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I ARCHITECTURE

On German Architecture¹ (1772)

On a pilgrimage to your grave, noble Erwin, I searched for the tombstone with the inscription, *Anno Domini 1318. XVI Kal. Febr. Obiit Magister Ervinus, Gubernator Fabricae Ecclesiae Argentinensis*.² But I could not find it, nor were any of your countrymen able to help me. And I was saddened to the depth of my soul, for I had come to pour out my veneration for you at that hallowed place. My heart, younger then, warmer, more foolish and better than now, solemnly vowed that once in due possession of my inheritance, I would build you a memorial of marble or of sandstone, whichever I could afford.

Yet you need no memorial! You erected your own, a magnificent one. And though the throngs crawling about it like ants know nothing of your name, you are like the Great Architect who piled up mountains into the clouds.

Few have been blessed with a mind capable of conceiving a Babel-like vision—whole, great, inherently beautiful to the last detail, like God's trees—and even fewer with the good fortune to encounter a thousand willing hands, to excavate the rocky foundations, to conjure up towering structures and, with their dying breath, tell their sons: I will remain with you in the works of my spirit. Complete what is begun, until it reaches into the clouds.

You need no memorial! Certainly not mine! When the rabble utter sacred names, it is superstition or blasphemy. The feeble esthete will feel forever giddy in the presence of your colossus, robust sensibilities will understand you without an interpreter.

Now then, worthy Erwin, before I venture back to sea in my fragile bark, more likely to encounter death than prosperity, behold this grove where I engraved the names of beloved friends, there I will cut yours into a beech tree slender and soaring like your tower, and in its branches I will hang by its four corners this handkerchief full of gifts. It resembles the sheet that was let down from the clouds to the holy apostle, full of clean and unclean beasts.³ So mine will be filled with flowers, blossoms,

leaves, but also dry grass and moss and toadstools sprung up over night—everything I gathered while walking through an uninteresting region, collecting specimens simply to pass the time. I now commit them to decay as an offering in your honor.

“What immature taste,” says the Italian and walks on. “Childish nonsense,” parrots the Fenchman and triumphantly flicks open his snuffbox à la Grècque.⁴ What right have you to show contempt?

Did not the genius of the ancients rise from the grave and fetter your own, Italian? You crept among the mighty remains like a beggar, hoping to learn of proportion, you patched together villas from sacred rubble, and you consider yourself the custodian of the secrets of art because you are able to give an account of the measurements of gigantic buildings, down to the last inch! Had you felt more and measured less, had you been inspired and not simply overawed by these massive structures, you would not have merely imitated them because they were created by the ancients and are beautiful. You would have created your own plans with their own inherent truth, and natural living beauty would have emanated from them.

Instead you applied a thin veneer of truth and beauty to your buildings. You were struck by the magnificent effect of columns, so you wanted to put them to use and embedded them in walls. You wanted colonnades too, so you encircled St. Peter’s Square with marble walks which lead nowhere. And mother nature, who despises the inappropriate and hates the superfluous, drove your rabble to prostitute all that splendor by transforming it into a public sewer. Now everyone averts his eyes and holds his nose when approaching this wonder of the world.

And so things go: the artist’s fancy serves the rich man’s caprice, the travel writer gapes, our esthetes, called philosophers, always fashion principles and histories of art from the stuff of fairytales, while their evil genius murders true human beings at the threshold of revelation.

Principles are even more damaging to the genius than examples. Individual artists may have worked on individual parts before him, but he is the first from whose soul the parts emerge grown together into an everlasting whole. Yet school and principle fetter all powers of perception and activity. Of what use to us is the knowledge, you philosophizing expert of the new French school,⁵ that the first man, inventive in his need for shelter, rammed four stakes into the ground, joined them with four poles and made a roof of branches and moss? From this you derive the appropriateness of our own buildings, as if you wanted to rule your new Babylon with a simplistically patriarchal attitude!

And it is wrong to boot. This hut of yours was not the first in the world. Two poles crossed at the top in front, two in the back and a

fifth as a ridgepole, as we can see every day from huts in fields and vineyards, that is clearly a far earlier invention, from which you could not even derive a principle for your pigsties.

Thus none of your conclusions are able to ascend to the realm of truth, but merely float in the atmosphere of your own system. You want to teach us what we should use, because what we do use cannot be justified according to your principles.

The column is very dear to your heart, and in another part of the world you would be a prophet. You say: "The column is the first, essential component of a building, and the most beautiful. What exquisite elegance of form! What pure and varied grandeur when they stand in a row! But beware of using them inappropriately; their nature is to stand free. Woe to those wretches who welded their slender shape onto bulky walls!"

And yet it seems to me, dear Abbé, that you should have been concerned when you encountered the unseemliness of walled-in columns so often, and saw that moderns even walled up the intercolumniations of antique temples. If your ears were not deaf to the truth, these stones would have preached the truth to you.

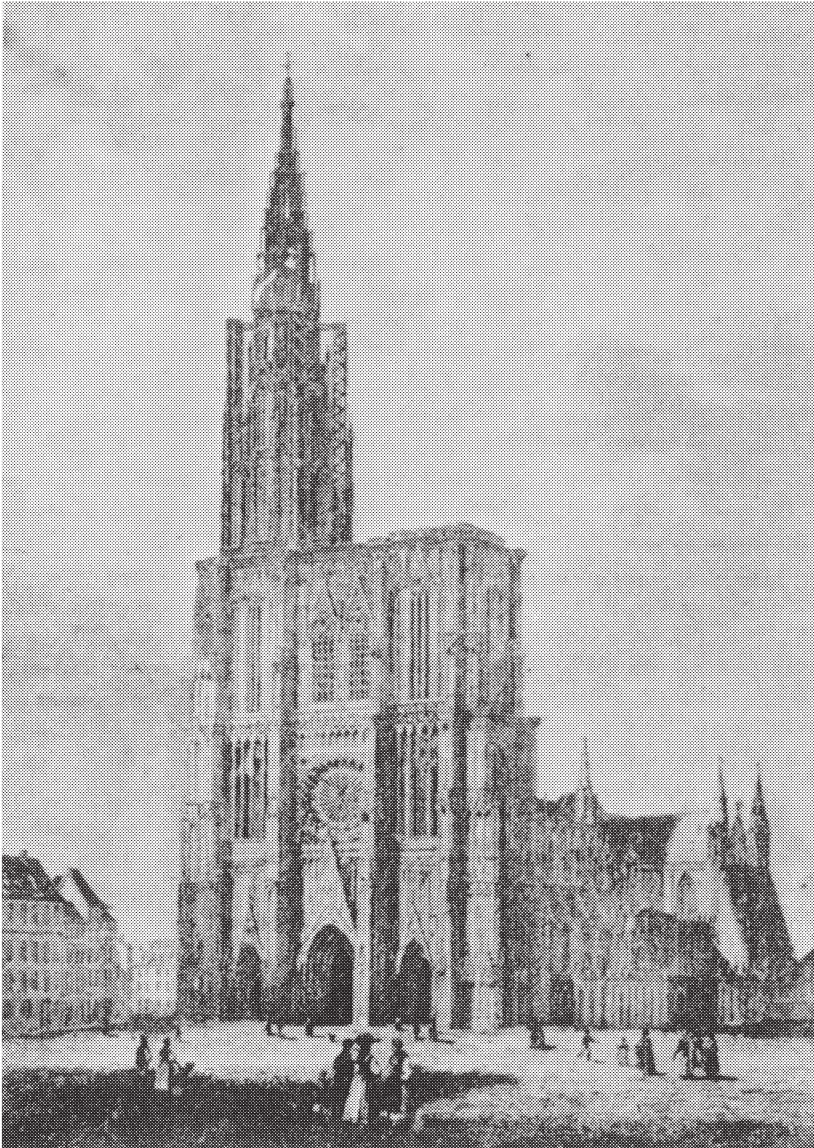
The column is by no means a natural component of our dwellings, on the contrary, it contradicts the character of all our buildings. Our houses did not develop from four columns in four corners, but from four walls on four sides. The walls are in place of columns and exclude columns, and where columns are tacked on, they are a superfluous encumbrance. This is also true of our palaces and churches, with a few exceptions, on which I need not elaborate.

Your buildings present mere surfaces which, the further they extend and the bolder they soar to the sky, inevitably oppress the soul with ever more unbearable monotony. Fortunately, Genius came to our aid and inspired Erwin von Steinbach, saying: Diversify the immense wall, raise it toward heaven so that it soars like a towering, widespreading tree of God. With its thousands of branches and millions of twigs and as many leaves as sand by the sea, it shall proclaim to the land the glory of the Lord, its master.

When I first came to visit the cathedral, my head was filled with general notions of good taste. Based on what I had heard others say, I praised the harmony of mass, the purity of form, and I was a sworn enemy of the confused arbitrariness of Gothic adornment. Under the heading 'Gothic,' as in an entry in the dictionary,⁶ I listed all the synonymous misconceptions that I had ever encountered, such as indefinite, disorganized, unnatural, patched-together, tacked-on, overladen. No wiser than a nation which calls the world it does not know barbaric, I called everything which did not fit into my system Gothic: from the elaborate figures and colorful ornaments on the houses of our would-

be nobility to the somber remains of early German architecture. A few bizarre curlicues prompted me to join in the general chorus: "Smothered by ornamentation!" So I shuddered, anticipating a misshapen, grotesque monster.

But what unexpected emotions seized me when I finally stood before the edifice! My soul was suffused with a feeling of immense grandeur which, because it consisted of thousands of harmonizing details, I was able to savor and enjoy, but by no means understand and explain. They say it is thus with the joys of heaven, and how often I returned to savor such joys on earth, to embrace the gigantic spirit expressed in the work of our brothers of yore! How often I returned to view its dignity and magnificence from all sides, from every distance, at different times of day! It is hard for the mind of man when his brother's work is so sublime that he can only bow his head and worship. How often the gentle light of dusk, as it fused the countless parts into unified masses, soothed my eyes weary from intense searching. Now all stood before my soul, simple and great, and I, full of bliss, felt develop in me the power at the same time to enjoy and understand. Then I sensed the genius of the great builder. "Why are you so amazed?" he whispered, "All these masses were necessary. Don't you see them in all the older churches of my city? I have merely elevated the arbitrary vastness to harmonious proportions. Above the main portal dominating the two smaller ones on either side, see the broad circular window! Once there was only a small hole to let in light, and now it harmonizes with the nave of the church. See the belltower high above—it demanded smaller windows. That was all necessary, and I lent it beauty. But oh, when I float through these dark and sublime side apertures which appear to be empty and useless! In these bold, slender forms I have concealed the mysterious forces which were to raise two towers high into the air. Alas! but one stands there forlorn, without the five crowning pinnacles I had planned, so that the surrounding provinces would do homage to it and its royal brother!" And so he departed from me, and my heart was filled with sympathy and melancholy, until the birds of the morning who live in the thousands of openings greeted the sun with jubilant songs and awakened me from my slumber. How fresh was its radiance in the misty shimmer of morning light, how happily I stretched out my arms toward it and looked at the vast, harmonious masses animated by countless components! As in the works of eternal nature, down to the smallest fiber, all is form, all serves the whole. How lightly the immense, firmly-grounded edifice soars into the air, how like filigree everything is, yet made for eternity! I owe it to your instruction, noble genius, that I no longer reel when confronting your profundities, that my soul is touched by the blissful calm of a spirit who can look down on such a creation and say, as did God, "It is good!"



Strasbourg Cathedral. (Courtesy of the Picture Collection, the Branch Libraries, New York Public Library.)

And should I not grow angry, divine Erwin, when a German scholar, on the word of envious neighbors, fails to see his advantage and belittles your work with the misunderstood term Gothic, when he ought to thank God for being able to proclaim: This is German architecture! Our architecture! The Italians cannot boast one of their own, much less the French. And if, Professor, you are not willing to admit this advantage, then show us that the Goths really built in this style, which will prove quite difficult. And in the end, if you cannot establish that there was a Homer before Homer,⁷ we will gladly grant you your theory of minor trial-and-error efforts, and approach with reverence the work of the master who first created a living whole out of scattered elements. And you, my dear brother in the quest of truth and beauty, close your ears to all pretentious prattle about art—come, enjoy, behold! Beware of profaning the name of your noblest artist and hasten here to see his magnificent work. If you feel repelled, or feel nothing at all, then farewell, harness your horses and be on your way to Paris.

But I will gladly join you, worthy youth, who stands there moved, unable to reconcile the contradictions clashing within your soul, now feeling the irresistible power of the great whole, now calling me a dreamer for seeing beauty where you see only strength and roughness. Do not let a misunderstanding separate us. Do not let the effete doctrine of our modern esthetizisers so enfeeble you that you can no longer bear what is meaningful but rough, lest in the end your sickly sensibility can tolerate only what is polished but meaningless. They would have you believe that the fine arts sprang from our supposed inclination to beautify, to refine, the things around us. That is not true! For it is the common man and the artisan who use these words in the only sense they could be true—not the philosopher.

Art is creative long before it is beautiful. And yet, such art is true and great, perhaps truer and greater than when it becomes beautiful. For in man there is a creative force which becomes active as soon as his existence is secure. When he is free from worry and fear, this demigod, restless in tranquility, begins to cast about for matter to inspire with his spirit. And thus savages decorate their coconut-fiber mats, their feathers, their bodies, with bizarre patterns, ghastly forms and gaudy colors. And even if this creative activity produces the most arbitrary shapes and designs, they will harmonize despite the apparent lack of proportion. For a single feeling created them as a characteristic whole.

This characteristic art is in fact the only true art. If it springs from a sincere, unified, original, autonomous feeling, unconcerned, indeed unaware of anything extraneous, then it will be a living whole, whether born of coarse savagery or cultured sensitivity. You see endless variations of this in different nations and individuals. The more the soul

develops a feeling for proportion, which alone is beautiful and eternal, whose fundamental harmony we can prove but whose mysteries we can only feel, in which alone the life of the god-like genius dances to blissful melodies, and the more deeply this beauty penetrates the mind so that both seem to have originated as one and the mind can be satisfied with nothing but beauty and produces nothing but beauty—then the more fortunate is the artist, the more glorious is he, and the deeper we bow before him and worship God's anointed one.

No one will dislodge Erwin from his pedestal. His work stands before you. Approach it and experience the profoundest feeling of truth and beauty of proportion, sprung from a strong, rough-hewn German soul in the setting of the gloomy petty-clericism of the Middle Ages.

And our own age? It has renounced its genius, sent forth its sons to collect foreign produce at their peril. The flighty Frenchman, who borrows even more heavily, has at least ingenuity enough to lend his meager pickings a semblance of oneness. He is building a magic temple to his Sainte Madeleine⁸ with Greek columns and German vaults. One of our own artists was asked to create a portal for an old German church, and I saw the model he proposed: stately antique columns.

I will not dwell on how much I detest our dainty doll-painters.⁹ Through theatrical poses, fake complexions and colorful costumes they have caught the eye of women. Manly Albrecht Dürer, the neophyte sneers at you—but to me, even the crudest of your woodcut figures is more welcome!

And you yourselves, the privileged, to whom it was given to enjoy the highest beauty and who now come among us to proclaim your revelations, even you do harm to the genius. He does not want to be borne up and carried off on wings not his own, though they be the wings of morning.¹⁰ He must provide his own strength, developed in childhood dreams and honed during youth, until, strong and lithe like a mountain lion, he can hasten forth to seek prey.¹¹ Nature above all must be his teacher, since you pedagogues will never devise a setting diverse enough to challenge and delight him as his abilities develop.

Hail to thee child who art born with an eye for proportion, ready to practice your talent on all nature's forms. When you gradually awaken to the joyful life around you and share the jubilant pleasure man feels after toil and fear and hope—the vintager's lusty song as the riches of autumn swell his vats, the reaper's lively dance after he has hung his idle sickle high on the beam—when the powerful forces of desire and suffering guide your brush in manlier strokes, when you have striven and suffered enough and have enjoyed enough, and when you are sated with earthly beauty and worthy to rest in the arms of the goddess, worthy to feel in her embrace the sensation which gave birth to the deified Hercules—then receive him, heavenly beauty, you mediator

between gods and humans! And then, more than Prometheus, may he bring down the bliss of the gods upon our earth.¹²

On Gothic Architecture¹ (1823)

There must be something fascinating about the architectural style which Italians and Spaniards for a long time, but we Germans only recently, have called “German” (*tedesca, germanica*). It was used for buildings of all sizes for centuries, adopted by most of Europe and utilized by thousands of artists and tens of thousands of craftsmen; it helped greatly in furthering Christianity and had a powerful effect on spirit and mind. This style, then, must possess something great, something profoundly felt, fully thought-out and developed, and must both conceal and reveal² interrelationships whose effects are irresistible.

We were struck, therefore, by the testimony of a Frenchman whose own style was at odds with the one so extolled above and whose time held it in low esteem. Nonetheless, he said the following:

“Any gratification we derive from a beautiful work of art depends on whether regularity and symmetry are observed, because satisfaction is produced solely by proportions. If proportion is wanting, no amount of external ornamentation will compensate for the lack of inner beauty and charm. We may even say that ugliness becomes more obnoxious and unbearable if one tries to enhance the effect of ornamentation through intricate workmanship or costly material.

“I am inclined to go further and maintain that beauty, which stems from symmetry and proportion, does not at all need precious material and fine workmanship to win admiration; on the contrary, beauty shines forth, calling attention to itself in the midst of the tangled confusion of material and technique. Thus we look with pleasure at those sections of Gothic structures whose beauty seems to derive from the symmetry and proportion of the whole in relationship to its parts, and of the parts among themselves. Beauty is evident despite, and even in defiance of, the ugly embellishments which abound on those edifices. But what most convinces us is that upon careful examination of these sections, we generally find the same proportions as in the buildings which were constructed according to the rules of good architecture and are so pleasant to behold.” (François Blondel, *Cours d'Architecture*, Cinquième partie. Livre V. Chap. XVI. XVII.)³

In this context, those years past come to mind when the Strasbourg Cathedral impressed us so greatly that we could not refrain from giving written expression to our delight.⁴ The same conclusion which the French architect had reached after customary measurement and ex-

amination, we came to intuitively. After all, there is no law requiring that one account for impressions which take one by surprise.

It is not difficult to cite reasons why these buildings stood there for centuries as relics from the past, without making a particular impression on the public at large. But how powerful was their impact in recent times with the revival of interest in this style! The young and old of both sexes were overwhelmed by the sight of such structures and were inspired not only to seek pleasure and edification from repeated visiting, measuring and sketching, but also to have this style actually incorporated in the subsequent construction of buildings dedicated to the needs of real life. Here they found satisfaction in evoking the feeling of being back in the time of their ancestors.

Now that the interest in these achievements of the past has been aroused, we owe thanks to those who have made it possible for us to feel and understand the merits of this style in the real sense, that is, from a historical perspective. I feel in a position to offer a few remarks on this subject because of my close study of such important edifices.

After my departure from Strasbourg I saw no other major work of this type that I found imposing, and the impression faded. I hardly remembered the state of mind which had made it possible for me to react with such intense enthusiasm to the sight of the cathedral. My stay in Italy could not revive those feelings, especially since the modern alterations on the cathedral of Milan had changed its original character, and for many years I felt remote, if not alienated from this form of architecture.⁵

Then, in 1810, through the good offices of a distinguished friend, I entered into a close relationship with the Boisserée brothers.⁶ They shared with me some of the outstanding results of their efforts. There were carefully executed drawings of the Cologne Cathedral, a ground plan and several elevations, which acquainted me with an edifice that, after thorough examination, I would say deserves recognition as the foremost example of this style. I resumed my studies of past years, acquired information through an exchange of visits with friends and the conscientious inspection of engravings, drawings and paintings of buildings from this period, so that I finally felt at home in that world once again.

But given the nature of the matter, and especially considering my age and position, the historical aspect of the whole undertaking necessarily became most important to me. In this regard, important collections owned by friends proved most helpful.

As good fortune would have it, Mr. Moller,⁷ a highly cultivated and perceptive artist, also developed a lively interest in the enterprise and contributed significantly to it. A recently discovered architect's plan of the Cologne Cathedral lent the affair new interest. The lithograph

of the cathedral, and particularly the counterproofs which made it possible through joining and coloring to represent visually the entire twin-towered edifice, produced a significant effect. At the same time—highly gratifying to the historically-minded—the excellent man undertook to present us with a chronological series of illustrations from earlier and more recent times, enabling us to follow easily the development of the style in question from its origin to its zenith and finally its decline. As a result our study of the subject has been greatly facilitated, especially since the first part of his work has now been completed and sections of the second, which is to deal with individual buildings in this style, have been made available to us.

We hope the public receives the endeavors of this perceptive and active man favorably, for now is the time to be concerned with such things and we must take advantage of the opportunity if we and generations to come are to arrive at a complete understanding of the matter.

And so we hope, too, that the Boisserée brothers' important work, the first installment of which we announced on a previous occasion, receives the same attention and interest.

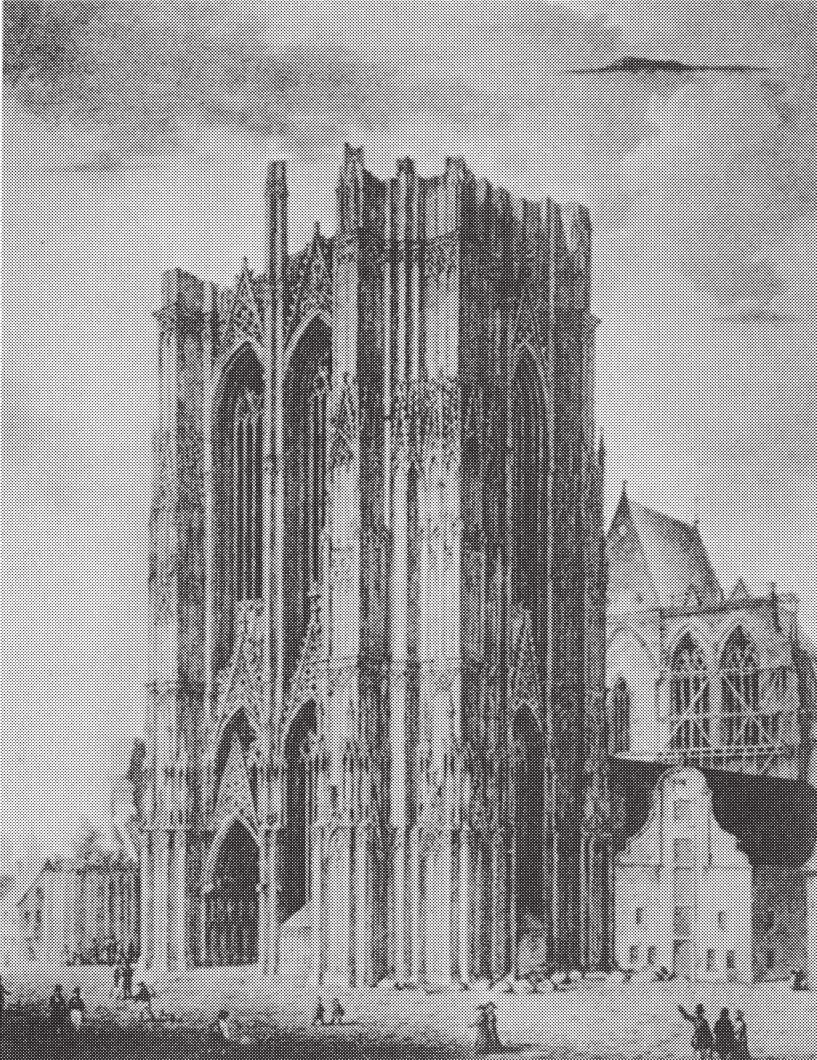
I am most gratified to see the general public enjoy the benefits which I have been privileged to share for thirteen years, the length of time I have witnessed the Boisserées' laborious and persistent efforts. I was frequently privy to newly drawn plans as well as older drawings and engravings relevant to this style. But especially important were the proofs of major plates which were in the process of being produced by outstanding engravers.

As pleased as I was that the enthusiasm of my early years had been rekindled by the project, the greatest impetus was nonetheless provided by a brief visit to Cologne which I was fortunate to make in the company of Minister von Stein.⁸

I must admit that seeing the exterior of the Cologne Cathedral aroused a certain apprehension in me which I could not explain. A significant ruin has a venerable quality, and we sense and actually see in it the conflict between a noble work of man, and time that with silent force spares nothing. Here, on the other hand, we are confronted with an edifice which is unfinished and prodigious, and precisely its incompleteness reminds us of man's insufficiency when he attempts the colossal.

Even the interior of the cathedral, although impressive, frankly strikes us as inharmonious. Only when we enter the completed choir do we encounter a surprising harmony. Then we are happily amazed, then we are joyously startled and experience a sense of complete fulfillment.

But since I had already studied the ground plan at length and discussed it in detail with friends, I was able to closely follow here on location the traces of the original concept, because almost the entire



Cologne Cathedral. (Courtesy of the Picture Collection, the Branch Libraries, New York Public Library.)

foundation had been laid. The proofs of the side elevations and the drawing of the front elevation were also of some help in visualizing the entire structure. Yet what was missing still seemed so colossal that it was impossible to soar mentally to such heights.

However, now that the Boisserées' work is approaching completion, and illustrations and commentary will be available, the true art lover will have an opportunity, though he may live far away, to convince himself completely that the Cologne Cathedral represents the pinnacle of this architectural style. Should he some day visit the wondrous site, he will no longer succumb to his own particular feelings, to vague prejudice or even outright aversion. As an informed insider, an initiate, the visitor will be able to reflect on what is before him and substitute in his thoughts what is missing. I, at least, felt fortunate after fifty years of study to have reached this level of clarity through the effort of patriotic, imaginative, diligent and indefatigable young men.

It is quite natural that in resuming my studies of German architecture of the twelfth century my earlier admiration for the Strasbourg Cathedral often came to mind, as did the essay I wrote in 1773, the expression of my initial enthusiasm. On re-reading it I was pleased to discover that I had no cause to be ashamed, for I had been intuitively aware of the inner proportions of the whole, had grasped the natural evolvement of the ornamentations from this whole, and had concluded after lengthy and repeated observation that the single tower, although of sufficient height, was nonetheless unfinished. All this corresponded well with my friends' recent views as well as with my own. If the essay is somewhat rhapsodically rambling, that is perhaps excusable when one tries to express the inexpressible.

We will have occasion to return to this subject often. We conclude our present discussion by expressing our gratitude to those who did the painstaking preliminary work: Mr. Moller for his interpretative remarks on the engravings in question, and Mr. Büsching⁹ for his 'Introduction to the History of Early German Architecture.' As another welcome resource I now have on hand the expert treatise written by Mr. Sulpiz Boisserée as introduction and commentary to the engravings.

Meanwhile, we wish a reprint of that aforementioned early essay of mine might soon appear; it would serve as a striking illustration of the difference between the first budding and the ripe fruit.

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