic original architectural values. This attitude represents aesthetically the most surprising approach since one aspect of the basic aesthetic ambiguity of ruins—half work of art, half nature grown through centuries—is almost entirely eliminated. What then are those architectural values beyond period-conditioned stylistic details? What are the true gauges and standards of the Stilwillen, elemental and independent of any kind of ornamental decoration?

Functional values, of course, do not count with ruins which by their very nature cannot have any practical use. Details are interesting, sometimes merely from an archaeological viewpoint, sometimes aesthetically. However, as one may remember, we found details clearly enough depicted even in otherwise completely romantic interpretations. Thus, there are actually left only the most basic values: proportions and the interrelationship of space and volume. Are they ever perceived and felt in ruins?

The answer definitely is “Yes.” As little as anyone in musical performances today is able to perceive the true sound and color of an orchestra as imagined by Vivaldi or Mozart, so it is impossible for us to feel proportions and the interrelationship of space and volume in ruins the same way as the architecture was planned by its builders. Here lies the crucial aesthetic problem. When people first became conscious of ruins, they were aware only of those values we have discussed before. Sometimes, however, the proportional and spatial qualities of the original creation survived and were not concealed or modified in spite of all later visual changes and partial destructions.

The earliest examples are probably the woodcuts in the Hypnerotomachia Polifili by Fra Francesco Colonna, an Aldus Manutius print of 1499, one of the most beautiful Italian books. In this architectural-allegorical novel by the much traveled Dominican monk, Love—sometimes very realistically depicted—and architecture are fused in his fantastic dreams, doubtlessly with Freudian
undertones. It is evident that the artist is interested neither in archeological details nor in any kind of mood evoking visual effects. He definitely wants to stimulate our spatial imagination and our interest in all forms of spatial expanse in order to make us feel specific harmonies created by purely architectural means (fig. 11). The author obviously feels that the emotional reactions of man to the impact of space are generally more spontaneous and less intellectual than all romantic moods or any archeological interest and therefore closer to the underlying lyrical-erotic intent of the book.

Nearly three centuries later, the aforementioned Hubert Robert, for the larger public the 18th-century painter of ruins, also created occasionally works in which he conceived of ruins primarily for the sake of three-dimensional, architectural qualities. This is especially evident in his preparatory wash drawings where the artist’s inborn susceptibility for pure space values shows strongest, not yet repressed by romanticizing tendencies. A similar sensitivity for space and void, the basic architectural elements, can be encountered with the engravings of the English architect Robert Adam (1728–1792). Since his Ruins of the Palace of Diocletian (1764) served primarily archeological purposes like so many works of his contemporary English colleagues his rendering is less impressionistic than that of the imaginative Frenchman, Hubert Robert. But Adam is too much of an artist to be satisfied by the merely archeological intent of his engravings. Often his objective is also to catch the shape of the void, as exemplified in the Temple of Jupiter in Spoleto (fig. 12). Of course, ruins whose ceilings are still almost intact, lend themselves most easily to the graphic projection of space.

The same prevalence of spatial over romantic impression holds true, for instance, in Piranesi’s etching of the interior of the so-called Villa of Maecenas at Tivoli (1764) (fig. 13) or of the Frigidarium of Hadrian’s Villa in Tivoli (1770). Also here the serious desire to concentrate on the spatial impact of architecture is unmistakable. Thus the
greatest of all masters who ever tried to project the visual and emotional impression of ruins shows himself here conscious of true architectural and spatial values. And he re-captures them as well, as in other instances he brought out their romantic mood and their factual forms.

Briefly, the graphic art of these artists proves that they—and obviously many of their contemporaries—were able to see ruins still truly as architectural creations and to recognize the genuine aesthetic intent of the architects.

Summing up: Ruins are felt as architecture if they can be conceived as “Gestalt,” as a specific structural configuration, as a *totum divisum*. And this overall-Gestalt is not less real than the individual palpable elements of architecture, the columns, the vaults, or the buttresses. The recognition of this configuration proves that in some instances there may still exist an organic structure with an inner unity which conveys the original architectural concept, in mass and voids and in relation to the surrounding space. These values can be perceived and appreciated naturally only as a metamorphosis of the originally projected architecture. Definite structural organization and spatial relations, modified as they may be through destruction and age, still prevail and are still—through the maze of time—perceived as such. In other words, the splendor of the original work of architecture, even if veiled by the inroads of growing nature, by demolition and sometimes by adaptations of later generations, has not been lost and radiates still. As an English 18th-century writer remarks in a typically English understatement: “One suspects that ruins sometimes suggest the subdued which the complete intact building has not attained.”

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3 *Bibliografia della vita e delle opere di Salvatore Rosa* (Firenze, 1955).
6 Jakob Rosenberg, *Jacob van Ruisdael* (Berlin, 1928).
15 Duncan C. Tovey, *The Letters of Thomas Gray* (London, 1912).