

THE CLASSICAL ORDERS OF ARCHITECTURE: LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS

After being out of print for almost 50 years, one of history's most important collections of plates on classical architecture has been reissued in a new, expanded edition.

It's an entire design education in 272 pages.

PARALLEL OF THE CLASSICAL ORDERS OF ARCHITECTURE

by Johann Matthaus von Mauch and Charles Pierre Joseph Normand
compiled and edited with a new introduction by Donald M. Rattner; Institute
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It's always a happy event when an important volume that has been "dead" for half a century rises phoenix-like from the ashes of vanished books. Such is the case with Normand's *Parallel of the Classical Orders*, which many believe contain the finest assembly of drawings of the classical orders ever created. The precursor of the present volume first appeared in a French edition by Charles Normand in 1819; Johann Matthaus von Mauch brought out an expanded edition in Berlin in 1855. Both editions went through numerous re-editions, re-collations, and reprintings, eventually going out of print in the 1950s as interest in the classical tradition dwindled.

This new edition, assembled and re-edited under the aegis of the Institute for the Study of Classical Architecture, features a suite of 100 plates selected from the best of the earlier editions of Normand and Mauch. The book also contains a new introduction by Donald M. Rattner, a practicing architect and one of the first designers of this generation to turn to the classical tradition as inspiration for contemporary work. Among the many issues he illuminates in clear, penetrating prose, Rattner explains why any architect or designer seeking to work in a traditional manner today needs a detailed understanding of the orders.

The "Parallel" is a graphical convention for a side-by-side comparative presentation of the classical orders first developed in the architectural literature of the Renaissance. The earliest complete development of the "Parallel" occurs in 1537: Book IV of Sebastiano Serlio's treatise *Architettura*, in which the author presents the five canonical orders on a single plate and in a proportional progression from left to right. The idea of graphically comparing the different species of orders was expanded by later writers to form the subject of entire volumes.

Ironically, the existence of books with plates of the canonical orders with measured and proportional drawings has long been used by opponents of classicism to denounce the entire classical tradition as "copying" and "just a set of formulas." That criticism betrays a lack of understanding of the true classical tradition. Classical designers, especially the ancients, rarely — if ever — "copied." Rather, they used the models from the past as a starting point for their own ideas. While honoring precedent, classical designers have always evolved and interpreted and designed anew for current conditions. The models of the new generation then become the departure points for succeeding generations. This evolutionary process was most eloquently described by Thomas Gordon Smith in his book: *Classical Architecture: Rule & Invention* (Gibbs Smith, 1988).

As Rattner points out in his Introduction, it was the Renaissance architect Vignola who unwittingly caused much of the opprobrium that has been heaped on classicism by architects of the 20th century. In an effort to make the classical orders easier for novice designers and builders, Vignola simplified each of the canonical orders by introducing a fixed set of ratios for each element within each order. Vignola declared that these ratios were valid for every type of building, regardless of size or purpose. Of course, when Vignola's formulas were later compared against the ancient monuments, it was found that most did not adhere to the rigid Vignolan ratios. Scholars who had hoped to confirm the simplicity and order inherent in Vignola's formulas then attributed these "irregularities" to poor workmanship and sloppy design, rather than the intentional practice of the ancients to adapt and re-interpret the orders to suit a specific building on a specific site.

The process of design inventiveness springing from modifications of previous models (or "rules") is shown through careful examination of the 100 elegantly precise plates and the commentary that accompanies them. For example, the notes attached to Plate 46 (see caption on illustration) show that the editors of the Normand volume gave the Renaissance architect Scamozzi less than a passing grade for his adaptation of the Ionic order from the Temple of Saturn. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of this new volume is the critical analysis that accompanies each plate. The notes are a compilation of the most useful insights from the various Normand and Mauch editions, collated and — in some cases — enriched by Rattner. Careful analysis of the notes to the plates is a design education in itself.

Rattner, one of the country's most literate exponents of the classical tradition, uses the introduction as a forum to help fellow design practitioners understand the full meaning and significance of the orders. The vast majority of architects and interior designers in practice today were never taught the principles of classical design in their formal education. By presenting the plates in Normand as a design tool, Rattner clearly hopes to start filling the educational *lacunae* that afflict so many of us.

Why study the orders? Rattner's response is most persuasive to this reviewer: "To examine and discuss the contents of the *Parallel*, however, is to discover that the orders are far more than elements of striking appearance, and that they signify far more than one possible set of solutions to the issues of composing with column and superstructure. In fact, by containing within their

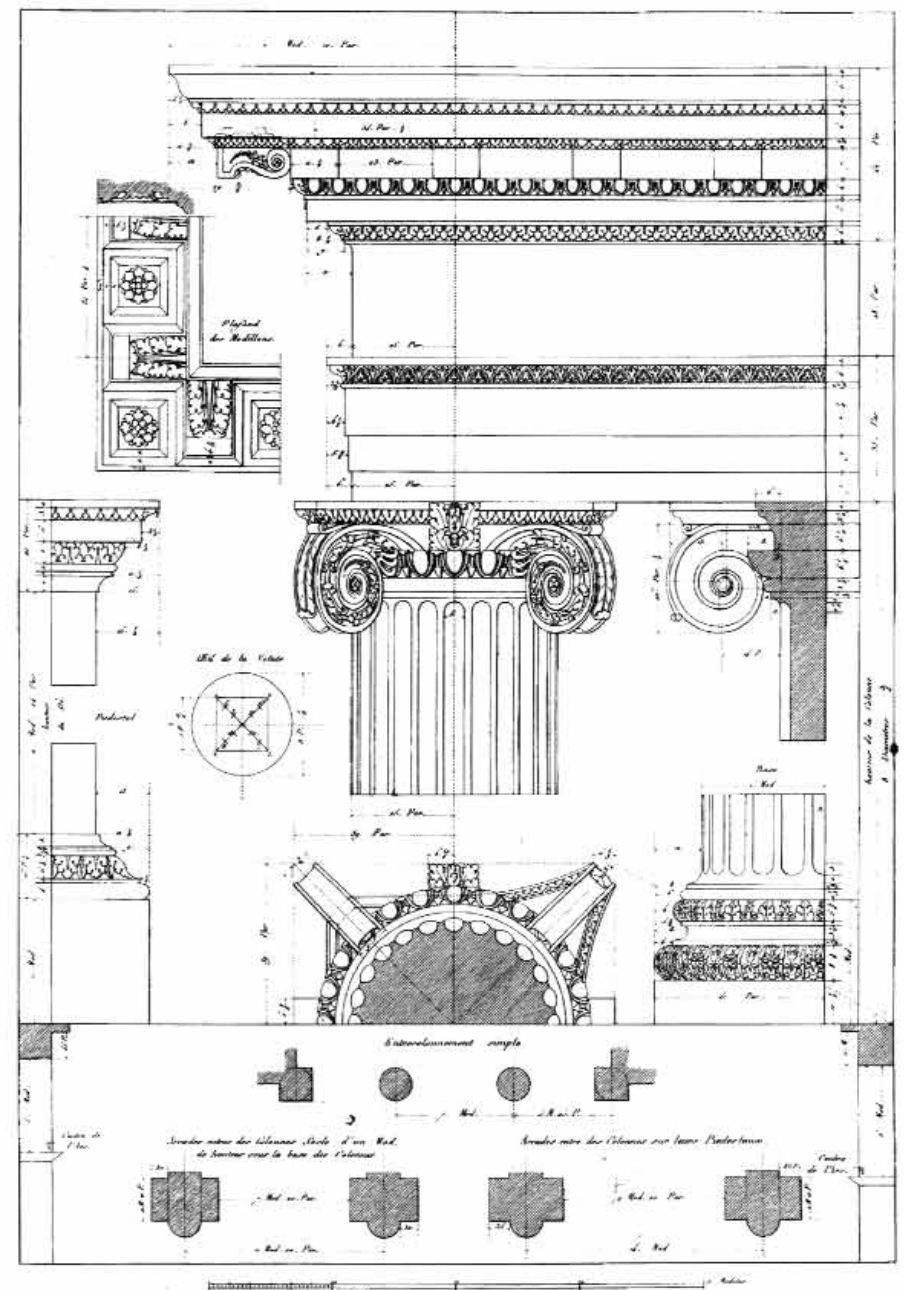


Plate 46 of the new edition of Normand's *Parallel* shows the details of an Ionic Order created by the Renaissance architect Scamozzi, a pupil of Andrea Palladio. However, the commentary on this plate gives this Ionic variation less than a rave review: "Like Palladio, Scamozzi uses modillions here, as well as a dentil member, probably an imitation of the cornice from the Temple of Saturn. The modillions are peculiarly decorated on the sides, where they are always in shadow and not plainly seen. As at the Temple of Saturn, the column capital has four corner volutes without connections at the top but springing out in the same manner as we see on the degenerate Corinthian capital of the Arch of Titus (plate 80). In addition to this, when we consider the floral swag that Scamozzi so cheerfully hung from the eyes of the volutes (which has been omitted in our plate), we are impressed that this order lacks the necessary earnestness of stone construction."

outlines nearly all the essential forms and principles that define the classical mode, a system of meaning is established in the orders from which all aspects of classical design may be learned. Without the orders, classical architecture does not exist; without a knowledge of them, classical architecture cannot be understood. In studying the orders, we come to understand the elements, techniques, and significance of the classical mode on every conceivable scale and dimension — from detail to building to urban ensemble."

Rattner's introduction also illuminates the "Ancient vs. Modern" controversies that have erupted from time to time among the proponents of classicism. The adherents to the "Ancient" camp contend that all wisdom and design virtue are to be found in the work of the ancients, and completely dismiss the value of any work after 400 A.D. This point of view was demonstrated in the 1872 edition of Mauch, which completely eliminated all plates of work from the Renaissance and thereafter. While clearly a fan of the ancient Greek models, Rattner admits to the possibility of brilliant new work — and brings back the Renaissance and Post-Renaissance plates that were omitted from the 1872 Mauch. And, as a final tip of the hat to the "Modern" school, an Appendix to this new volume includes a 16-page portfolio of new work by architects working with the classical vocabulary.

Regardless of the style in which a designer works, careful study of the plates and the commentary in this volume cannot help but increase one's refinement of eye and appreciation for subtlety of detail. It is a master work... and belongs in the library of anyone who designs, or appreciates, architecture. — Clem Labine