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WAS THE AMATEUR ARCHITECT A BRITISH PHENOMENON?

David Watkin

In attempting to answer this question we shall begin where the Georgian amateur would have begun, in antiquity where we find Vitruvius confessing that,

“I cannot refrain from praising those owners of estates who, fortified by confidence in their own erudition, build for themselves, judging that if inexperienced persons are to be employed, they themselves are entitled to spend their own capital to their own liking rather than to that of anyone else.”¹

In general, however, the purpose of Vitruvius’ treatise was to underline the importance of the trained professional architect. It is significant that the only exception he somewhat reluctantly allows in the passage just quoted is those who wish to design their own houses in the country. The best known example is Pliny who, about 70 years after Vitruvius, designed villas for himself at Laurentum, near Ostia, and Tifernum, in Umbria.² These, of course, provided a precedent for Lord Burlington who funded Robert Castell’s edition of Pliny’s letters, published as *The Villas of the Ancients Illustrated* (1728). It contained one of the many reconstructions of the Laurentine villa in the long chain which links Pirro Ligorio with Léon Krier.³

In the ancient, as in the modern world, the great ruler has often been identified, doubtless with some justice as, an architect. There were rumours in ancient Rome that the Emperor Hadrian was the architect of the Temple of Venus and Roma in Rome,⁴ and that he made designs for domical vaults of pumpkin-shape, as in the Serapaeum at Hadrian’s Villa.⁵

Before looking at 18th-century continental examples of amateur architects, I want to sound a note of warning. We have inherited a notion of the individual architect as a pioneer of progress, forging a solitary path of stylistic change, a romantic concept owing much to 19th-century images of genius. This notion has also been oddly bolstered by the modern art-historical obsession with questions of attribution rather than with an attempt to understand the nature of patronage. But current research into the Renaissance and Baroque art of the continent, which often concentrates on patterns of patronage, is showing the important architectural role played by patrons at, for example, the courts at Mantua,⁶ and at Ferrara.⁷ Turning to the court of the Dukes of Savoy at Turin, we find a plan for the expansion of the city of Turin in the hand of Charles Emmanuel I, Duke of Savoy, made in about 1612-19.⁸

Indeed, in the courts of continental Europe in our period there were likely to be many contributors, not one, to a building intended as a great public statement like the east front of the Louvre, begun in 1667. Though an undoubted masterpiece, this facade was the result of a committee, anathema to the romantic mind. Its design was influenced by the king’s chief minister, Colbert, his premier architecte, Le Vau, premier peintre, Le Brun, and, above all, by the remarkable Claude Perrault, scientist, doctor, and, surely, amateur architect.

Louis XIV himself confessed that building was, after war, his greatest passion.⁹ We know for example, that in September 1687, after work on Mansart’s Trianon de Marbre at Versailles had begun, the king ordered that the mansard roof should be replaced by a flat one and, even more significantly, that the central pavilion should be demolished in favour of “something lighter and carried on columns in the manner of a peristyle”.¹⁰ Thus, the highly original open form of what became the Grand Trianon seems to have been directly due to the king.

Frederick the great, as we shall see, can be seen even more clearly as an example of the ruler architect.

In 18th-century England, the situation became very different as a result of the Revolution of 1688 which diminished royal power and display. The contrast on the Continent in terms of patronage and building types is not only due to the existence of absolute monarchy, of innumerable royal and princely courts which provided opportunities for courtiers to make designs as part of the machinery of royal display, but of the Catholic church which provided, especially at the Jesuit colleges, a high level of education, for example in mathematics, and a way of life which enabled an educated clergy, sometimes of noble birth, to pursue academic, scholarly, literary and architectural pursuits. Skills in mathematics, music, and architecture often went hand in hand in this context. Guarini and Lodoli are important, if very different, examples of priest architects, a type of amateur architect not familiar in Britain. I shall thus suggest a typology for the amateur architect on the continent consisting of three types: the monarch as architect, the courtier or diplomat as architect, and the priest as architect. Doubtless all three had precedents in the ancient world, of whom Hadrian and Pliny are but two examples. We will now briefly investigate examples of these three categories.

Count Carlo Lodoli (1690-1761), who became a Franciscan friar, studied mathematics, philosophy, ancient and modern languages.¹¹ In a portrait of him, by Alessandro Longhi, he is described as skilled "in the devising of parables and architectonics". He studied art and architecture in Rome where he intended to lecture on art history. Indeed, he became a peripatetic teacher in Venice where he taught the new doctrines of Enlightenment philosophy to the sons of the nobility. He presented architecture not only as an instrument of state but also spoke of the relation between representation and function, coining the phrase, organic architecture. He believed that architecture should respond to the needs and aims of human beings rather than to formal laws.

Lodoli's position as commissioner in charge of Franciscan pilgrims to the Holy Land from 1739 to 1748 led him to make designs for rebuilding the cloister at Palladio's church of S. Francesco della Vigna as a pilgrims' hospice. Here he also set up stone tablets, dated 1743 and inscribed, "Ex Fabrica et Ratiocinatione", from Vitruvius.¹² In his pilgrim's hospice, which partly survives, he designed the unusual window heads to cast off rain and express function. They resist the downward pressure of brickwork resting on wooden piles, while the curious cills with their catenary curves also contain channels for rain. Lodoli's opposite number in France was, of course, the Abbé Laugier, better known as an architectural amateur, though he did not, unlike Lodoli, put up a building to demonstrate his theories.

The character of Lodoli's hospice was described by Lodoli's pupil Andrea Memmo, while Lodoli's chief pupil, the Venetian Count Francesco Algarotti (1712-64), described him as "the Socrates of Architecture". Algarotti, like Lodoli, was concerned to unite the new philosophical ideals of the Enlightenment with those of architecture, an implicitly anti-Baroque position.¹³

Algarotti stayed in Berlin with Frederick the Great in 1738-42 and 1745-53, where he was made a Prussian count, and became Frederick's artistic adviser. Frederick the Great, apart from being a composer of music, was also an architecte manqué. He formed a close friendship with Baron Georg Wenzeslaus von Knobelsdorff (1699-1753), who was, in a sense, an amateur architect, and certainly a figure who would be unfamiliar in the context of English society.¹⁴ His portrait by Antoine Pesne, for example, shows him with the accoutrements of his rank as a nobleman, not as an architect. He was born in 1699 on the family estate at Kurckädel in the Crossen district of Brandenburg. He joined the Prussian army in 1714 aged 15 and went with his regiment to Berlin 1729 where he was made Captain and made first contact with the 17-year-old Crown Prince, the future Frederick the Great, who reigned as King of Prussia from 1740 to 1786. Frederick saw himself a pupil of his friend, Knobelsdorff, who was also a musician. Following an

illness, Knobelsdorff left the army and studied painting at Berlin Academy under his friend Antoine Pesne. He continued to paint portraits and landscapes throughout career, but he also studied architecture under A. von Wangenheim and J. G. Kemmeter.

He was sent by Frederick on a study tour of Venice, Rome and Florence in 1736-37 where he praised antique architecture and ideals at the expense of modern Italian art. He took up residence at the Prince's Court at Schloss Rheinsberg which he remodelled in 1737-40 with characteristic open colonnades with coupled columns, a form which he and Frederick chose together. They now conceived the Forum Fredericianum in Berlin (1730-43), a cultural enclave with church, library, and an Opera House (1741-43), based on Campbell's Wanstead as published in *Vitruvius Britannicus*, a copy of which Frederick owned, as also Burlington's edition of Palladio's drawings of the Roman baths.

Frederick went on in 1744 to make drawings for Sanssouci, the private retreat which he created for himself at Potsdam. Using these designs, Knobelsdorff built Sanssouci in 1745-47 incorporating interiors in a wide range of styles from Rococo to neo-Classical. Frederick made Knobelsdorff Director of Royal Palaces and Gardens as well as counsellor in the Department of Finances, a handy conjunction of offices. A disagreement over the design led to a temporary coolness between the two men.

We should recall that Frederick was now under the influence of Algarotti who encouraged him to turn the garrison town of Potsdam into an extraordinary architectural museum. To help achieve this, Algarotti wrote from Potsdam in 1751 to another great architectural amateur, Lord Burlington, to ask if he would send drawings to Frederick. "You are, my Lord", Algarotti wrote flatteringly to Burlington, "the restorer of true architecture in this century." Algarotti wrote to Frederick on August 4, 1751, "Sir, following Your Majesty's instructions, I have written, Sir, for the Palazzo Pitti and for the new Palladio being printed in Venice; and I hope you will pay the same honour to Venetian architects as to those of Rome and Versailles and naturalise, so to speak, some of their productions, mingling them with your own."¹⁵ A range of architects transformed the streets of Potsdam with buildings based on engravings supplied by Frederick of work by Giulio Romano, Rainaldi, and Fuga. Other examples from 1754 are a dwelling and guest house based on Sanmicheli's Palazzo della Gran Guardia in Verona and one inspired by the Palazzo Barberini in Rome.¹⁶ Here the parallel to Burlington is close, for the buildings at Potsdam included a copy of Burlington's neo-Palladian house for General Wade, and another, not executed, inspired by Inigo Jones's Whitehall, based on English engravings.

The king also made suggestions for a triumphal arch like that at Nancy. Hence, the Brandenburger Tor at Potsdam of 1770, the plain front to the town by C. von Gontard, the elaborate outward front by G.C. Unger. Frederick also gave engravings of the Baroque range of the Hofburg in Vienna as a somewhat unexpected model for the royal library on the west side of the Forum Fredericianum, built in 1774-80 by Unger and Boumann. All this work helps set in context the similar development of Munich for Ludwig I of Bavaria by Klenze and Gärtner in the early 19th century.

Now to Saxony, and to the relationship between another princely architect manqué, Prince Leopold Friederich Franz of Anhalt-Dessau (1740-1800) and his friend, Friedrich Wilhelm von Erdmannsdorff (1736-1800),¹⁷ a nobleman who also took up architecture and, with the prince, created Schloss Wörlitz and its park from 1766-99.¹⁸ Erdmannsdorff was born in Dresden as the son of Hofmarschall Ernst Ferdinand von Erdmannsdorff (1736-1800). The family seat was a handsome Schloss at Kossern bei Grimm, near Leipzig. Erdmannsdorff studied mathematics, a good basis for architecture, at Wittenberg University in 1754-57 where he first met his future friend and patron, Prinz Leopold Friedrich Franz of Anhalt Dessau (1740-1817). The prince had been a Captain in the Prussian army until, following illness in 1757, he began his personal rule in the following year. In 1761-63 he sent his friend Erdmannsdorff on a study

tour to Italy, while, after the Peace of 1763 at the end of the Seven Years War, the two men, accompanied by the landscape designer Johann Friedrich Eysenbeck, travelled together in 1763 in England and the Netherlands.

In 1765-67 they travelled together in a large group in England, Scotland, Ireland, France, where the Prince studied Roman buildings in the Midi. Moving to Italy, the Prince studied architecture in Rome where those he met included Clérissieu, Winckelmann, Vanvitelli, Piranesi, Cavaceppi, and Sir William Hamilton. Erdmannsdorff was in Italy again in 1770-71, and again in England with the Prince in 1775-76. These were specific journeys to collect material for interiors at Schloss Wörlitz and for buildings in the park. Archive material now being released at Schloss Wörlitz suggests that the Prince, like Frederick the Great, was himself an architect and collaborated with Erdmannsdorff who himself had no specific architectural training. The Schloss contains furniture in the Chippendale style as well as pieces based on designs by Chambers. The park, intended to improve and educate the prince's subjects, contains souvenirs of buildings such as Burlington's Pantheon at Chiswick, the iron bridge at Coalbrookdale, and most significantly, a convincing recreation of Rousseau's tomb on the island at Ermenonville. The prince had visited Ermenonville in 1778 where he met Rousseau.

A close parallel to the relationship between the Prince and Erdmannsdorff is that between Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia,¹⁹ and Schinkel. Schinkel taught architecture to the prince who, in turn, supplied Schinkel with endless designs for buildings, including plans, elevations, and perspectives, in a wide range of styles. Schinkel brilliantly turned these into buildings such as the Casino and Belvedere at Schloss Glienicke, Schloss Babelsberg, the Orangery at Sanssouci, and many more.²⁰ I hope I may be forgiven for comparing the relation between Schinkel and the Crown Prince to that between Hitler and Albert Speer. The architectural designs of Hitler, an architecte manqué, bear a curious resemblance to those of Friedrich Wilhelm.

Turning to Italy, we find an Italian count who has some claim to be one of the most successful amateur architects. This is Conte Benedetto Innocente Alfieri (1699-1767), born in Rome to a noble family from Asti, in Piedmont.²¹ He had a Jesuit upbringing in Rome, studying mathematics in particular, continuing his studies in law at Turin University. From 1726 was a city councillor in his native town of Asti where he became mayor in 1730. In the course of these activities he became involved with building maintenance and administration, designing a church tower in 1724 and a bridge in 1729.

Soon his relatives called on him for minor architectural works. Indeed, from the beginning he worked chiefly for family and friends, his nephew, the playwright Vittorio Alfieri, claiming that he did most of his work gratuitously, an important qualification for an amateur architect. He was particularly adept at reconstructing the palaces of his noble friends. In 1732 his second career began in earnest when he worked for his uncle, Marchese Tommaso Ghilini, on the great family palace in Alessandria. This was Alfieri's first contact with Juvarra and may have been his chief indoctrination into architecture. The facade was built from Juvarra's designs, but the daring and beautiful brick vault of the atrium are the fruits of Alfieri's mathematical brilliance.

In 1739 King Carlo Emanuele III appointed Alfieri royal architect in succession to Juvarra. His most characteristic design, not for the king, was the parish church of SS Giovanni e Remigio at Carignano, built in 1757-64. The site for the church was given by wealthy local businessman, and Alfieri gave his services free which, of course, helped him to force the bizarre plan on the local community who had wanted a longitudinal plan, not the semi-circular one Alfieri gave them in which almost no one had a view of the altar. Its stunning curved vistas make the building both auditorium and stage-set, recalling that Alfieri had designed the Teatro Carignano in Turin for the Prince of Carignano a few years before in 1752-53.

Meanwhile, in Turin, essentially a military and governmental centre, Alfieri was valuable

to the king as an administrator and political adviser as much as an architect. It is not clear exactly how he and others like him saw themselves. "Amateur architect" is obviously not exactly the right phrase, so perhaps we should see Alfieri as essentially a professional courtier, one of whose duties involved design. He held other posts in the city administration and also became Mayor.²³

I turn finally to France where the Marquis de Voyer d'Argenson was described in 1774 by his friend, Sir William Chambers, as an "Excellent architect" who understood "Painting and sculpture better than most men of his time".²⁴ I have not yet found anything more about this Marquis, so will end with a nobleman from Messina, one of a number of Sicilians who revolted against the rule of Charles II of Spain. In 1678 he arrived from Sicily at Versailles at the court of Charles II's enemy, Louis XIV. Here he was known as duc Ferdinand-François Fornari-Colonna, a title disputed, characteristically, by the duc de Saint-Simon who nonetheless described him as a man who "drew to perfection and had great knowledge of architecture as well as perfect taste in all kinds of buildings, above all those on a large scale."²⁵

In 1703 the duc Fornari-Colonna designed the Hotel d'Etampes in the rue de Varenne, Paris, for the Marquis d'Etampes, Captain of the Guards to the duc d'Orléans.²⁶ Fornari-Colonna was a type unfamiliar in England. Equipped with all the social graces, he was a man of taste, with skills in music, architecture, and the arts, as well as in the world of finance. He thus provided useful services to a number of noble families, acting, for example, as counsellor or governor to the son of the duc de la Feuillade. Though he received a pension from Louis XIV, he had forfeited his estates in Sicily and doubtless needed to ingratiate himself in high circles by the exercise of his various skills. His path in society must have been greatly assisted by his friendship with Louis XIV whom he rescued from falling down a marble staircase at Versailles in 1695. According to Saint-Simon, always anxious to report anecdotes hostile to the royal architect, J. Hardouin-Mansart, Fornari-Colonna's discussions with Louis XIV at Marly about his buildings and fountains drove Mansart mad with jealousy.

NOTES

1. Book VI. Preface, 6.
2. *The Letters of the Young Pliny*, II, 17, V, 6.
3. For Krier's reconstruction, see *La Laurentine et l'invention de la Villa Romaine*, Institute Français d'Architecture, Paris, 1982.
4. Mary Boatwright, *Hadrian and the City of Rome*, Princeton, 1987, 31.
5. Diodorus Siculus, LXIX. 4, 2-6, and see William MacDonald, "Roman Architects", in Spiro Kostof, ed., *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, Oxford, 1977, 28-58.
6. For the architectural activities of Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantova, and of Ludovico Gonzaga, Marquess of Mantova, see, respectively, Clifford M. Brown and Mary Hollingsworth in Cesare Mozzarelli and Robert Oresko, ed., *La corte dei Gonzaga nell'età del Mantegna e di Giulio Romano*, Rome, forthcoming.
7. See Thomas Tuohy, *Herculean Ferrara*, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.
8. Martha D. Pollak, *Turin 1564-1680: Urban Design, Military Culture, and the Creation of the Absolutist Capital*, Chicago & London, 1991, 52-4 & pl. 41.
9. See Jean Autin, *Louis XIV architecte*, Paris, 1981.
10. Bertrand Jestaz, "Le Trianon de marbre ou Louis XIV architecte", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, November 1969, 259-86.
11. See Andrea Memmo, *Elementi d'architettura Lodoliana*, (1833-34), Milan, 1973, Edgar Kaufmann, "Lodoli Architetto", *In Search of Modern Architecture: A Tribute to H.-R. Hitchcock*, ed. H. Searing, Cambridge, Mass., & London, 1982, 31-7, and Joseph Rykwert, "Lodoli on Function and Representation", *The Necessity of Artifice*, London, 1982, 115-21.
12. Book I, ch.1, para 1, where Vitruvius states that "knowledge is the child of practice and theory".
13. See *Opere del Conte Algarotti*, 17 vols., Venice, 1791-94, and Edgar Kaufmann, "At an eighteenth Century Crossroad: Algarotti vs. Lodoli", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 4, 1944, no.2, 23-29, and Werner Oeschlin in *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, London & New York, 1982, vol I, 68-69.
14. For a general survey, see David Watkins & Tilman Mellinghoff, *German Architecture and the Classical Ideal 1740-1840*, London, 1987. On Knobelsdorff, see Hans-Joachim Kadatz & Gerhard Murza, *Georg Wenzeslaus von Knobelsdorff, Baumeister Friedrichs II*, Munich, 1983, and Tilo Eggeling, *Studien zum frederizianischen Rokoko: G. W. von Knobelsdorff als Entwerfer von Innendekoration*, Berlin, 1980.

15. Cited from Friedrich Mielke, *Potsdamer Baukunst, das klassischer Potsdam*, Frankfurt-am-Mein, 1981, 40 (my translation).
16. Unfortunately, most of these buildings in Potsdam were needlessly demolished following bomb-damage in the Second World War.
17. See Marie-Louise Harken, *Erdmannsdorff und seine Bauten in Wörlitz*, Wörlitz, 1973, and Hans-Joachim Kadatz, *Friedrich Wilhelm von Erdmannsdorff 1736-1800*, Berlin, 1986.
18. See Erhard Hirsch, *Dessau-Wörlitz. Aufklärung und Frühklassik*, Leipzig, 1985.
19. Ludwig Dehio, *Friedrich Wilhelm IV von Preussen, ein Baukünstler der Romantik*, Munich, 1961.
20. See, for example, Johannes Sievers, *Die Arbeiten von Karl Friedrich Schinkel für Prinz Wilhelm, späteren König von Preussen*, Berlin, 1955, 135-39.
21. See Amedeo Bellini, *Benedetto Alfieri*, Milan, 1978, and Richard Pommer, *Eighteenth-century Architecture in Piedmont*, New York, 1967.
22. On his work in Asti, see Mirella Macera, ed., *Benedetto Alfieri: l'Opera Astigana*, Turin, 1922.
23. Other noble amateurs at work in Italy were Marchese Gabriele Dionisi who, Dr Giles Worsley informs me, built the Villa Tacoli Dionisi, near Verona, between 1740 and 1766, and Conte Ercole Silva who, following a visit to English parks and gardens in 1786, laid out his own grounds at the Villa Silva-Ghirlanda at Cinisello Balsamo, near Milan, and published *Dell'arte de'giardini inglesi* (1801).
24. John Harris, *Sir William Chambers, Knight of the Polar Star*, London, 1970, 14.
25. *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, ed. A. de Boislisle, vol. XIX, Paris, 1906 124. My translation. For further brief references to him see Marquis de Sourches, *Mémoires secrets et inédits de la cour de France*, Paris, 1882-93 and Marquis de Dangeau, *Journal, avec les additions du duc de Saint-Simon*, Paris, 1854.
26. *Le faubourg Saint Germain, La rue de Varenne*, Exhibition catalogue, Musée Rodin, Paris 1981, 49. I am indebted to Dr Robert Oresko for drawing my attention to this reference and for his comments on the first draft of this paper.