CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TANTA MOLIS ERAT:
ON VALUING ROMAN IMPERIAL ARCHITECTURE

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1. Introduction

How can we gain access to the aesthetic criteria that ancient viewers applied to architecture? How can we know on what basis they divided the good from the bad, the beautiful from the ugly? One approach might be to use ancient literary sources which describe responses to architecture, and examine them for what they can reveal about actual appreciation of architecture in antiquity. Hardiman in this volume applies a comparable approach to Theocritus Idylls 15 and Herodas Mime 4 with regard to art appreciation when he investigates to what extent these poems about women who view sculptures and a tapestry can offer access to the ‘popular’ reception of art in antiquity.1 My approach is related, but different in one important respect. I argue that we possess a range of evidence, consisting of inscriptions, images, and texts, which might not tell us how Romans actually viewed and valued architecture, but which were supposed to encourage Roman viewers to appreciate architecture in a particular way.

In this chapter, I will investigate a selection of inscriptions, images, and texts and discuss the way in which they influence the viewer’s appreciation of a work of architecture, and what it is they encourage Roman viewers to value the most. It will emerge that our traditional understanding of

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1 Hardiman, p. 271: These two works illustrate how sculpture in general was viewed in the Hellenistic period and how this material may have been interpreted by “ordinary people”, with important nuancing remarks.
'aesthetic value' as a category based solely on beauty has to be broadened considerably if we want to understand the ways in which ancient builders wished viewers to value what they had made.

The obvious starting point for anyone interested in Roman architectural aesthetics is Vitruvius’ *De Architectura*. However, it is important to look beyond the opening of the treatise and the famous six aesthetic categories named in 1.2.1–9.² It is true that this passage has been extremely influential for the development of architectural theory from the Renaissance onwards, but it is by no means representative for the remainder of the treatise.³ A closer reading of *De Architectura* soon reveals that for Vitruvius, the value of architecture resides in far more than what we might conventionally understand as ‘aesthetic’ value, architectural beauty achieved for example though symmetry or proportion. The following passage, which appears towards the end of *De Architectura* 6 illustrates this fact (Vitr. *De arch.* 6.8.9):

Therefore the test of all building is considered in three parts: fine workmanship, magnificence, architectural composition. When a building is considered to have been magnificently executed, the expenditure will be praised, based on the power of the patron. When it has been executed carefully, the exactitude of the building supervisor will be approved. But when it has a graceful effect due to its proportions and symmetries, then the glory belongs to the architect.⁴

itaque omnium operum probationes tripertito considerantur: id est fabrili subtilitate et magnificentia et dispositione. Cum magnificenter opus perfectum aspicietur, a domini potestate inpensae laudabuntur; cum subtiliter, officinatoris probabitur exactio; cum vero venuste proportionibus et symmetriis habuerit auctoritatem, tunc fuerit gloria architecti.

In this passage, Vitruvius suggests that one should assess a building on the basis of three criteria of which only the last one (*dispositio*) relates to actual ‘aesthetic value’: a pleasant effect of the building (*venuste*), achieved *proportionibus et symmetriis*. In order to evaluate a building on the two other

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² *ordinatio, dispositio, eurythmia, symmetria, decor and distributio*. On these categories, and the problematic status of this passage within the remainder of the treatise, see e.g. Lefas 2000 with an overview of earlier bibliography.

³ Payne 1999, 35 notes the selective and skewed reception of Vitruvius’ treatise for the writers of Renaissance architectural treatises: ‘Renaissance architects [read] their own questions into it [i.e. the treatise], and [turned] it into a collection of loci, a thesaurus of issues and recommendations, that set off a pattern of use still current today. Certain passages had greater appeal ...’.

⁴ Translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.