Aspects of Genevois architecture from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century

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1000 Years of Swiss Art

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Swiss Art

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Aspects of Genevois Architecture from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century

The Part Played by Foreigners – between Repression and Status

Ever since the publication of the Recueil de Renseignements sur les beaux arts à Genève (Collected Information on the Fine Arts in Geneva, 1845–1849), a precursory work by mayor and connoisseur Jean-Jacques Rigaud, historians have all too often painted Geneva as a city devoid of major art; they have almost always put the blame on Calvin and the measures to forbid luxury. Geneva's artistic development, shattered during the iconoclastic days of 1535, should have remained dormant. Constrained by rigorous sumptuary statutes, it should not have risen again until the end of the eighteenth century. Between these times, the city should have been content with applied arts intended for export – jewelry, silver, enamel painting, or engraving.

However, although it cannot be denied that the effects of the Reformation – and in particular the loss of commissions from the Church – did represent a handicap for painting and sculpture, they had little impact upon architecture. On the contrary, the increase of foreigners seeking refuge in this Protestant Rome gave a welcome stimulus to building. It was in this community of French and Italian refugees that the finest architects and the wealthiest patrons were found up to the eighteenth century. Had they not managed to import and impose international fashions, Geneva would have retained the look of a small provincial town. The flowering of Genevois architecture in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries raises questions that often overlap. Who
influenced architecture? What part did foreigners play? What was the religious influence? Were there reactions against foreigners? What was the real impact of the sumptuary laws on architecture?

This study’s purpose is to unravel some threads of the tangled skein of human and social relationships underlying architectural achievements in Geneva.¹

The Notion of Fashion and Luxury in Genevois Architecture

The influence of the sumptuary laws on art has been much debated. These measures, a contemporary practice in many European cities, should be considered less emotionally. The excessive importance sometimes given to them sounds like an alibi for an artistic dearth. It is better to use some basic common sense to filter the denunciatory dictates: the harsher the threat, the less heeded. Besides, would it have been really possible to keep the Genevois away from forbidden fruit? Reading between the lines, it is soon obvious that, from the eighteenth century on, the Chamber of Reformation was no more than a lone voice preaching in the desert.

Regulations concerning the luxury of private buildings evolved with time and, until the beginning of the eighteenth century, affected furnishings and decoration more than architecture itself. The most explicit prohibitions relative to buildings appeared in a statute of 1710. The government, which included representatives of the builders’ families, was probably torn between the need to embellish the city and concern over ostentation. As for the Chamber of the Reformation, it tried to nip in the bud an emerging tendency. The powerful merchant Jean-Jacques Bonnet had closed off the lake perspective from the place du Molard with a large house begun in the 1690s (fig. 1). Jacques Eynard, a wealthy refugee merchant from French Dauphiné, had ordered master mason Moïse Ducommun¹ (c. 1667–1721) to build his beautiful house, Derrière le Rhône — overlooking the port of La Fusterie (1694–1695) — possibly according to the plans of architect-engineer.

fig. 1: Main façade of the Maison Gonet, giving on the place du Molard. This old photograph shows a careful architecture using the superposition of orders.
Pierre Raby (1627-1705). Above all, the first town mansions had appeared. Three years later, Léonard Buissin (1643-1719), delegate to Louis XIV at Versailles in 1696, built the first townhouse sited between courtyard and garden “to a plan imported from Paris,” very close to the project of Jules-Hardouin Mansart for the Hôtel de Lorge (fig. 2). In 1705 Jean-Antoine Lullin-Camp commissioned Joseph Abeille to design the opulent building of La Terrasse.

To such constructions marking an unmistakable turning point for residential architecture in Geneva corresponded regulations limiting floor-to-ceiling space to a maximum of eleven feet. The use of fine materials such as polished marble, walnut, parquets made of woods other than pine, or richly carved wood paneling was equally forbidden. Statues, whether indoors or out, and costly paintings were prohibited. The owners, and even the workers who tried to get around the law, were liable to fines. In 1720 the Chamber of the Reformation tried to outlaw the hôtel or mansion type of construction. In a debate in the Council of the Two Hundred, the syndics retorted that it was necessary to remove from the statutes the “article pertaining to buildings as, in certain cases, it is impossible to apply due to the laws of architecture.”

Texts of these 1739 statutes prove that their voices were heeded: fashionable styles, mainly from France, could no longer be resisted.

During the eighteenth century, more and more cheating occurred among “top-class people.” The Traité du Luxe (Treatise on Luxury, 1774) by Jean-François Butini (1747-1800), while apparently praising the wisdom of austerity measures as set down by the Chamber of Reformation, rang the bell for sumptuary ordinances abolished soon after. Nobody could ignore that, in Paris during the same period (1778), Madame de Vermenoux, young widow of George-Tobie Thelusson, a banker of Genevois origin, engaged Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, assisted by Claude-Jean-Baptiste Jallier-de-Savault (1740-1806). The visionary architect invented for her a sensational folly with a portal in the shape of a “mouth opened on nothing,” which was the talk of Tout-Paris.

In his treatise, Butini played down an important phenomenon when speaking of “some Genevois who, used to the pomp and delights of great cities, consider any sumptuary ordinance as a monastic rule, a chain only fit to be broken.” In fact, the Genevois aristocrats, the majority of whom were bankers and important merchants, found themselves influenced by daily and family contact with the international elite and felt their influence. Through their links with Lyon and Paris, they were on familiar terms with French artistic circles.

In Paris, the clique that gathered around banker Robert Butini was a good example of the sort of network fashioned between Genevois of Geneva, Genevois abroad, and the French. Butini owned “a mansion with carriage entrance, courtyard, and garden, at the Clairvaux cul-de-sac and the corner of rue Saint-Martin,” where he received his colleagues Gédéon Mallet and Pierre Cramer, who stayed with him between 1718 and 1720. During this sojourn, the two brothers-in-law met Rouen architect Jean-François Blondel (1683-1756) and asked him to design their own house. In 1721 Gédéon Mallet, one of many Genevois who got out of Paris following Law’s bankruptcy, chose the site of the ancient cloister of the Cour St. Pierre to build an up-to-date, spacious and luxurious mansion (fig. 3). Three years later, the young and wealthy minister Ami Lullin (1695-1756) began a country house at Creux-de-Genthod (fig. 4). Described by Blondel as having “a main building in the Italian style,” the type of villa erected here offered new prospects to the Genevois upper-class: for fifty years, local builders copied it with few variants.

Though often infringed, the sumptuary ordinances left their stamp. Bourgeois practicality marked the Genevois mentality. For every Apollon Tronchin who, influenced by Voltaire’s gibes, quietly disdained the sumptuary edicts, how many patricians felt truly and profoundly concerned?
figs. 2a,b: The inner court and garden façade of the first mansion built in Geneva. It is often said that "luxury came to Geneva by the carriage door of the Buisson mansion."
Probably warned by his patron, then a member of the Venerable Company of Pastors, Jean-François Blondel, writing to Lullin about the interior decoration of the Creux-de-Genthod manor, insisted: “I have not put any kind of ornament on the ceiling cornices, feeling apprehensive that it might not be properly done in Geneva and seem too rich to you.” The French architect Claude-Jean-Baptiste Jallier-de-Savault, commissioned in 1762 to design plans for Antoine Saladin’s house in Crans, submitted a project that seemed too Parisian to the eyes of Isaac-Robert Rilliet-Fatio, the future builder of Varembé and a friend of Saladin’s, who compared it with local builders’ plans:

I don’t know whether you will be pleased by the plans of your house; I think that the ones you had drawn up in Geneva, and that you showed me, were just as agreeable and comfortable as those of M. Jallier, who, by trying to give each bedroom toilets, wardrobes, entryways, etc., in my opinion has cut up the apartments and made the rooms too small; this looks a bit like the ways of Paris, where one cannot even go to the country without a full retinue...”

And at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when jeweler Jacob-David Duval was about to return definitively to Geneva, he took into account his mother’s written advice praising the simplicity of Geneva houses.” He gave up the idea of creating the Château de Cartigny after Rastrelli’s opulent neo-classical models for St.Petersburg. Jean-Gabriel Eynard, himself one of the richest men under the Restoration, also felt that “it is not done for an owner to appear too wealthy.” This led him to downgrade the project of an urban palace created for him by Florentine architect Giovanni Salucci to more “Genevois” proportions. Which did not prevent General Guillaume-Henri Dufour from writing to French colonel Baudrand: “Right now, I am supervising the construction of a small palace one of our rich fellows is putting up.”

**Master Craftsmen, Local and Foreign**

The employment of foreign artists and craftsmen was a Geneva tradition dating back to the Middle Ages. In the golden age of the bishoprics of Jean de Brogny and François de Metz, Geneva was a center of artistic activity, attracting masons, painters, and sculptors from as far as Burgundy and Flanders in the north, Piedmont and Provence in the south. The Chapelle des Macchabées (prior to 1400) ordered by Cardinal Jean de Brogny is one example of this artistic mix. The architecture is similar to realizations in Avignon. The concert of musician angels adorning the vaulted ceiling came from the Piedmont atelier of Giacomo Jaquiero, initiator of international Gothic art in Geneva. The sculpture of the cenotaph, as well as that of the cathedral stalls, was entrusted to Brussels sculptor Jean Prindale, who busied himself between Dijon and Chambéry. Later, François de Metz called upon Alais painter Conrad Witz for an important altar screen dedicated to St. Peter (1444).

This presence of foreign craftsmen went on after the Reformation, except that the workers now came to Geneva for religious reasons. A large contingent of French construction workers from the south of France (Dauphiné, Languedoc, the Cévennes, Montpellier) poured in after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. However, toward the middle of the eighteenth century, the majority of masons were “Swiss,” traditionally recruited from the Canton of Neuchâtel. Bonded by origin and family ties, the teams from Le Locle or Fleurier dominated after 1750. The four dynasties of Bovet, Matthey, Vaucher, and Favre monopolized the construction scene. Handsome buildings, such as the Lutheran church (1763), no doubt designed by the older Jean-Louis Bovet – who built the Château de Malagny (1753-1757) and that of Crans, the granary of Rive (1769-1771), the military barracks of La Treille – are the work of teams of master masons and master carpenters originally from Neuchâtel.

Nevertheless, until the second half of the eighteenth century and the pivotal date of 1751, which marks the cre-
ation of the Ecole de Dessin (School of Drawing), there were practically no Genevois architects. As such, Geneva was no different from other provincial towns. Even her important neighbor Lyon, the first commercial and banking seat of France before being dethroned in the eighteenth century in favor of Paris, was described as a "great provincial town, but a town with neither prince nor aristocracy [that] at the end of the seventeenth century is a town without an architect." Lyon's first architect was Jacques-Germain Soufflot (1713-1780), whose activities were also tied to the architectural destiny of Geneva."

In the eighteenth century, perhaps only the son of Vaudois builder Jean-Michel Billon as worthy to be called an architect. It was to him that the Genevois authorities entrusted the important project of a mansion for the French Resident (1740-1743), a repeat on the theme of the mansion "à la française." His career followed in the wake of such foreign personalities as Abeille, Vennes, and Blondel, whose principles he applied, though never their student. As for the talented Jean-Louis Bover the Younger (1725-1754), whose possible collaboration on the constantly changing works of the Ecole Militaire in Paris remains to be examined, it is easy to imagine that he might have been an outstanding figure among Genevois and even Suisse-Romande architects of his time had he lived longer.

The creation of the Ecole de Dessin in 1751, thanks to the persistence of councillor Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui (1694-1748) and after many false starts, represented a great victory for art in Geneva, even though the Genevois hid it from themselves for a long time. The motive was not artistic education, but a teaching destined to improve the average level of local craftsmen. As Pierre Soubeiran, director of the Ecole, continued to repeat as late as 1770:

"We never intended to train here first-rate sculptors or painters for whom this study (of live models) is essential, because we have no need for them in Geneva; but to train artisans who manufacture things for commerce or those who serve civic needs and not magnificence."

However, one must await the dawn of the Restoration and the strong personality of Samuel Vaucher-Crémieux (1798-1877), born of a family of master masons from Fleurier, to see the first generation of Genevois architects. Trained at the Ecole Polytechnique of Paris, and then under engineer Guillaume-Henri Dufour, for some twenty years Vaucher was given the state's main commissions. Following a resolutely international and modern style, he built, one after the other: the Musée Rath (1823-1824), the rue de la Corraterie (1827-1833) derived from Percier and Fontaine's model for the rue de Rivoli, the Rive pententiary (1822) – thereby gaining international repute by applying the panoptical process of Englishman Samuel Bentham – the new riding school (1827-1828), the covered market by the Rhone (1829-1833), the lunatic asylum at Les Vernets (1847-1861), and worked on the building designed by Hector Lefuel for the imperial residence of Napoleon III at Faro. This master mason's son rose in society to become the architect of the French emperor's house in 1852 as well as being internationally recognized as an authority on penitentiary buildings.

**Huguenot Nicolas Boqueret at the Service of the Republic**

The first great works in the aftermath of the Reformation were erected by the state and showed the young republic's twofold ambition – democratic and cultural. The models of Genevois magistrates "given to construction and architecture," Pernont Desfosses and Nicolas Boqueret, a refugee from Champagne, transformed the old town hall into a classical palace as early as 1555, while the Académie de Calvin went up almost simultaneously.

The Maison de Ville, "superbly rebuilt as new, with its paved ramp for horsemen," was highly admired and, with the market halls of Neuchâtel, heads the list of Swiss Renaissance public works.
Some fifteen years later, the government mandated this same Boguelet for the first reconstruction of the Halles du Mollard, a top priority government project, then that of the Arsenal in front of the Hôtel de Ville (1573). Only too content to rely on the advice of a French master, the Council retained him with exceptional conditions: the best salary of any master mason in the Seigneurie.37  

Because of his renown, neighboring governments, such as the town of Morges (1574), the Senate of Savoy (1575), or the Bernese authorities (between 1593 and 1600), also called upon him.  

Thus, the Seigneurie conformed to the image of “good government,”41 purveyor of equipment and public buildings that enhanced the city. But the desire for similar architecture spread among the population; private owners joined the trend.  

The Maison Turrettini: Two Refugees to Build One Palace  

After the great international merchants – the Medici, the Asinari, the Sassetti – of the end of the Middle Ages came the refugees, a French and Italian elite of bankers and brokers. Used to a gentler lifestyle, the refugees played a dominant role in introducing new artistic forms. Through them, Renaissance and Mannerist principles finally arrived in Geneva.  

The main agent of this artistic renewal was François Turrettini,39 husband of Camille Burlamaqui. In his Mémoires, he tells of his flight from Lucca, a European odyssey that brought him to Geneva (1574), Antwerp (1579-1585), then Frankfurt, Basel, Zurich, and finally, to settle in Geneva in 1592. Linked to banking as well as the manufacture and international commerce of silk, he belonged to the elite of Lucca, as did the Burlamaqui, Calandrini, Diodati, and Micheli. He himself came from the picturesque castle of Nozzano near Lucca, built in the festive style of the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry. His wife was related to conspirator François Burlamaqui, who built the remarkable Villa Gattaiola around 1540.40 They liked to live well. This explains why they were the first to have a “master carpenter and sculptor” from Burgundy, Paul Petitot,42 build them a palace as innovative43 by its size and details as the Ritter Palace (1556-1561), in the Renaissance style of Florentine palazzos, was for Lucerne, or the Hôtel Razé (1581-1583), created in a Lyon manner still under Gothic influence, was for Fribourg.  

“The fame of this house spread so that strangers, great lords and others, who came to this town were curious to see and visit it.”44 The palazzo, erected on the site of three medieval houses, had an inner court with two superposed galleries, something never seen before in Geneva (figs. 5, 6). The very idea of the courtyard, with arcades of basket-handle vaults on two sides, systematized by Petitot at the Hôtel de Ville (1614-1615), effectively broke with the local Gothic tradition of noble turreted houses and owed much to Italian Renaissance models the architect had seen in Rome.  

Around Geneva, the Renaissance was already flowering. In the first half of the fifteenth century, Nicolas Perrenot, from the Jura, had built for himself a palace in Besançon with a vast inner court edged with porticoes. Elsewhere in Savoy some forty years earlier (1575-1582), Cardinal Gallois de Regard, who had spent some of his life in Rome and the Neapolitan region, built the castle of Clermont,45 surrounding a spacious inner court with superimposed galleries, in a possible reminiscence of the one of St. Damasus.  

However, in the Maison Turrettini, the Italianate style began to compete with the French – a comment that may be extended to all Geneva architecture of the old regime. The inner court contrasted with the beautiful Mannerist façade and its diversified repertoire of window frames, carved breast walls and window sills, and reliefs enhanced with volutes. Otherwise, the belated use of the Gothic twin window precluded Italian models.  

The taste for handsome architecture spread among the members of the rich Lucca community, and the innovations brought in by Petitot began to be found in their
own homes, as in the house of Vincent Burlamaqui, son-in-law of François Turrettini (1627), the gallery of Barthélemy Micheli’s house (fig. 7) and Marc Micheli’s house, said to be “a very attenuated likeness of the Turrettini house,” as well as the old Arsenal building drawn by the selfsame Petitot to form an ensemble with the newly built façades of the Hôtel de Ville (fig. 8). Some twenty years later, Jean Turrettini (1600–1681), son of François, transposed the idea of a portico to the patio of the Château des Bois de Dardagny. For this reason, it was called “a tall house in the Italian style.”

In his Histoire de Genève de 1686, Gregorio Leti noted the opulence of this first wave of private buildings at the beginning of the seventeenth century, saying:

For about fifty years now, people have been building in the modern style, and the brothers Turrettini, the demoiselle Andron, and Sire Calandrinii the merchant have built three superb palaces. Now all the houses of the well-to-do are well built.

The Exemplary Faith of Faule Petitot

Settled in Geneva since 1597, Petitot was one of the many Huguenot artists and artisans that came to shelter in Calvin’s shadow for a time or for good. The state and the wealthy families called on them to build the edifices of power, faith, and aristocracy. Petitot, like Bogueret, was an individual, referred to as “the sculptor,” with no further need for a name and to whom was offered free citizenship “in consideration of the services that the Seigneuries hopes to receive from him and his art for public buildings.”

The faithful account of Petitot’s life, transmitted by his son Jean, a famous portrait and miniature painter, describes him as an exemplary refugee:

He (God) brought my father from the dark depths of idolatry to which, apparently, it seems we are all born. It is in Rome, where he had been established for many years, enjoying every advantage a man of his condition could hope, being, with no intent of flattery, well appreciated for the sciences he knew, among others architecture and sculpture. God, in his almighty compassion, touched his heart and opened his eyes, showing him the idolatrous worship of people who bowed before works of their own making hardly had they made them, which finally made him detest this earbound and superstitious religion. He came to Geneva in 1597 (where he found the light he was seeking) to finish his days here and was happy enough to be particularly cherished by the late Monsieur de Beze, who contributed a great deal to his contentment.... He preferred the ways of heaven to those of this earth and, from the beginning of his retirement, spurned the quite important advantages that a neighboring prince offered him, along with the same freedom of conscience as he enjoyed here, should he ever wish to go to Torino.

Resistance to the Catholic Artists

Protestant artists and artisans were warmly welcomed. Catholics were just as actively repressed until the beginning of the eighteenth century. There are many references to the expulsion of Lombard masons who “go to mass every Sunday around here.” For a century and a half, the Seigneuries seem to have brooked neither concession nor exception. Vicenza painter Cesare Giglio was Protestant. He came to Geneva in 1589, before going on to Lyon in 1622, and did the restorations work (1604) on the Allegory of Justice in the council room of the town hall. Twenty years later, two painters had to leave town before even being allowed to finish their work: Leonard Colbert from Milan and the Frenchman Nicolas Tremier, “living in Geneva for a year, dismissed for the injury he causes to other painters.” The same thing happened, at the end of the seventeenth century, to painters Arnulphe and Joachim. The rejection of Catholic painters, especially Italians, explains as much as the sumptuary laws
why there were no mural paintings in Geneva at a time when quadrature and wall scenes flourished in Italy. The rich had to be content, within the limits set by the authorities, with tapestries.

The feeling against Catholics eased during the eighteenth century. Though rare, the passage of Italian decorators in private homes showed already in the first half of the century. Although, under Parisian influence, current taste tended to paneling or painted wallpapers, a few Geneva residences show some little-known samples of wall painting. At the dawn of a brilliant career as a portrait painter, Carlo Rusca (1696-1769), from Ticino, took part in 1735 in decorating a ballroom on the Grand Morillon property of Jean-Louis Du Pan. A landscape painter accompanied him: “An Italian painter called Restelino has painted frescoes of four windows in the gallery; the figure of the peasant seen in them was done by chevalier Rusca, another Italian painter.”

However, in the forefront of all proprietors who acquired some sort of trompe-l’oeil were the Vassersots, whose foreign extraction, cosmopolitan outlook, and recent fortune prompted them to act like nouveaux riches scorn ing social conformity and any respect for the sumptuary statutes. On intimate terms with banker Law, this prosperous merchant, Jean Vasserot the Elder, nicknamed the “Mississippian,” was knighted by Frederic William I of Prussia in 1715. In 1720 he bought the manor of Vaux, then, in 1722, that of Dardagny. His son David died young but acquired, in 1724, the manor of Vincy and built the handsome residence whose interiors were later decorated by Genevois sculptor Jean Jaquet. The imposing Château de Dardagny was adorned around 1725 by a ballroom decorated with an architectural trompe-l’oeil unique in Geneva. Otherwise, the virtuoso effects of perspective were in the Juvarrian tradition, worthy of comparison with the grand salon of the Hindelbank residence devised by Joseph Abelle for Hieronymus von Erlach.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Italian painters were only consulted by way of exception. The completion of the theater in the place Neuve—an enterprise that dealt
fig. 6: The inside courtyard of the Turrettini mansion, with its superposed loggias. Old photograph.

fig. 7: The gallery of the Micheli mansion copies some of the characteristics of the Turrettini mansion. Old photograph.
the final blow in 1782 to the spirit of sumptuary ordinances - required expert ultramontane scenographic painters. Ornamentalist Jean Jaquet (1765-1739), who reigned as master over the Ecole de Dessin and private interior decoration, continued the tradition of French paneling but never acquired these new talents. Likewise, a century later, the Eynards ordered the decor of their private theater from Alessandro Sanquirico, stage designer for La Scala and the inventor of ephemeral architecture.

At the Restoration, the taste for art and the admiration of talent overcame religious prejudice; Calvin's citadel was drawn into an Italophile current. Around the Eynard, Mirabaud, Saladin, and Bartholoni families gravitated fresco and stucco artists. The team of Italians first called on to decorate the extension of Beau lieu (1812), then the Palais Eynard after 1821, introduced the neo-classic manner. Giuseppe Vincenzo Lodovico Spampani (1768-1828) settled in Geneva (1821) after an itinerant career at the court of Württemberg, in Winterthur, and in Zurich. He received official commissions, such as the interior decoration of the theater of the Cour St. Pierre (1824), and offered to give "a free course in painting as applied to the decoration of homes." After some hesitation, the authorities accepted, with a tinge of protectionism:

These lessons could give birth to a new branch of industry that will not only contribute to the enjoyment of our homes but will supply the sort of relief ornamentation that we must now bring from abroad. It can in no manner harm any professions practicing in our own country, not even the wallpaper trade, because fresco or painting on plaster will so rarely be used to paint the walls of apartments, being mostly destined for the decoration of ceilings and cornices. The Board has gratefully accepted the offer of M. Spampani and a committee will see it is executed.41

Jacques-Marie Jean Mirabaud (1784-1864), a convinced Italophile from having long lived in Lombardy, "would have liked in our own mores a blend of the severity and
tenacity that are our characteristics with the lighthearted grace and the aesthetic sense of the Milanese. He managed in 1827 to wipe out two centuries and a half of resistance to things Italian: to the detriment of the Genevois Almeras, he named Gaetano Durelli from Milan (1789-1853) as Jaquet’s successor at the head of the Ecole d’Ornement et d’Architecture (School of Ornament and Design). Toward 1830, at the time the brothers Vicario executed the prodigious Neo-Gothic trompe-l’oeil in Chambéry’s Cathédrale St.François, painted decors became the rage in private Geneva homes.

The Case of Papist Joseph Abeille

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the spirit of intolerance still rife among the population calmed down to some extent among members of the government and the upper class. A century after the sorry fiasco of the “water artifice,” invented around 1611-1612 by Huguenot Jacques Gentillette (1578-post 1622), and other unsuccessful attempts in the seventeenth century, the Seigneurie called in 1700 upon a hydraulics engineer, Joseph Abeille, to solve the problem of supplying water to the city of Geneva. The Frenchman, a native of Brittany then domiciled in Paris, was at the beginning of a promising career. A competent engineer as well an excellent architect, he had a particularly wide range of skills.

His début in Geneva was difficult. Antipathy around him was hard to overcome: “One can only praise Abeille,” reads a report of the end of the century, for his courage in setting up the hydraulic works at his own expense at a time and in a country where a Catholic could find no support and much opposition. Hydraulic science was still profoundly obscure. He was accused, it seems, of holding papist meetings and poisoning the people through the fountains he controlled.

Despite this ill will, the Seigneurie gave him citizenship and allowed him to buy a house near the waterworks. The government also asked him to think about the burning question of the Hôpital Général (General Hospital) then being built—a fact that was completely obliterated until some time ago (fig. 9). The Genevois historical tradition has preferred to remember the Huguenot refugee Jean Vennes as the hospital’s only author. However, there is proof of the primary role Abeille played, possibly to the consternation of hard-core Calvinists, in this affair: the reward of “fifteen louis d’or... for the plans and other care he has given to the new building up to now...” as stated in February 1710; the style and plasticity of the drawing of the main façade, poles apart from the style of the façade attributed to Vennes for the Temple Neuf; and finally the fact that he was called to Bern a short while later to study hospital projects.

At the same time, a Franco-Genevois silk manufacturer, banker, and resident of Lyon, Jean-Antoine Lullin-Camp (1666-1720), entrusted to Abeille the project of his hôtel particulier at La Tertasse (1707-1712). If the intervention of the young architect was of primary importance, it had no direct influence on Genevois architecture. In baroque mass and colossal impact, this mansion can be compared, more or less consciously, to projects for episcopal palaces planned by his master builder, Robert de Cotte (fig. 10).

One would like to know more about the circumstances whereby Abeille was summoned from Geneva to Bern by Hieronymus von Erlach (1667-1748), an officer with an international career and future councillor of the city of Bern. Abeille drew up for him the plans of two exceptional country residences in the region. First, Thunstetten (1713-1715), an elegant one-story main building topped by an enormous Bernese-style roof, surrounded by a park in the manner of Le Nôtre, and second, the even more sumptuous property of Hindelbank (from 1721), with its U-shaped wings surrounding an entrance court. Abeille also took part in working out the plan of the hôtel particulier that von Erlach built within the city walls. The style of Blondel was obvious, however, in this realization.
fig. 10: The garden façade of the Hotel Lullin at La Terrasse, by Joseph Abeille. Its colossal Ionic order gives it great plasticity.

For the time being, the strong resemblance with certain Genevois mansions such as those erected as early as 1721 by the Boisiers and the Sellons in the rue des Granges can only be noted.

Introduced to the Bernese government by Hieronymus von Erlach, Abeille was intensely active in the city of Bern. In 1715 he was asked, among other architects, to draw up plans for the reconstruction of the Inselspital. In 1726 he entered a competition for a design of the new town hall. But it was later, between 1732 and 1734, that he played a determining role in the project of the Burghers’ Hospital. The kinship with the General Hospital of Geneva is marked by the lavish treatment of the main gateway. The comparison is obvious down to the details of the stair rail, which literally copies the models of Genevois locksmith Pierre Gignoux (1713). However, both also followed the unavoidable prototype of Jules-Hardouin Mansart’s Hôtel des Invalides.

From 1720 on, Abeille was the “famous architect and head engineer of His Most Christian Majesty appointed for the reconstruction of the town of Rennes.” Assisted by his sons, Abeille managed two parallel careers, constantly traveling between France and Switzerland. This man, who made such remarkable beginnings in Geneva, deserves a study taking into account the important French career he carried on simultaneously under the king’s architect, Jacques Gabriel, in the towns of Rennes and Nantes.

A New Temple – in the Image of the Temple of Charenton
Little is known about Jean Vennes (c. 1653–1717), native of Sommières and a refugee from Languedoc, other than what is in the Genevois archives – such scant detail that he might be thought no more than a dilettante. His French career remains an enigma to this day. In 1700 his presence is proven in Geneva: that year he was consulted, along with two local masters, Pierre Raby and Moïse Ducommun, for the project of the Salle du Conseil (Council Chamber of the Two Hundred) in the town hall. In 1701 he furnished plans for the Vevey town hall. In 1708 he was rewarded by the Seigneurie for various jobs he had completed:

...several people considering that he has rendered several services to the people, either in the construction of the town hall, or that of the Hospital, or for the temple that is to be built, and otherwise, by various plans, side views, models, and such, believing that not only is there no need for him to pay dues, but also that one should make him some gift. By general assent, it was said that one should make some sort of an honest gesture.
And, in the second discussion about what kind of a present...that in consideration for his services and for those one still hoped to receive from him, he would be given fifty golden louis, once he has delivered the plans and elevation that he has said he would do for the Temple de la Fusterie...

Thus, the name of Vennes is especially linked to the projects for the Hospice Général and the Temple Neuf de la Fusterie (fig. 11). Because of this last building, Vennes is of particular interest to this study. Determined to build a new place of worship in the Lower Town and, with the help of a legacy of thirty thousand florins from Jean-Antoine Lullin de Châteauvieux (1708), the Genevois authorities first consulted the Republic’s engineer, Du Châtelard. Then they consulted Vennes. He looked for inspiration to the second temple of Charenton by Huguenot Salomon de Brosse, symbolic archetype of a Protestant place of worship, and provided a project obeying the general wish for a temple “octogonial and oval in shape, with
no bell tower," and no additional structures." The project was accepted, and Vennes directed it from 1713 to 1715.

The novelty of the plan, deliberately breaking the tradition of churches in the form of a Latin cross, struck mind and soul. Minister Bénédicte Picter underlined, in his dedication sermon of the new temple, its "structure so different from any others that we have." The interior, organized in the way of Vitruvian basilicas, played on the theme of the "galeria porticina" and recalled the public places of antiquity.

The main façade, on the other hand, was but a timid rendering along the lines of the tympanum of Sta. Maria Novella and its scrolls, conceived by Alberti and confirmed by Giacomo della Porta in the Roman Gesù. Some forty years later, the Genevans again brought up the question of a temple façade when they built St. Pierre. Only one project, attributed to the Genevois master Armand Mignot, reproduced a Jesuit-type façade. The Genevans did not hesitate to distance themselves from Catholic forms by recuperating for St. Pierre the archetype of a pantheonic temple.

Furthermore, in 1711, along with Le Quint and Peschabeis, better known as La Jeunesse, Vennes took part in an expert examination of the cathedral, already in an alarming state of disrepair; he signed with them a Mémoire sur les Réparations à faire à l'Eglise de St-Pierre (Memorandum on the Repairs needed for St. Pierre). However, nothing was attempted immediately, the republic probably having its hands full with the Hôtel de Ville, the Hôpital Général, and the Temple Neuf. The complete transformation of the cathedral had to wait for better times and the arrival of fresh political figures.

After Vennes' death, the Bernese built the Heiliggeistkirche (1726-1729), another replica of the Charenton temple, where the colossal interior evokes the columns built at the Hôtel Lullin at La Tertasse. One suspects that Abeille - whose name was never mentioned in this realization," but who happened, at the same time, to be working on the competition for the town hall, and later on the construction of the nearby Burghers’ Hospital - may have breathed a little of his own particular emphasis into this project.

Many Hands for One Portico: Between Soufflot and Alfieri, Soubeyran and Bovet the Younger

Several generations of historians have studied the astounding façade in the form of a porch added onto the old Cathédrale St. Pierre (figs. 12-15). But no one has really untangled the circumstances of its conception. Rather inclined to favor foreign personalities, the Genevois for a long time gave credit for the façade to Benedetto Alfieri, the court of Piedmont's sole architect. This really did not do justice to a number projects - admittedly of uneven value - submitted by local masters.

Essential to keep the building standing, the renovation of the façade of St. Pierre (1749-1756) gave an excuse to bring in "a foreign architect expert in this kind of a building before beginning anything, for though we have here people who can execute the work, we have none wise enough to guide us in it." Thanks to its situation at an artistic crossroads, Geneva benefited from the advice of two men, Jacques Germain Soufflot (1713-1780), then at the beginning of his career, and Benedetto Alfieri (1699-1767), a proven architect.

Mathematician Jean-Louis Calandrini (1703-1758), to whom is attributed the project for the baroque Protestant Temple de Chêne Bougeries (1756-1758), played a determining role in the commission of the Petit Conseil, mandated to study the renovation. No doubt, it was he who guided the penning of the reports of the Abrégé des Mémoires présentés au Magnifique Conseil, touchant le Temple de St. Pierre (Resume of the Report presented to the Magnificent Council regarding the Temple of St. Pierre, 1750). This document tells of plans already drawn up by local masters that disclose a notable preference for a "tasteful but simple and modest façade, according to our
Religion and our position" rather than a "Gothic and lugubrious façade"—this being the gabled façade of Piedmontese inspiration."

The classic variants enabling the Protestants to take over the ancient cathedral were inspired by two grand models: the handsome façade of St. Gervais in Paris, conceived by Salomon de Brosse in 1616; and the "Rotonda in Rome, one of the beautiful remnants of antiquity." The Panthéon was the principal subject of such painters of veduti and capricci as Paolo Pannini or Hubert Robert. It vividly struck the imagination of people on the Grand Tour, far more than the new Roman façades recently added to the ancient Paleo-Christian basilicas of Sta. Maria Maggiore or St. Jean de Latran.

The renovation of this façade was a chance to prove artistic determination. This unusual awareness was underlined at a time when the new precepts of the École de Dessin were laid down:

...one must examine whether the expense of these ornaments may not be balanced by the beauty added to the Cathedral & for the place & the propriety which we should give at this time, as proof of progress made in the Fine Arts for our city & the zeal of the magistrates to honor both Country and Religion.

Lyon banker Camp became Calandrini's go-between to speak to Soufflot. This architect seems to have been the most qualified to sound the sick building. A few years earlier (1741), he had distinguished himself before the Lyon Academy by a Mémoire sur l'architecture gothique (Report on Gothic Architecture). In December 1749, as he was about to undertake a Grand Tour of Italy with the Marquis de Marigny and the engraver Cochin, Soufflot received the reports and plans of the Genevois. Had the notion of a porch, a hint of the future solution for St. Geneviève of Paris, already taken form in the blueprints? Soufflot's Grand Tour began in 1750 with an obligatory stop at the Teatro Regio of Turin built by Benedetto Alfieri. Soufflot noted down its plan. Did the two men meet just as the plan for St. Pierre's new façade was being discussed? At the time, Alfieri’s career was at a standstill: the Duchy of Piedmont was at war with Austria. A little later (1752), he drew up a project for the reconstruction of the Château de Chambéry, burnt down by the French in 1743. The castle was renovated a first time according to the plans by Giuseppe Piacenza (1775-1776) and Piedmontese Francesco Garella (1786), who both took part in the creation of Carouge, near Geneva. When coming by Geneva via Chambéry in 1751, Alfieri was invited to give advice on the local projects. He corrected those of the Genevois, especially the ones attributed to Bovet the Younger, who had been to Rome, and to Pierre Soubeyran, back from Paris and about to take on the direction of the soon-to-be-created Ecole de Dessin. Those two local masters worked out a façade with an eight-column Corinthian portico that won support for both aesthetic and liturgical reasons.

Alfieri perfected the formula. Far from being a classicist, he delivered to the Genevois a plan that, without following Palladian tradition, anticipated architectural ideas to come and certainly placed Geneva in the lead of international neo-classicism—a fact not admitted up to now. Born of a collective inspiration and the very Genevois desire to de-Catholicize St. Pierre, the portico somehow illustrated a still theoretical search formulated at the time by abbé Laugier in his Essai sur l'architecture (Essay on Architecture):

I tried to find if in building our churches in the style of ancient Architecture, one could not give them a lightness and an elevation equal to our beautiful Gothic churches. And having long pondered this, it seems to me that not only is it feasible, but easier to do this successfully with the Architecture of the Greeks than with all the discoveries of Arabesque Architecture.
fig. 11: A Grisar engraving showing the façade of the Temple Neuf at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Not entirely true to the original, it accentuates the lack of relief of the architecture.

fig. 12: A project for St. Pierre attributed to Armand Mignot.

fig. 13: A project for St. Pierre's façade, attributed to Jean Louis Bove the Younger.
fig. 14: Project attributed to Pierre Souléyran.

fig. 15: Project signed by Benedetto Alfieri.
In Conclusion

Ever torn between austerity imposed by their religion and the temptation of luxury suitable to their means, patrician Genevois simultaneously encouraged and criticized elaborate architecture. Thoughtolerated to some extent in public buildings, until the eighteenth century it was officially discouraged for private buildings.

In this context, it was foreign architects who were often either guilty parties or accomplices to forbidden aspects of Genevois architecture. Commissioning outsiders made it easier to defy the rules or, at least, be forgiven trespasses. Trapped by their own ambiguity, the Genevois screen themselves behind these architects who came from afar and managed to erect a bit more than intended: buildings flaunting what sumptuary statutes did not permit.

With the creation of the Ecole de Dessin and the portico of St. Pierre, 1751 became a key date. It was a turning point in artistic history. From then on, the Genevois leaned less on foreign architectural taste and assumed responsibility for their creations. The teaching of the Ecole de Dessin was based on drawing to serve art and on the imitation of models. It gave the students an elementary grounding that built up self-confidence. From that time on, handsome Genevois buildings were the work of talented local masters, no longer referring, as earlier in the century, to a "plan imported from Paris." Only recently has the extent of the reference libraries of Genevois masons been realized. They were fully familiar with foreign models and able to turn out similar work.

This emancipation corresponded to a change in mentality. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the Citadel of the Reformed Religion was opening out to the world. The crusading spirit had calmed down, and, at the same time, quarrels about luxury ceased. Attributing the portico of St. Pierre to the hand of Count Alifier alone may have been one last indication of false modesty. Pretending that local masters were incompetent and provincial was no longer a valid excuse.

While Geneva began to produce architecture of its own, foreign projects did not disappear entirely. During the nineteenth century, Giovanni Salucci, Luigi Bagutti, Félix-Emmanuel Callet, and Jean-Baptiste-Cicéron Lesueur were usually associated with local architects who carried out the work. The foreigner became a distant inspiration, the local master the true executor.

Translated from the French by Mavis Guinand

Notes
5 Ordinance of 1710, art. XVIII and XXX.
6 Registres du Conseil, 11 February 1821, see Rigaud, p. 172.
7 Jaller's works show the complex network of private relationships linking Geneva to Paris and Lyon. This Burgundian, student of Soufflot at the Académie, worked with Gabriel in Paris, possibly on the building of the Ecole Militaire where the Genevois Jean-Louis Bozet (now distinguished himself, as well as with Bélanger, in whose orbit Wolfgang-Armand Topfer also gravitated (between 1768 and 1792), engraving, among others, Bélanger's project for an opera. In 1764, Jaller drew the plans for Antoine-Saladin's château in Crans. Almost twenty years later, Saladin had him make up plans for the theater of the placé Neuve and paid him six hundred livres "for the plans and designs... relative to the Salle de Comédie de Genève." And possibly he advised the master masons Matthey, the presumptive builders of the rental buildings of the rue Beauregard, owned partly by Jean-François Thékkasset.
8 Jean Satini, Traité du luxe (1774), p. 245.
11 Four projects, two of them realized, are known by their publication in the collection of Jean Manette, L'Architecture française (Paris, 1727).

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14 This is François Tronchin, an important amateur of paintings, who said his collection to Catherine the Great of Russia in 1771. See Mauro Natale, Le goût et ses collections d’art italien à Genève (Genova, 1966), pp. 15-25.


17 ...for in these parts (near Carigny) all country houses are very simple, they show no luxurie, and I fear that if you turn your house into a manor you would find yourself remaining a delightful atmosphere in the BPU, Fr. ms. (26 October 1692), Marie-Louis Duval-Dumont to her son.

18 BPU, suppl. ms. 1847 (20 August 1693), Jean-Gabriel Eynard to his father in France.

19 Edouard Chapuis, Le général Dutour 1776-1875 (Lausanne, 1953), p. 50.


24 Guillaume Fatio, Le château de Malagny (Genève, 1924).

25 Fontana and Bury, op. cit.


27 See below on the façade of Cathédrale St-Pierre, Soufflet also maintained relations with Vouet and corresponded with François Tronchin, who was his host at the Détols later. See BPU, Archives Tronchin, Lettre de Soufflet à François Tronchin (Paris, 18 August 1776).


29 “... au lieu de Mme Billon pour avoir copié divers plans de ladite maison donnée 4 Louis d’or,” BPU, Lulin ms. 71 (8 August 1824), op. cit., p. 32.


31 This law professor, also passionately interested in art, became from 1718 on, the advocate of artistic teaching in Geneva. In 1720, he presented to the Council of the Two Hundred a report urging the value of such education. Buteaux encouraged the engraver and miniature painter Jacques Saint-Ours (1708-1737), father of the historical painter Jean-Jacques Saint-Ours, to open a school for painters (1748). In the same way, he sponsored Pierre Souffren, son of a lodging a dream Langwidthw, refugee from the Reformation of the Estadt of Neuchâtel, offering him a trip to Paris to perfect his artistic knowledge. Souffren was for over twenty years a drawing master at the École de Dessin.


35 Bonnard, Chroniques, op. cit., t. I, p. 86.

36 Bouveret may have come from Langres, a town possessing a few early Renaissance examples inspired by ancient models that are still standing, such as the façade of no. 8, rue Cardinal Maret, according to Louis Heurtier, L’histoire de l’architecture classique en France, l, t. II, vol. 2, pp. 402-404.


38 As defined at the end of the eighteenth century by Baud, op. cit., chap. I, p. 29.

39 For a detailed account of François Turrerini’s professional activities, see Léa de Waal, Genève au Ségle de la Réforme. La drapée et la toile (1540-1630), MDG, LII (1987), pp. 331-340.

40 Isse Belle Borsali, Le Vieux Léchelle (Rome), pp. 36-38.

41 It would be interesting to find out the exact relationship with the Petitot branch of Lyon, especially Simon Petitot (1682-1746), who built the waterworks of Lyon in 1729, as well as Desroches-Alexandre Petitot (1727-1801), a student of Soufflet, Prix de Rome, and later Architect of the Ducal Manufactures of the Court of Parma after 1753.


43 Annuaire, p. 817.


45 Once no. 8, rue de la Cité, now demolished but reproduced in La Maison Bourgeoise en Suisse, Genève (Zurich, 1980), pl. 10.

46 No 10, rue des Granges.

47 No 4, rue de l’Hôtel de Ville.


51 Carl Bon, Dictionnaire des artistes suisses, suppl.

52 Regula, op. cit., p. 82.

53 Ibid.

54 Deomeno, op. cit., p. 375, and note 3, which give little importance to Geneva mural paintings.

55 A career that brought him into the entourage of magistral Hieronymus von Erlach in Stern, wh. whose portrait he painted with all military trappings.

56 Notices sur Monilhon, private archives, ut, on the History of Grand Monilhon.


58 I wish to thank Alme Raimi for this oral information.

54 Favara, MaconnTaverini, annexes, and Jacques Genolet.
55 Alfred Betant, Forts, fontaines et machines hydrauliques de l'ancienne Genève (Geneva, 1941), pp. 52-53. These were the town council problems of the time. Simon Pfitzner (1682-1746) was commissioned in 1729 to build the waterworks of Lyon, see L'art baroque à Lyon, pp. 46-49.
56 Ibid., p. 58 from the memorandum of Nicolas Paul (1796), who was put in charge of "caving for the waterworks" during the French period.
57 Roth-Lotchner and Favara, "Un bâtiment nouf pour des ambitions nouvelles" (see note 3 above), chap. 12 is the architecture of the Hôpital? pp. 193-196.
58 Ibid.
60 It would be useful to find out more about the fires between Geneva and Bern (through Abbaye?). It is known that, in 1730, Ars Luthian employed in Genoa, sculptors Jean-Frédéric Funk and Charles Christophe Haag, Bernese artisans who were active on Erlach's works; see BPU, misc. Lufin 8.
61 Der Erbeehof in Bern (Bern, 1990).
63 Reproduction in Divers ouvrages de savane comme Balzac Rampes d'escalette castle porte de fer de coups de porte swiss Porteauyssine, Le Tout dressé et fai et gravé par Pierre Gignoux père et ses Mestres savane A Geneva. Et Le Tout fait en l'année Mille sept cent Treize et Le present livre se debite chez Leutenant a Geneve.
64 Paul Hofer, op. cit., p. 332.
65 Of his "Swiss" career, one knows that he built several private dwellings in the town of Bern, made plans for Solothurn's new hospital (1725) and church, and provided, at the request of Agrippa d'Aubigné, a model of a mausoleum for the mausoleum of the port of Morges (1735).
66 In 1726, they worked together on a project for a canal in Burgundy. In 1730, Joseph Abœlle was designated to supervise the reconstruction of the town of Rennes, destroyed by fire in 1721. He took along his two sons as assistants. At the end of his career, he was in Nantes to study the rebuilding of the Bourse de Commerce (1741), then the canalization of the Erdre river (1745), a project of reconstruction of the town Bruges with two covered market buildings (1751-1753). See Claude Perre, La reconstruction d'une ville au XVIIIe siècle. Rennes 1720-1760 (Rennes, 1972), pp. 186 and Pierre Lehe, Nantes au XVIIIe siècle. Urbanisme et architecture (Paris, 1964).
1 September 1908.
70 Nonetheless topped with a small bellry "à la gavroise." On these typical Geneva belles, see Marcel Grandjean, op. cit., p. 173.
72 Héritier Pictet, Dissertation sur les temples, leurs dédicaces et plusieurs choses qu'on y voit, avec un sermon (Geneva, 1716).
73 BPU, B 117, Trecent archives, Temple de St-Pierre (1752).
76 Favara, "Transformations" (see note 65 above), p. 91, quoting the R.C. (December, 1750).
77 Only Jean-Michel Billon, in one of the drawings attributed to him, presented a project routing the Gothic entrance portal and its gable with a sculpted but partially mutilated tympanum.
78 Also placed directly onto a Gothic building.
79 Abrégé des Memores..., op. cit., pp. 16-17.
80 The influence of Sauflot's Lyon activity is of great importance to Geneva. The symmetrical houses aligned along the quai St-Claire were adzed by Guillaume-Henri Dufour, the future cantonal engineer during the Nepotist campaign, and reflected on the quarter des lieux, then along the Genoese quays in general during the next century. See Le Silic et Walk, "Guillaume-Henri Dufour et le nouveau vaisseau de Genève," Guillaume-Henri Dufour dans son temps 1737-1770 (Geneva, 1957), pp. 192-214.
81 Except for his drawing of the façade of the Cathedral of Vareuol and the never-realized project for the Cathedral of Tarno.
82 It is quite different from Ignaz Jöchle's portico for Old St. Paul's in London or from Gibba portico for St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

Picture credits
Figs. 1-3, 5-9, 11-15: Musée Vieux, Geneva
Figs. 2-4, 10: University of Geneva