CHAPTER 2

Medieval Vestiges in the Princely Architecture of the 15th Century

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The artistic heritage of the Middle Ages constituted a vast pool of knowledge for the artists of the Renaissance and their patrons. Local architectural traditions formed the basis on which new artistic expression and building models were founded. Raphael famously characterized medieval architecture by claiming that the origin of the pointed arch was the intertwining of two trees from the northern forests.1 His claim is an indication of how, in the 16th century, the presence of models and building styles referring back to the Middle Ages still inspired architectural discourse.2 The two ideas that constitute the starting point for this study are thus continuity and the long duration of the Middle Ages, given the suggestion of some medievalists that we should consider the 15th century as the “late Middle Ages”.3 Although it is clear that, at various times throughout the medieval millennium, particular attention was paid to

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1 He added that “though not worthless as far as origins go, it is however rather weak,” Francesco Paolo Di Teodoro, Raffaello, Baldassar Castiglione e la Lettera a Leone X, (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1994), 71.


3 On this topic, see Renato Bordone and Giuseppe Sergi, Dieci secoli di medioevo (Turin: Einaudi, 2009), x1–xIX; Ludovico Gatto, Viaggio intorno al concetto di Medioevo (Rome: Bulzoni, 1977).
classical culture – for example, when 14th-century scholars read Vitruvius, or in the rediscovery of the Roman world through the study of ancient monuments\(^4\) – only during the second half of the 15th century did a different kind of affinity with the culture of antiquity emerge.\(^5\) The differing approaches to the classical world in the medieval and Renaissance periods can best be appreciated by taking into account the more detached position in the latter, which developed into a new approach to antiquity, by then a separate and autonomous culture, which required knowledge to recover it.\(^6\)

In Italian cities, resisting innovation and at the same time mixing the old with the new were two attitudes that endured for a long time, as shown in more recent studies of 15th-century architecture.\(^7\) Resistance to novitas, owing to the weight of a “constraining” tradition, was expressed in different types of building characteristic of the 15th century: from outer walls to sanctuaries and, in particular, public palaces.\(^8\) This conservatism was also manifest in the reuse of the architectural language of the Middle Ages during the early modern period, when the persistence of the “Gothic tradition” became explicit not only in how pre-existing buildings were completed – owing to understandable reasons of concinnitas – but also in the construction of buildings ex novo.\(^9\)


\(^6\) Salvatore Settis has suggested a reading of the relationship between antiquity and the Middle Ages through the concepts of continuity, distance and knowledge, see Salvatore Settis, “Continuità, distanza, conoscenza. Tre usi dell’antico”, in *Memoria dell’Antico nell’arte italiana. III. Dalla tradizione all’archeologia*, ed. Salvatore Settis (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), 413–486.


\(^8\) Elena Svalduz, “Riflessioni a margine”, in *Il Rinascimento italiano e l’Europa. Luoghi, spazi e architettura*, eds. Donatella Calabi and Elena Svalduz (Vicenza: Angelo Colla editore, 2010), xxiii–xxx.