



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

David Watkin, 'Introduction', *Late Georgian
Classicism*, Georgian Group Symposium,
1987, pp. 5-6

INTRODUCTION

David Watkin

The architecture of the early nineteenth century, as we are reminded by the varied papers published here, is a fascinating case-study since it was essentially a melting pot of new and old ideas; thus, the classical tradition was still accepted unquestioningly as the norm, yet its practitioners had to contend with the growth of Picturesque eclecticism and of the Gothic Revival. They were, moreover, as Edward Diestelkamp shows in fascinating detail, obliged to give consideration to the use of the new materials introduced by the industrial revolution. It was also in this period that architects finally solved, perhaps not very satisfactorily, the problem of how to incorporate the Greek sources which had been uncovered by archaeologists since the mid-eighteenth-century. It is surely one of the puzzles of eighteenth-century architecture that it was so little influenced by these new Greek sources. Many of them had, after all, been available as early as 1758 with the publication of J.-D. Le Roy's *Les plus beaux monuments de la Grèce*. The dryness of much Greek Revival architecture produced a reaction in the form of the lively Italianate style which Tim Mowl here christens the Williamane. This was a late flowering of the eighteenth-century Picturesque tradition which had always had half an eye on the romance of Italy.

That the early nineteenth century is worthy of detailed study is immediately clear when we remind ourselves that the leading architects were men of the stature of Nash, Smirke, Cockerell, and especially Soane, different aspects of whose achievement are investigated in papers by John Wilton-Ely and Christopher Webster. Though still practising in the reign of William IV, Soane takes us back to the days when Piranesi was exerting a heady influence on architectural students in Rome. It was on the recommendation of Sir William Chambers that the young Soane visited Piranesi in Rome, shortly before that visionary artist's death in 1774. The 'poetry of architecture' which Soane spent much of his career in attempting to create, was a concept which undoubtedly owed much to the mystery, the drama, and the poetic use of light and shade, which characterised Piranesi's seductive etchings of the buildings of ancient and modern Rome. Piranesi was initially hostile to Greek architecture, if only because he feared that its popularisation might threaten his livelihood as a purveyor of views of Rome. However, he eventually succumbed to the majesty of the Greek Doric temples of Paestum, preparing powerful engravings of them which still colour our experience of the buildings today.

Soane was happy to hang Piranesi's original drawings of Paestum in his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, yet the lectures he delivered at the Royal Academy were influenced by a rationalist theory which was totally opposed to the freedom proposed by Piranesi. In his theoretical position Soane tried to restrict the practice of classicism to the Laugier-inspired doctrines of truthful construction, according to which columns must be free-standing and load-bearing, not engaged and decorative, while pilasters should, ideally, be proscribed altogether.

This approach would have appealed to Sir Charles Monck, creator of the austere Greek Belsay Hall. As Richard Hewlings shows, Monck's remarkable library contained every book published on the architecture of Greece but nothing at all on that of Rome. This arid and extremist attempt to deny the unity and vitality of the classical tradition down the centuries is the opposite of everything that Piranesi stood for. It is the *ne plus ultra* of the

eighteenth-century rationalist drive for purity and authenticity. What makes Soane an architect of such brilliance is that he was able to combine these two contrasting strands of thought, the rationalist and the poetic. So, too, was Schinkel with whom he had much in common. We can appreciate the strength of the position adopted by Soane and Schinkel by contrasting it with the mechanistic interpretation of architecture proposed by Durand in his *Précis des leçons d'architecture données à l'école royale polytechnique* (1802–05). Durand reduced architectural design to a scientific process restricted to the fulfilment of measurable functional requirements.

Cockerell's position was far closer to that of Piranesi, who had stressed freedom of invention, than to that of Durand, who recognised neither freedom nor invention. Having discovered a Baroque trend in ancient Greek architecture, Cockerell was deeply aware of the continuity of the classical language of architecture of whatever period; he was thus hostile to the Winckelmannesque rhetoric which coloured the approach of Sir Charles Monck.

Classicism is an eternal language, yet each age has to rediscover it for itself. The process is an exciting one in which the boundaries between past and present are dissolved. In the late twentieth century, we still have everything to learn.