

The Northern Renaissance

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Preface

It used to be believed that the renaissance was a clearly defined phenomenon, both thematically and chronologically. Much of that sharpness of perception is now recognised to have been false, but the Renaissance itself was real enough. An interest in classical antiquity was not new, but the willingness to take that antiquity on its own terms, and to value it for itself rather than to see it as an imperfect prelude to the Christian revelation, was unprecedented. This novel intellectual approach was reflected, not only in historiography and philosophy, but in a whole range of visual arts; painting, sculpture, architecture. It generated a new and critical approach to textual analysis, a preoccupation with linguistic accuracy, and above all a curiosity about human identity, both collective and individual. Only a very small number of Renaissance scholars or artists ceased to be practising Christians, and fewer still admitted it. But they set their classical insights alongside their Christian heritage, often with no obvious sense of incongruity. This was facilitated by the fact that their intellectual curiosity, although intense, was highly circumscribed. With very few exceptions they failed to emancipate themselves from the concept of authority, merely setting their classical authors alongside (or in some cases above) the fathers and doctors of the church to whom their predecessors had looked for centuries. Curiosity about the material world was eclectic, and there was little attempt at systematic observation, let alone the notion of experimental verification. Generally speaking, the Renaissance was not a scientific movement, although some of its consequences were to lead in that direction in due course.

The Renaissance originated in Italy, for a variety of reasons; a closer sense of identity with the Roman past; physical proximity to the decaying Empire of the Greeks; free wealth generated by commerce; and a fragmented political and social structure that offered a range of opportunities to the able and ambitious. In the north hardly any of these favourable circumstances were replicated, except to some extent in the Low Countries. Here the Renaissance succeeded, as Christianity had succeeded before, by converting the courts of kings and princes. Northern humanism was less emancipated from the church, and much of its art and architecture was derivative. However, in Germany and the Low Countries, and to a lesser extent in France and England, intellectual curiosity helped to stimulate a theological revolution, which was quickly to become of equal significance. By concentrating on the study of scripture, and the explanation of the ways of God to man, northern humanists extended their range (quite unintentionally) to embrace new systems of causality which eventually became the scientific revolution.

The collection of small studies set out here is not in any sense original, and breaks no new ground. It is intended to stimulate thought, and to provide an introduction to that distinctive phenomenon which is usually called the Northern Renaissance. Various themes and approaches are explored, sometimes very briefly and perfunctorily. No one should regard these essays as a complete statement of what the Northern Renaissance was, but they should provide some idea of its parameters.

10: The Architecture of the Northern Renaissance

In Italy by the mid-fifteenth century renaissance taste had produced a whole theory and practice of architecture, based partly upon scholarly and artistic appreciation of renaissance motifs (such as the classical 'orders') and partly upon a sturdy Romanesque tradition. Italian architecture had never been thoroughly 'gothicised', and princely and ecclesiastical patrons were quick to appreciate the application of the new artistic rules to building. The result was beautifully proportioned masterpieces, such as the Ducal palace at Urbino. Italian architecture continued to be dominated by great artists, such as Michaelangelo, Bramante and Raphael, until well into the sixteenth century, and one of the results (one suspects) is that many of their buildings were much more beautiful to look at than they were convenient to use. Perhaps it was partly for this reason that Renaissance styles advanced only very slowly in northern Europe. In Germany, the Netherlands, England and Northern France, not only was the gothic style indigenous and deeply entrenched, but the design of buildings was dominated by master masons and other craftsmen who were not particularly open to literary and artistic influences. Moreover, some of the most noticeable features of Italian architecture (open loggias, for example) were not appropriate to northern climates. Consequently the first, and for a long time the only, impact of the Renaissance on northern building came in the form of superficial ornamentation - classical medallions and porticos stuck on the outside of otherwise gothic buildings.

The main 'bridge' from Italy to the north was France, and it was Francis I's great chateaux of Chambord and Fontainebleau which formed the models and inspiration for the aristocratic and princely patrons of England, Flanders and Brabant. The Netherlands had a particularly well developed native tradition, the so-called Brabant gothic, and it was not until the second decade of the sixteenth century that even superficial classical ornamentation began to appear, as on the choir screen of Utrecht cathedral, built in 1519 and long since destroyed. The first Renaissance building in the Netherlands appears to have been the palace at Breda, built for Count Henry of Nassau-Breda, and commenced in 1536. This building was altered out of all recognition in the nineteenth century, but artistic impressions of it survive. The architect was an Italian resident in Antwerp, Thomas Vincidor, who is described in the records as a painter. A second Italian, Alexander Pasqualini, is also known to have been active at the same time, although the only piece of his work known to survive is the church tower at Ijsselstein near Utrecht; he later became the court architect to Duke William V of nearby Julich-Cleve. Thereafter most of the known architects are Netherlanders, operating in their own adaptation of the Italian style. In 1546 Wilhelm Van Noort designed a new Town Hall for Utrecht, which does not survive, but which seems to have consisted of a renaissance stone front, behind which lurked a normal late gothic building. Some craftsmen also designed in a mixture of gothic and Renaissance idioms, such as Herman von Herregrave, who built a new Town Hall for Nijmegen in 1554. One of the reasons for the slowness with which renaissance styles advanced in The Netherlands was the absence of a Royal Court. Apart from a handful of great aristocrats the main patrons were the municipalities, merchant companies, and individual merchants, who tended to be conservative in their tastes. This was true even in the great cultural centre of Antwerp, and it was not until the 1560s that the exceptionally talented artist Cornelius Floris de Vriendt was commissioned to rebuild the Town Hall. The result was the first great monument in the Netherlands Renaissance style. The rest of the sixteenth century produced little more except on a purely domestic scale, such as the so-called 'House of Charles V' at Zwolle, built in 1571, because of the revolt. Beginning with the Compromise of 1566, and the consequent repression by Alva between 1567 and 1572, a civil war developed thereafter which lasted down to 1609. It was not, therefore, until the seventeenth century that large scale building began again in the Netherlands, and then the most important patrons were to be the reformed church and the Princely (soon to be royal) house of Orange-Nassau. Nothing could be more purely Renaissance in style than the Mauritshuis at the Hague, or the Royal Palace in Amsterdam (1633 and 1648).

In England, of course, architectural development suffered no such disruption until the civil war, and the pace was somewhat faster, but not very much. Some of the reasons were the same - the dominance of masons over artists, the toughness of the indigenous style (perpendicular), and the nature of the climate.

England did have, however, a creative and energetic royal court under Henry VIII, when the king began to interest himself in building. Apart from bringing in Torrigiano and several followers to design his father's tomb, Henry did little in this line until the 1530s; the Italian and other artists were mostly employed on purely decorative work, and on the designing of scenery for masques and pageants. It was Wolsey who was the great builder of the second and third decades of the century, and it was not until Wolsey presented the king with Hampton Court in 1525 that the king began to get interested in such projects. Wolsey had built mainly in flattened, rather squared-off secular version of perpendicular which was characteristic of late-fifteenth century college and monastic building. It was an extremely useful, practical style, but also one which lent itself to superficial adaptation; and on Wolsey's buildings, as in the Netherlands, Renaissance ornamental motifs began to appear. The king also acquired York Place from Wolsey at the time of his fall, in 1529, and renamed it the Palace of Whitehall. Between 1530 and 1536 Henry did a good deal of building, both at Hampton court and at Whitehall, mostly in the same basically gothic style - for example the banqueting hall. It was not until he began work on Nonsuch in 1538 that Henry really started to experiment with a renaissance style.

Nonsuch was not completed in Henry's lifetime, and was pulled down in the late seventeenth century, but we have several descriptions of it, and at least two pictorial representations. These, by Hofnaegel and Dankerts show two very different aspects, but they are clearly the same building, and it is the former which shows it as Henry wished it to be seen. This is very different from Hampton Court, and the model is clearly Chambord. Much of the interior of the two courtyards seems to have been built in a vernacular half-timbered style, but with a wealth of Renaissance ornamentation. Henry VIII was not only important as a leader of fashion, he also created the institution through which successive English monarchs patronised artists and architects, masons and engineers.

The Surveyor, the Comptroller and the Clerk of these Works were always the most talented professionals who could be found, and it was they who designed and built, as well as, repairing, royal residences, public buildings and fortifications. Just as taste made Henry VIII a builder of palaces, necessity made him a builder of fortifications - particularly the fear of invasion which followed the papal condemnation of 1536. Over the next ten years dozens of castles and forts were built, from Berwick to the Solent, in accordance with the modern designs dictated by the rapid development of heavy artillery. The old upright walls, however thick, were just sitting targets, and squat bastions now took their place, as at Deal and Walmer on the south coast. The model for these designs was French, and they represented a great advance on anything which England had seen before.

Henry's subjects were also large scale builders, particularly after the religious houses began to come into their possession, increasing both their means and their ambitions. However, they mostly built on the Tudor Gothic model, with just occasional touches of renaissance detail, as in the gatehouse windows at Hengrave Hall. No Tudor monarch after Henry was a great builder, and the leadership of fashion after 1547 fell to men like Sir William Sharrington who rebuilt Lacock Abbey between 1540 and 1549, and Sir John Thynne, who built Somerset House in the Strand for the Lord Protector in 1547. Somerset House was the first building of any substance conceived and executed entirely in a Renaissance mode, and was to be immensely influential. The Duke of Northumberland was also a patron of the new style, but this is less obvious in his buildings than in his patronage of John Shute, who travelled to Italy in the early 1550s specifically to study Italian styles, and who published *The First and Chief Grounds of Architecture* in 1563. The Elizabethans built exuberantly in a great variety of styles (some of them very eccentric), but followed the lead of pioneers like Thynne (Longleat, Wollaton) Lord Burghley (Theobalds, Burghley House) and the Earl of Derby (Hardwick Hall, designed by Robert Smythson). Even at the end of the century, however, many great houses still retained elements of the earlier Tudor Gothic, and it was left to Inigo Jones in the early seventeenth century to build in a purely Italianate renaissance style (Queen's house, Greenwich). Elizabeth herself made only one major contribution to the subject under discussion; in the early part of her reign she took over and completed a Marian project for the fortification of Berwick, employing not French but Italian engineers. The result, with its low, earth covered ramparts and sophisticated artillery

placings, was to remain unique in Britain, and is an early example of a style later taken over and perfected by the Frenchman, Vauban, serving Louis XIV.

The vernacular style, both in England and The Netherlands, was slow to respond to changes of fashion. Small manor houses and yeomen's dwellings in brick and stone were still being built to essentially medieval designs in the early seventeenth century, and the half timbered style of the town houses of Chester or Shrewsbury altered little between the fifteenth century and the reign of James 1. The so-called 'Paul Pindar's house' in Bishopsgate (1624) shows a transitional design, but it was not until after the middle of the century that square-fronted, brick built town houses began to be common - helped in London by the rebuilding which followed the fire of 1666.