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Review of Michael Gnehm and Sonja Hildebrand (eds.), *Architectural History and Globalized Knowledge: Gottfried Semper in London* / Michael Gnehm, Sonja Hildebrand, and Dieter Weidmann (eds.), *Gottfried Semper: London Writings 1850–1855*

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MICHAEL GNEHM and SONJA HILDEBRAND (eds.), *Architectural History and Globalized Knowledge: Gottfried Semper in London* (Mendrisio: Mendrisio Academy Press / gta Verlag, 2021), 215 pp. ISBN 978 3 856 76409 8. €35.00

MICHAEL GNEHM, SONJA HILDEBRAND, and DIETER WEIDMANN (eds.), *Gottfried Semper: London Writings 1850–1855* (Zurich: gta Verlag, 2021), xliii + 591 pp. ISBN 978 3 85676 403 6. €79.00

Born on 29 November 1803 in Altona, Gottfried Semper was one of the most important architects and theorists of art and architecture of nineteenth-century Europe. His professional activity might be divided into four periods: Dresden between 1834 and 1849, where he was professor of architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts; London between 1850 and 1855, where he worked on the Great Exhibition of 1851 and its successor, the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, and was appointed in 1852 as professor of ornamental art at the newly founded Department of Practical Art under the direction of Henry Cole; Zurich between 1855 and 1871, where he took the chair of architecture at the Federal Polytechnic School (*Polytechnikum*); and a later period working on projects in Vienna lasting until his death in 1879 in Rome.

Semper's architectural output in the German-speaking world was impressive. In Dresden it included the art gallery completing the Zwinger complex, the Hoftheater (later replaced after fire by today's Semperoper), a synagogue, and numerous other prominent buildings. In Zurich, Semper designed the *Polytechnikum* building that still houses the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH). In Vienna, he played a leading part in the transformation of the city and the creation of the new Ringstraße, with plans for a museum and cultural quarter including the Kunsthistorisches and the Naturhistorisches Museum and the Burgtheater. As Sonja Hildebrand and Michael Gnehm bravely claim in their introduction to *Architectural History and Globalized Knowledge*, 'No other architect in the nineteenth century created buildings that continue to shape the cityscape today in so many different places which at the same time represented stages in his life' (p. 8).

The two volumes reviewed here deal with Semper's London period. In Britain, his architectural building work was much more limited.

A great deal of insight is provided into the reasons for this. Yet as the authors argue, the London period was a particularly significant one. Both works testify to the importance of Semper's time there in terms of his theoretical development and publications. For alongside his architectural output Semper was a leading participant in contemporary discussions about art and design history and aesthetics. The authors reveal Semper's encounter with modern, industrializing Britain as crucial to the evolution of his thinking and subsequent architectural and written output. And even without major architectural commissions, Semper left his mark in the United Kingdom.

Both volumes arise out of the project 'Architecture and the Globalization of Knowledge in the 19th Century: Gottfried Semper and the Discipline of Architectural History'. Funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the research involved collaboration between the Institute for the History and Theory of Art and Architecture at the Università della Svizzera italiana and the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture at ETH Zurich. Symptomatic of well-funded and well-organized research, both volumes are notable for their high-quality presentation. Despite the challenges of language (Semper worked in German, English, and French) and orthography, the editors and authors have achieved a high degree of precision.

As Sonja Hildebrand and Michael Gnehm state in *Architectural History and Globalized Knowledge*, 'With the exception of Paris, none of the many places where Semper lived – neither Hamburg nor Dresden, Zurich nor Vienna – had as great an influence on his thought as London' (p. 9). Like countless other Germanic and European visitors to mid-Victorian Britain, Semper was fascinated both by the process of modernization and the international and imperial culture he encountered. Exiled from reactionary Saxony in 1849, he was forced to engage with this new environment not just intellectually, but also professionally. The success or failure of his engagement outlined here reveals much about Semper himself, as well as the wider context of British–German and European cultural developments.

The first volume under review is an edited collection of essays exploring Semper's experiences and work in London. Murray Fraser usefully provides an opening frame of reference for understanding the course of Semper's career while in London. He points to the high

standing of German art and architecture in Britain from at least the 1830s, particularly among art reformers. Semper's early work on classical architecture and polychromy—the use of colour on Greek and Roman sculpture—was already known. Semper also visited Britain in 1838 as part of his preparatory research for the Hoftheater in Dresden and met Thomas Leverton Donaldson, a founder member of the Royal Institute of British Architects, proponent of classicism, and member of the committee to explore polychromy in connection with the Elgin Marbles. Donaldson would become a lifelong friend. The rising number of British visitors to German capitals to admire new museums and buildings, meanwhile, meant Semper's Hoftheater and other Dresden projects attracted attention.

Fraser also sets the thematic tone by pointing to the significance to Semper's work of London's global character and, in particular, his interaction with the Great Exhibition of 1851. Commissioned by Henry Cole to arrange colonial displays there, Fraser shows how Semper consequently reflected in his writings on the evolution of architecture, the relevance of historical styles—including polychromy—in modern architectural settings, and universal principles of design and decorative art. Such reflection facilitated Semper's appointment under Cole at the Department of Practical Art, where he taught and researched for almost two years and enjoyed a professional basis for numerous further projects. Also highlighted by Fraser, not re-examined in this volume, and certainly noteworthy here are Semper's design work for the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich and the astounding commission by Prince Albert in 1855 of a design for the layout of the new South Kensington estate.

Claudio Leoni provides an in-depth explanation of Semper's work on the Canadian court at the Great Exhibition, the image of which, he judges, 'has had an almost iconic status in architectural discourse, illustrating the beginning of material culture in mid-nineteenth-century architectural theory' (p. 39). Following what seems a pattern of Semper's life, the mission soon crept, as it were, to include the displays of Turkey, Sweden, Denmark, and the Cape of Good Hope. Leoni notes the united Canadian display's political significance pre-confederation. He provides striking detail on the exhibits—including a Canadian fire-engine 'of unusually large proportions, and remarkably

elegant design and workmanship', trialled on the Serpentine, and 'capable of throwing two streams of water 156 feet high, or a single stream of 210 feet high' (p. 43). Leoni also explains how the Canadian court expressed Semper's evolving thought regarding the relationship of architect to decorator, the technique and meaning of display, and museology.

In an initially eyebrow-raising but ultimately rewarding chapter, Philip Ursprung imagines a round-table discussion including Semper, his contemporary and co-exile Karl Marx, Crystal Palace architect Joseph Paxton, and Herman Melville. Ursprung is perhaps over-candid in admitting to being no expert on Semper and having done no archival research for the chapter. Involvement with the project and access to its findings proves enough to enable valuable insights regarding the Crystal Palace and the participants' engagement with themes of the industrialization and commercialization of architecture, the decoration of modern buildings, and gigantism. Semper's qualified approach to modern architecture is clarified by comparison with Paxton. The ambivalence generated in many contemporaries by such patently modernist buildings as the Crystal Palace is conveyed. Ursprung reiterates the unique opportunity the exhibition provided for Semper:

with this event and its enormous impact on visual culture, the issue of representation moved to the centre stage in architecture, economy, science, and culture in general. For a brief moment, the whole scale of society, economy, art, and science was made visible simultaneously at a single level of representation, in one space. Such a concurrence of factors had never arisen before, and it was never again repeated (p. 61).

Mari Hvattum follows with a chapter devoted to one of Semper's most discussed commissions: the Duke of Wellington's funeral car, designed during his time at the Department of Practical Art. Hvattum notes Semper's collaboration on the car with both Cole and Richard Redgrave and consequent debates about ultimate responsibility. She emphasizes the contemporary significance of the Duke of Wellington's funeral in 1852 and, drawing on contemporary media, shows the intense public discussion of the car's meaning. Central to

the chapter — as to Semper — is the question of how far historical precedent should be applied to modern design. Among the many such precedents Semper considered, it is pleasing to this reviewer to be directed towards Andrea Mantegna's *Triumphs of Caesar*, then as today located at Hampton Court Palace. Ultimately, however, the funeral car demonstrated the dangers of weighing down modern design with history. Paxton's Crystal Palace managed to be both functional and aesthetically pleasing. Semper's funeral car was, Hvattum judges, marked by its 'ponderous monumentality' (p. 80). In the public mind it was upstaged by the simple pathos of Wellington's riderless horse, boots hanging from the saddle.

The main focus of Dieter Weidmann's chapter is Semper's use of English, an unusual subject focus but one that provides insights and entertaining detail, and also allows reflection on challenges to acclimatization faced by migrants. Weidmann describes Semper's travels before his arrival in Britain. He studied in Paris and travelled widely, including in France, Italy, Sicily, and Greece. Weidmann reminds us of the continuing French influence in Semper's life, linguistically and intellectually. Using lists of his grammar books drawn from customs records and Semper's own translation exercises, gathered as part of the research project, Weidmann traces how Semper learned English. It remained cumbersome, despite his many public duties. Semper jumbled French, German, and English to create words such as 'barches', 'fricture', 'sutt', and 'didges' (p. 96). Cole would describe Semper's draft lectures diplomatically as 'suggestive' (p. 91). The importance of Semper's difficulties with English to his removal to Zurich is left open.

In her chapter on Semper and curvilinearity, Sonja Hildebrand demonstrates how Semper, drawing on German Romantic precedents, and building on his own interest in mathematics and natural science, engaged with contemporary British discussions on the nature and laws of beauty and the problem of perception. With the help of call slips Semper used during his research at the British Museum Library, Hildebrand identifies Semper's interaction with theorists including Francis Penrose, James Fergusson, and David Ramsay Hay. She successfully demonstrates the importance of this to Semper's own work on the interrelationship of form and function, an immediate

illustration of which was his work on the shape of Greek slingshots and Prussian musket balls.

Elena Chestnova examines Semper's lectures at the Department of Practical Art to trace the development of his ideas regarding decoration and design. Responsible at the outset for metalwork design, his brief expanded quickly to decorative arts more widely and especially pottery. At Cole's suggestion, Semper visited Herbert Minton's factory at Stoke. Drawing on this and the work of writers including Karl Otfried Müller, Georges Cuvier, and the director of the Sèvres porcelain manufactory Alexandre Brongniart, Semper developed further his theories regarding national differences of ornamentation. He considered function and spirit as influences on ornamentation, producing thereby a hierarchy of material culture. Like others in the art reform movement, he identified a deterioration in decorative art connected with mechanization and shared their admiration for non-European design.

Kate Nichols looks at Semper's work for the Crystal Palace at Sydenham. Semper argued for an architectural history based on divisions of space, including through hung textiles. It was appropriate, then, that his (limited) practical contribution there was the design of the mixed textile court. Yet as Nichols shows, he had a far more important impact indirectly. Both Semper and Owen Jones had been interested in Greek sculpture and polychromy since the 1830s. Jones, influenced by Semper, displayed plaster casts of Greek art in colour. Nichols effectively and entertainingly conveys the outrage caused. She also argues that Semper's writings were 'foundational to what was to become one of the lasting, and most controversial, aspects of the Sydenham Palace: its display of brightly painted copies of the Parthenon frieze' (p. 144).

Semper's views on textiles lead into Caroline van Eck's chapter: the architect's anthropological interest in body art among indigenous peoples in such things as tattoos and masks. A central concern was its representational function. Van Eck shows how Semper's thought built on a century or more of anthropological interest, but also how, by tracing degrees of representation and symbolism, he 'unfolds a view of the nature of architecture, its origins, the laws that govern its development, and its aesthetics that is completely new' (p. 173). Beat Wyss

continues the discussion of Semper's textile paradigm and its facilitation of an evolutionary history of architecture. In this respect, Wyss shows, Semper belonged to a broad intellectual concern with evolution predating Darwin.

The concluding chapter by Alina Payne appropriately seeks to summarize Semper's significance. Central, she argues, was his ability to combine disciplines and develop global theories of art and architecture. Semper's universalism was particularly triggered by the Great Exhibition. This 'enormous *Handelsraum*', as Payne puts it, was a 'Humboldtian playground of cultural simultaneities and comparisons . . . it was a visual display of things compared to each other. And comparative aesthetics comes straight out of it' (p. 205). Semper's interdisciplinary work fed back into disciplinary discourse and, even if not always accepted, was deeply influential:

What Semper had done was to reinterpret the Great Exhibition, as a mentality-changing event, into a methodology for analysis—of art, architecture, crafts, and the relation of man to the products of mind and hands, of labour and memory. He laid the foundations of a first global art history, as well as providing a site for the globalization of knowledge—meaning not only that he engaged with territorial geography but also with disciplinary territories, with a broad geography of disciplines (pp. 207–8).

The second volume under review, *Gottfried Semper: London Writings 1850–1855*, presents an extensive collection of Semper's works written in London but hitherto unpublished. Sections include: materials Semper produced on arrival and as he attempted to set up a private school of architecture; letters, articles, and notes written in connection with the Great Exhibition; essays on polychromy; works written in connection with his duties as professor at the Department of Practical Art—including his report on the arms at Windsor Castle; his lectures during this time; and other supplementary texts, some of which are not by Semper, but relate directly to his career.

The editors provide a highly valuable general introduction offering contextual detail regarding Semper's life before Dresden, his connections and work in France, his involvement with the revolutions of 1848–9, and his aborted intention to emigrate to the USA. They point

to his time in Rome and acquaintances there, including Emil Braun, who was crucial in his decision to come to Britain. They allude to Semper's connections to other Germanic migrants in London, reveal the significance of his work on polychromy, and explain his transfer to the Department of Practical Art. His move to Switzerland is also rationalized under the heading 'The Will to Architecture' (p. xxviii) as a desire to return to architectural practice that had been stymied in Britain.

The general introduction begins a hierarchy of analysis. After the main documents comes an 'Apparatus' containing an introduction to each section, an explanatory note on separate documents, multiple variants of the documents, and then references to other versions of documents published elsewhere. This meticulous, scientific structure is complex. Yet here the excellent production work comes to our assistance: sections are colour coded. There are even useful bookmarks in corresponding tones. More importantly, the volume allows access not just to Semper's curious orthography, but also to the way his ideas gestated and evolved. In astounding detail the editors record Semper's own emendations to documents. Appendices provide extensive bibliographies of Semper's writings, works used by Semper, and secondary literature. This impressive rigour makes the volume a central and lasting reference work.

Taking the two volumes together, the research team's centre of gravity in art and architectural history means some subjects demand further consideration. Semper's politics and the significance of his participation in the revolution in Dresden remain opaque. Despite intermittent mention of his siblings, wife, and children, the roles, demands, and practicalities of his extensive family are largely unaddressed. More acknowledgement is needed of the broad Victorian interest in Germanic culture that predated and accompanied Semper. Murray Fraser makes mention of this, but the British-German cultural hinterland was far more extensive than is conveyed. The editors and authors point to Semper's often close connections to other German migrants, including Lothar Bucher, Julius Faucher, Gottfried Kinkel, and William Siemens, and provide much information useful to research in this area. The inclusion of Bucher's 'London' article is particularly insightful. Yet greater analytical focus on this area is possibly required.

The authors provide a wealth of detail regarding Semper's networks and make mention of his closeness to figures such as William Siemens and fellow Dresden revolutionary Richard Wagner. Again, one is left wanting more information. Perhaps this is to be viewed as one of the values of the project.

Across both volumes, Prince Albert, in particular, remains a vague and yet undeniable shadow, his agency at times clear, at other times implied or left to be suspected by the reader. It is almost unimaginable, even if Cole made the approach, that Albert did not know about—and give his consent to—Semper's employment at the Great Exhibition. As the *London Writings* show, Albert commissioned Semper to write for a German readership about the exhibition and to design Wellington's funeral car, and agreed to a report on the arms at Windsor. Albert's decision to ask Semper to come up with a solution for planning the South Kensington estate—and his enthusiasm for the resulting proposals—is remarkable. This is especially so considering Semper's status as a revolutionary with a death penalty for treason hanging over him in Dresden until 1863. Doubtless, ubiquitous Prussian intelligence conveyed to Berlin Semper's involvement in the exhibition. Seen in this light, Albert's sustained support for Semper was soft, yet clear and powerful liberal propaganda in the Germanic political context.

Albert, meanwhile, had also travelled to Rome and knew Emil Braun. So, too, had Ludwig Grüner, also from Dresden, a close contemporary of Semper and employed as Albert's art adviser between 1845 and 1855, though curiously not mentioned in these volumes. Semper's concern to combine historical styles with modern production chimed entirely with Albert's position and also with his moderate liberal political views. Murray Fraser notes in *Architectural History* that four years after Albert's death, 'one General Grey' (pp. 32-3) attempted to have Semper appointed as architect for the Royal Albert Hall. By this point, Grey was Victoria's private secretary. Much more may be said on all these fronts.

Together, these volumes constitute a substantial and lasting contribution to knowledge and understanding of Semper. The analysis of Semper's work during his time in London is excellent in relation to the history of art, architecture, and aesthetics. The volumes also,

however, have wider relevance for scholars of German migration, British–German cultural relations in the Victorian period, the history of exhibitions, and the art reform movement. The production of the volumes is outstanding and supports the success of the research process. Where the architectural focus means important aspects of Semper’s life and significance are downplayed or absent, the volumes are important in raising questions and encouraging further research. The extensive primary materials produced by the project have undeniable intrinsic value for future research.

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