

James Ackerman | *Origins, Imitation, Conventions*

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002

Reviewed by Michael Chapman

The latest book by the widely respected American art historian James S. Ackerman brings together a collection of recent essays spanning a diverse array of subjects and focusing primarily on Ackerman's principal interest: the Italian Renaissance. Following on from his 1991 compilation, *Distance Points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), Ackerman reveals in the preface that the focus of these latest essays is to re-examine historical narratives through a predominantly post-structuralist lens. In this respect the work deals largely with issues pertaining to perspective, and in particular the specific perspective of the critic as observer with a peculiar and individual viewpoint. In the short preface to *Distance Points* Ackerman made reference to the title,

*which refers to a point selected in constructing a Renaissance-specifically Albertian-perspective image that fixes the distance of the observer from the object. I mean it to refer in this context to the position the historian or critic takes in relation to his or her object-as it were the point of viewing* [Ackerman 1991: viii].

*Origins, Imitation, Conventions* concerns itself to a large extent with this "point of viewing" and its relationship to the traditionally objective position of the architectural historian. Ackerman draws upon the influential examples of Michel Foucault and Manfredo Tafuri, attempting to broaden the perspective of architectural history and creativity beyond a simplified linear departure from antiquity. This latest work concerns itself primarily with an understanding of the relative creative importance of artistic development and attempts to surpass the traditionally progressive depictions of the evolution of historical styles, which Ackerman himself has previously endorsed. Ackerman examines critically the relationship of academic history to specific historical eras delineating the inherent oversimplification of an ever-increasing oeuvre in scholarship that focuses primarily on the appropriation of styles, rather than their more specific creative origin or impetus.

As well as examining the theoretical perspective of the critic towards history, Ackerman's work also embraces the relative position of the artist towards antiquity. Ackerman redefines creativity as a continual manipulation of historical conventions, through the unique interpretation of the individual artist; he examines the way that this theoretical marriage between the artist and history is instrumental in shaping the way architecture is described, depicting a hiatus in the Renaissance between the relative objectivity of unadorned orthogonal drawings, and the more subjective expression of

architectural perspective, employing light and shadow to engage the observer with the picture. The preference in the Renaissance for one-point perspective, like the influence of the camera centuries later, implies a subjectivity that tends to privilege the individual observer at the expense of a more abstract understanding of overall proportion and pure mathematical harmony. This understanding invites Ackerman to critically reexamine the way that the study of architectural space has traditionally been approached.

Given this, the collection of essays that comprise *Origins, Imitation, Conventions* are part of a thoughtful and committed reassessment not only of important historical developments, but also of the intellectual function of history altogether. In the preface Ackerman describes the compilation as centering on “the tension between the authority of the past [...] and the potentially liberating gift of invention” [Ackerman 2002: viii]. This concerns itself primarily with the creative engagement between artists (and historians) and their ancestors delineating a position to art history which is not so much progressive, as interactive or exploratory. The work thus, as the title suggests, is divided into three distinct sections.

The first section (comprising the opening four essays) examines *origins*, looking at innovations in technique or style which represented a rupture rather than continuation of the past. Here significant events such as the development of perspective, the invention of photography and even the scholarly account of architectural history itself are depicted as historical moments, essentially without precedent which, in turn, have given rise to a diverse range of prevailing conventions.

In the opening chapter Ackerman demonstrates the way that Vasari, one of the earliest Renaissance art historians, provided a new theoretical impetus for architecture through his gradual formulation of art-history. By methodically grouping individuals within a larger artistic style, Vasari (and others) provided a framework for a historical interpretation of art, defined primarily by its relationship to nature.

The subsequent chapter examines genealogically the way in which basic principles of orthographic communication emerged almost instantaneously in the thirteenth-century plans for Reims cathedral. This important conceptual advancement was often overlooked by the architects of the Renaissance who preferred the principles of perspective over the two-dimensional abstraction of plan and section. Despite the protestations of Alberti (who tersely urges architects towards orthogonal drawings—devoid of light or shadow—leaving perspective as the exclusive domain of the painter) there was a widespread reluctance in the period towards such abstract depictions of architectural form. Ackerman, in an insightful conclusion, argues that the Renaissance fascination with pictorial form necessitates a complete spatial re-evaluation of the principles of Renaissance architecture, previously associated with strict two-dimensional proportion and mathematical rigour. Ackerman writes,

*perhaps my interpretation of Italian late medieval and Renaissance architectural representation as pictorial, in contrast to the linear emphasis of northern Gothic*

*images, could lead to an expansion of our critical perspective on Renaissance architecture* [Ackerman 2002: 61].

Later, in chapter 4, Ackerman shows how the development of photography, in a similar manner, instantly revolutionized architectural illustration by recasting its relationship to the impartial observer.

Another important historical moment depicted by Ackerman is the Renaissance reinterpretation of the Christian church (Chapter 3). Ackerman describes how the humanism of the Italian Renaissance led to a dramatic rupture with the historical model for ecclesiastical architecture, realigning itself more profoundly with ancient pagan principles. The architects of the Renaissance (Leonardo da Vinci being the most energetic) rejected the linear demarcation of space inherent to the ritualistic Medieval church (and derived from the Roman liturgy), preferring instead centrally-planned cloisters that circumvented authority by placing the individual at the centre of the spatial diagram. This allocation of space, whilst entirely inadequate for the purposes of the church, reflected Platonic geometric principles by establishing a microcosm of the Christian universe. Ackerman describes how Leonardo's exploratory sketches of space and mass, in their raw and rapid form, had already conceded the improbability of their own acceptance or realization by the clergy. The construction of the central chapel was reserved almost entirely for the private chapel or the pilgrimage and discarded for important religious monuments. Despite this, the new approach to church design represented an important historical advance, not only embodying important philosophical principles but also critically incorporating ancient architectural models with a more contemporary interpretation of individualism.

The second section of the compilation—*imitation*—gives an account of the historical dependency of many Renaissance artists in reiterating or reproducing ancient precedents in a creative and inventive manner. Ackerman examines the relationship between imitation and influence, effectively recast in the twentieth century by the forces of post-modernism and deconstructivism. Ackerman is critical of the perennial academic drive towards establishing traces of ancestry in the work of artists. This has exaggerated the need for originality and tainted many epochs with the burden of imitation giving it a derogatory and often illegitimate connotation. Ackerman argues that imitation in the Renaissance had a degree of innocence and also inevitability that was the direct result of a more liberated relationship between the artistic individual and the broader forces of culture. Ackerman writes that “[i]mitation stressed community, the solidarity that the maker of the present experiences with his ancestors and teachers-ancestors whom he engages in a contest of skill and imagination.” He continues that “[n]o major writer in the ancient or Renaissance worlds meant it to promote the sort of frozen authority we call academic” [Ackerman 2002: 137].

Having established this, Ackerman demonstrates the importance of Vitruvius as the spiritual forefather of the Renaissance and integral to almost all of the major architectural achievements of the period. Ackerman's account looks at architects such as Palladio and

Thomas Jefferson (as well as theoreticians such as Alberti and Barbaro) demonstrating their subtle but distinct reappraisal of the historical canons of Vitruvius.

A central and discursive essay is devoted to the immaculate sketches of Leonardo da Vinci, who was virtually alone in the Renaissance in his dedication to nature as a source of inspiration over and beyond previous historical precedent. As Ackerman demonstrates, many of Leonardo's later works, in particular his studies of plants and animals, are the direct result of empirical investigation, and Leonardo's objective was the emulation of nature rather than antiquity. This made his work highly original in artistic terms, but also strongly derived from ancient and medieval scientific principles. Ackerman refers earlier to the famous skull drawing, demonstrating the genius involved in its technical orchestration, but also its limited scientific rigour that inaccurately depicts a hollow spinal column.

The final section, confined to the concluding essay, looks at *conventions*. This examines the artistic language that facilitates interpretation through the repetition of accepted principles of communication. This, like many of the preceding essays, focuses on architectural drawing and the development of a distinct but characteristic language of architectural conventions, both abstract and translatable.

In isolation, each of the twelve essays in Ackerman's work provide an insightful and authoritative account of major developments in art-history and architectural communication. In unison, they represent a post-structuralist reappraisal of the specific relationship between art and history through the processes of invention, imitation and interpretation. This not only provides a broader understanding of important artistic and architectural developments but also allows a greater relevance for history through its deepening relationship to the emancipatory processes of art and architecture.

#### *About the Reviewer*

Michael Chapman is based at the University of Newcastle, Australia, and is currently completing postgraduate research on architecture and the philosophical writings of Friedrich Nietzsche.