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The Philosophical Framework of Le Corbusier's Education: Schuré and German Idealism

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to demonstrate that Le Corbusier's autodidactic agenda between 1908 and 1911 reflects a consistent philosophical reasoning based on the philosophical tradition of German idealism. The vehicle of analysis is the connection between Édouard Schuré's 'Sanctuaires d'Orient', a book Le Corbusier read in 1908, and three key episodes of the subsequent period of travel. Schuré's book provides us with the philosophical framework to which he was exposed. The three episodes, in turn, are taken as case studies in order to demonstrate the correlation between the philosophical background of the book and Le Corbusier's changing attitudes during this period. The terms of this correlation are based on an evolutionary conception of history and can be synthesized as the belief in cultural progress, leading to a new society built upon the unity of science, religion and art, in a secular-sacred life attained through the recovery of a pantheistic existence, and in art and architecture as a means to an epistemological experience. I will lastly argue that this creates the basis for the lifelong influence of idealism in Le Corbusier's work and thought.*

Keywords: *Le Corbusier's Education; Schuré; German Idealism; Romanticism.*

To a greater degree than is commonly assumed by the critics of functionalism, the modern movement was intimately associated with the legacy of nineteenth-century Romanticism. This is particularly evident in the case of Le Corbusier, whose work has been gradually understood as a dialectical interaction between rationalism and idealism. This dialectic harks back to his formative years, when he was exposed to nineteenth-century thought through an eclectic set of sources. A milestone in this renewed look at Le Corbusier is Paul Turner's *The Education of Le Corbusier*. Through the analysis of Le Corbusier's early readings, Turner concluded that Le Corbusier's attitude towards architecture was fundamentally intellectual and "idealistic," and that for him architecture was above all an expression of ideas and transcendent principles.

To a certain extent, however, Turner's analysis falls victim to such eclecticism, failing to demonstrate a consistent philosophical positioning during this early stage. Moreover, in spite of the enormous amount of research carried out since then, many of Le Corbusier's decisions and attitudes during the period of travel between 1907 and 1911 still lack a justificatory philosophical framework. How to explain, for example, his repeated refusal to enroll in an architectural school? How can rationalism explain his devotion to the Gothic when the Parisian sketchbook of Notre-Dame focuses on subjective experience? What led him to the final itinerary of the journey to the East, extending his initial plans to travel to Rome?

In this paper, I will explore the connections between Le Corbusier's readings and these questions in order to show that these and many other attitudes, unrelated as they may seem, can be explained from a consistent

philosophical standpoint. The focus will be on *Sanctuaires d'Orient*, a book by Édouard Schuré,¹ because it shows the extent to which Le Corbusier was exposed to an idealistic line of thought based on key notions of the German philosophical tradition.

1. Schuré's Sanctuaires

Charles L'Eplattenier, Le Corbusier's teacher and mentor at the school of arts of La Chaux-de-Fonds, provided Le Corbusier with a Ruskinian education, permeated by the notion of a mythical South, behind which stood Rousseau's notion of origins.² German philosophical idealism and Hegelian aesthetics were added to this education through indirect sources such as Henry Provensal's *L'art de demain*.³ This eclectic book on art theory, rooted in German idealism, argues for the unity of spirit and matter and of art and science as the way to overcome the decadent state of contemporary art and create a new art expressing the moral and spiritual needs of the new emerging society. The artist is presented as the one who is tasked with creating a new society, bringing together the “*truth of the past and that of the future*” through a new art, thus giving continuity to the “*invisible chain*” that, uniting Man to the infinity of Universe, resolves the Absolute. Art is seen as the expression of a given thought—the *idea*—being attained through abstraction and symbolic dimension: cubic forms which, expressing universal laws underlying nature, have informed all great periods of art. Le Corbusier found similar ideas in *Les Grands initiés*, by Schuré,⁴ given to him by L'Eplattenier when he departed on his initiatory trip to Italy in 1907. He started reading it in Italy and finished it in Vienna.⁵ The book explores the same ideas of esoteric knowledge or a universal truth that traverses history, and of the need for a spiritual revival of modern civilization. The focus shifts from art and artists to religion and an elite of mystical prophets, who were the guardians of the “*eternal truth*” at the base of the great periods of civilization. This background was preparatory to the reading of *Sanctuaires d'Orient* during the Viennese sojourn in 1908.⁶

Schuré (1841-1929) was a playwright, novelist and music critic.⁷ He had an extensive knowledge of German philosophical idealism, maintaining personal contacts with Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche. Inspired by Wagner's dream of revitalizing mythology through drama, Schuré himself attempted to stage his own sacred dramas and probed into music writing. He was an evocator more than a man of erudition, a specialist or an objective historian, as Alain Mercier has put it. Underlying the esoteric tone of *Sanctuaires d'Orient*, however, one finds an idealistic world-view comprehensively expounded, through which Le Corbusier could frame the rather esoteric discourses of his previous readings.

The book is an account of his journey to the East—Egypt, Greece and Palestine. It is divided into four main sections, the first devoted to Muslim Egypt, the second to ancient Egypt, the third to ancient Greece, and the last one to the Holy Land. The main arguments are that, despite their diverse expressions, all religions are rooted in a single, universal religion, and that an independent spiritual movement of a transcendental nature must rise from within the lay world in order to put an end to the antagonism between the Christian Church and the University.

¹ All subsequent citations refer to the 1907 edition.

² For a comprehensive work on Le Corbusier's early years see Brooks, *Formative Years*. On the influence of Rousseau see Vogt, *Le Corbusier*, passim.

³ On the influence of this book in Le Corbusier see Turner, *Education*, p. 10-24.

⁴ All subsequent citations refer to the 1921 edition. See also Turner, *Education*, p. 24-29.

⁵ Le Corbusier to parents, 8 October 1907 and 31 January 1908, repr. in *Correspondance*, p. 49, 137.

⁶ Le Corbusier to parents, 31 January 1908, repr. in *ibid.*, p. 137.

⁷ For a comprehensive work on Schuré see Mercier, *Édouard Schuré*.

The aim is to retrieve this universal religion through a synthesis of religion, science and art, a synthesis to be found in the lost pagan relationship between Man and the divine forces of the natural world—the “*unité primordiale et finale*.” What is more, the retrieval of this original existence will be accomplished by applying the old tradition and symbols to a new universal meaning.

Based on these premises, Schuré explores the three countries he considers to be the great sources of the tradition and symbols of the Occident, and of its intellectual, artistic, moral and social life. Ancient Egypt is seen as the heir to the pagan understanding of the universe, having expressed this sacred ontology through symbols. One of these is the pyramid, which expresses the Absolute through abstraction and geometric laws, and by combining science and religion within a perfectly built geometric form.⁸ The other is the sphinx, the Guardian of the rising Sun. Facing east, it allegedly was originally crowned with a golden disk lit by the first rays of the sun, reconciling the vertical, cosmic axis with the horizontal, pantheistic axis.⁹ We recognize here two major icons of Hegel's theory on Egyptian art.

Schuré then traces the history of the split of this original pagan religion into several branches through the debate on Greece and Palestine. Concerning Greece, Romantic imagery is discussed, from the theme of an ideal society to that of the Greek fighter and of an existence transfigured by art, in a peaceful relationship with a mythic landscape. It echoes Hegel's theory on ancient Greek *Kunstreligion* (Art-as-religion), filtered by the Wagnerian notion of *Gesamkunstwerk*, which Schuré expresses through the concept of *vie intégrale* (complete life). As for Palestine, Schuré stresses the coexistence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While Judaism and Christianity are the two sides of the epistemological schism of the universal religion, he argues, Islam was founded upon both, reuniting the ontological values. Particular emphasis is given to the mosque of Omar (generally known as the Dome of the Rock) in Jerusalem, built on the site of Solomon's temple. Its dome is discussed in similar terms to those employed for the Egyptian pyramid: a perfectly built geometric form uniting science and religion. Schuré sees it as a symbol of the “*invisible chain*” that started in ancient Egypt, reconciling the Orient and the West. This explains the first section devoted to Muslim Egypt, in which he argues for the role of Islam in drawing forth a future synthesis of science, religion and art.

The historical account of the ontological transmission of pagan religion, extending beyond the bounds of this paper, ends with what Schuré considers to be the last attempt to re-establish a universal religion: the crusades of the Order of the Temple of Solomon. With this last assumption, Schuré completes the three stages of Hegel's philosophy of art—symbolic (Egyptian), classical, and romantic (Gothic) art.

2. Philosophical Background

The central assumption underlying Schuré's discourse consists of an evolutionary conception of history expressed at three levels: the history of civilization itself, of religion, and of art. Historical teleology is expressed in Schuré's faith in a new emerging era which, under the impulse of social and intellectual development, would fulfill historical destiny. The view of history as a chronological process of cultural development and progress towards a higher state of perfection has its roots in positivist thinking.¹⁰ In the face of growing knowledge of the Eastern world, this evolutionary principle had to deal with the evidence that values change with different

⁸ Schuré, *Sanctuaires*, 83-86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88-91.

¹⁰ On the theories of history I rely on Meinecke, *Historism*.

historical and environmental contexts. This is particularly evident in the artistic field. With Montesquieu, Voltaire, and later Winckelmann, art came to be seen as an expression of a particular people and their life as a whole, and thus dependent on specificities such as climate, political constitution, national character and the spirit of the age. This relativizing of history did not eschew the idea of historical development, however. The Enlightenment had proposed what has been called the “life cycle theory,” which explained the course of human events through the notion of the growth, maturity and decline of human creation. The correlation between these cycles became the focus in the nineteenth century. Early in 1821, Wilhelm von Humboldt conceived of history as a chain of events linked to each other in space and time.¹¹ This process, he argued, was governed by particular laws (e.g., of geography and climate) and by a more powerful active principle: original and eternal ideas which, not being directly visible because they lie outside the compass of the finite, impart impetus and direction to world history. It is the historian's task to reveal the essence of history by unveiling the idea or hidden spirit beneath the surface of historical events, just as the artist's task is to reveal the ideal form beneath the variable forms of the visible world. The nineteenth-century saw the nurturing of this belief in historical events driven by an eternal, original *idea* common to all cultures. Its most extreme vision is found in Hegel's philosophy of history and his belief that all socio-cultural phenomena are historically determined by final causes—a *universal will*.

Schuré's call to retrieve the universal religion is informed by these ideas of a driving force giving purpose to history. True, the positivist view of historical development was associated with the notion of a straightforward narration of progress from the religious to the secular. However, as men like David Hume and Kant show us,¹² the process of secularization never led to a total severing of connections with religion. While religious practices, institutions, and the nature of God were being questioned, religion tended to be seen as the state in which Man finds himself in relation to the world, such as in Hume's “natural religion.” The rationalist conception of nature as order and as a system of *a priori* rules became gradually associated with a Neo-Platonic understanding of the world. This view is expressed early on with Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), who supported the idea of the existence of interior forces of an immaterial nature hidden beneath the visible mechanistic framework of cause and effect, through which God calls life into being.¹³ All this paved the way for the counter-Enlightenment doctrines of pantheism and the related belief in an immaterial driving force hidden beneath the contingent factors of historical events.

This counter-Enlightenment positioning comes as no surprise. Questioning Christian theology required its replacement with new moral and social systems. Hegel's is the first comprehensive attempt to synthesize every aspect of existence into one such system.¹⁴ Rejecting the atheism of positivist thinking, Hegel sees religion as a fundamental issue of human consciousness. Placing himself on the threshold between the religious and non-religious world, he brought Christianity into the realm of the secular, firstly by considering it historically—that is, as a historical expression of an *idea*—and secondly by dissolving the *idea* in a pantheistic philosophical system. Rather than transcendence, God concerns Man's inner spirit and self-consciousness. In other words, God is the Absolute, immanent in the finite.

¹¹ Von Humboldt, “On the Historian's Task”.

¹² See Minois, *Histoire de l'athéisme*, chap. XII

¹³ On Vico see Meinecke, *Historism*, p. 37-53.

¹⁴ Minois, *Histoire de l'athéisme*, chap. XVII

Both Hegel's "doctrine of pantheism in the shape of humanity as an evolving God"¹⁵ and the more general pantheistic doctrines that saw nature as a manifestation of the Divine, of the Absolute, and as a revelation of the infinite, were reactions against the positivist "disenchantment of the world," as Max Weber termed it. Through them, the Romantics conceived of God as the Absolute, immanent in nature and history. This implied two notions that interest us here. First, the notion of the secular-sacred, a peaceful, pantheistic existence in harmony with the natural world, resurfacing in imagery such as that of pagan religion and of nature as Mother Earth, profusely explored by Schuré and his contemporaries. Second, the idea that, freed from Christian theology, man could give continuity to history and achieve a higher state, the iconic image of which is Nietzsche's *Übermensch* (*Superman*, or more precisely, *over-human*).¹⁶ In terms of historical development, these notions relate to two poles. On one pole is the myth of a golden age and of the Primitive, involving an original pantheistic existence, fusing reason and intuition. On the second, we find a renewed Christianity, which, to recall Hegel's conception, consists of the consummate or absolute religion, the religion of reconciliation. Judaism and Islam, in their turn, were seen as religions of the western Orient, forming a transition from pure oriental religions to Christianity.

Such is the basis of Schuré's renewed Christianity, a universal religion uniting science, religion and art, aiming at a higher state of mankind by retrieving a secular-sacred existence and an art expressing this fundamental lived experience. In fact, in the teleological principle of idealism, the emergence of a new era implied a return to a primitive identification with nature, a return to the primitive Absolute. It is this identification, understood as an ideal that traverses history beneath historical events, that underlies Schuré's notion of the "*unité primordiale et finale*" and Provensal's assertions on the "*invisible chain*" that brings together the "*truth of the past and that of the future*," uniting Man to the infinity of Universe.

Finally, this historical and religious perspective runs parallel with the theories of art history. Art, I have mentioned, came to be seen as an expression of a given culture and of its relation to the world, thus depending on contingent factors. However, as with the theories of history, a universal will was believed to lie beneath the contingent. With the impulse of Winckelmann, the nineteenth-century looked at art as a symbol and revelation of the divine. All great periods of art therefore shared the same fundamental symbols. Also, beauty was understood as something apprehensible more through impression than through reason, implying experience rather than *à priori* laws. Thus understood, symbols were a means to an epistemological experience, acquiring a key role in the development of art history. This explains Schuré's call for the study of symbols *in loco* (from ancient Egyptian to Muslim and Christian architecture), and of its purpose: to unveil through an experience of reason and intuition the eternal, original *idea* that, hidden beneath these symbols, traverses history and will allow a new society and its artistic expression to emerge.

In sum, through the reading of Schuré's *Sanctuaires d'Orient* in 1908, Le Corbusier was exposed to a consistent philosophical reasoning based on German idealism. The book clarified and broadened the Romantic discourse of his previous readings, allowing him to conceive of an idealistic world-view based on an evolutionary conception of history, given purpose by the *idea* of a secular-sacred existence, and in which the experience of mythic symbols is a vital means of re-enacting that existence and creating a new architectural style expressing the *zeitgeist*.

¹⁵ Meinecke, *Historism*, p. 506.

¹⁶ Note that Le Corbusier read Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in 1908/1909 and was struck by Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*, which has much in common with Provensal's elite of artists and Schuré's Initiates. Turner, *Education*, p. 56-61.

3. Schuré and Le Corbusier

In order to evaluate the influence of Schuré on Le Corbusier's subsequent period of travel, I will focus on the three points initially raised: his rejection of architectural schools, his approach to Notre-Dame, and the itinerary of the journey to the East.

An immediate manifestation of Schuré's influence concerns religion and universities. When, in 1908, Le Corbusier went home for Christmas, his father noted in his journal the complete modification of his son's beliefs and religious faith, which nonetheless coexisted with a feeling of confidence in the future.¹⁷ This signifies that Le Corbusier was abandoning his Protestant education and adhering to Schuré's lay movement and arguments on the revival of an original existence. Inklings of this had resurfaced by the end of the Viennese stay. In a letter to his brother Albert,¹⁸ he speaks of Italy as “*la Terre sacrée*”, imbued with an ideal to which he should be faithful. Moreover, this ideal is about to be revealed with the emergence of a renewed society:

“... ces phénomènes de transmission de la pensée à travers des pays entiers, s'observent de nos jours toujours plus nombreux (paraît-il). On devine-là une force inouïe qui va un jour se révéler; la force qui a fait les miracles des prophètes, des prêtres égyptiens, indoux (sic) ou persans. Schuré le constate comme une force terrible, des plus dangereuses ou d'une influence quasi-divine suivant les cas.”¹⁹

The modification of his beliefs was consistent with his rejection of university, which in his case meant architectural schools. Le Corbusier's repeated refusal to continue his education at architectural school, and the fact that this was a contentious battle-ground between him and L'Eplattenier from the time of his arrival in Vienna until his German sojourn between 1910 and 1911, illuminates the extent to which he absorbed Schuré's critique of the antagonism between the Christian Church and the University.

This is already felt in Vienna, where we also find the idea of historical development and of a universal ideal underlying it. During the school years at La Chaux-de-Fonds, Le Corbusier had acquired the notion of three great historical periods: ancient Egypt, ancient Greece and the Middle Ages.²⁰ This idea was mainly associated with ornament through authors such as Owen Jones.²¹ A letter to Albert reveals that, during the reading of Schuré, he came to see these historical periods as major expressions of philosophical ideas, upon which a new modern architecture should be built. Confessing his doubts on the Viennese modern movement, he wrote:

“... l'étude sérieuse ferait placer en première ligne l'Égypte puis la Grèce et tout au bout la Chrétienté pour l'expression des idées de grande philosophie !”²²

¹⁷ Quoted in Dumont, ed., *Lettres à Charles L'Eplattenier*, p. 194.

¹⁸ Le Corbusier to Albert, 2 February 1908, repr. in *Correspondance*, 147-149.

¹⁹ Le Corbusier to parents, 11 February 1908, repr. in *ibid.*, p.150-154.

²⁰ Le Corbusier wrote about L'Eplattenier's teaching: “*Pour lui, trois grandes périodes demeurent: l'Égypte avec le lotus, la Grèce avec l'acanthé, le Gothique avec les fleurs et les bêtes des bois...*” Le Corbusier, *L'Art décoratif*, p. 198.

²¹ Copying artistic motifs from Jones's *Grammaire de l'ornement* was a routine exercise in the school of arts. *Ibid.*, 135. Motifs ranged from the ancient cultures of Egypt, Asia and Greece to the middle ages and the Renaissance. While suggesting an evolutionary succession of these styles, Jones saw the architecture of ancient Egypt as a pure original style. See Jones, *Grammar*, 22.

²² Le Corbusier to Albert, 15 December 1907, repr. in *Correspondance*, p. 103-104

If we accept the above, consequences in his subsequent approach to architecture are to be expected. The earliest paradigmatic example is his reaction to Notre-Dame during his sojourn in Paris and the preparatory readings associated with it. Instead of enrolling in an architectural school, Le Corbusier devoted the first months of his stay to studying at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, where he paid particular attention to Edouard Corroyer's *L'Architecture romane*.²³ The book is a study of the genesis and development of the Christian church, the aim of which was to understand the genesis of the Gothic, dealt with in a second volume. The historical account, building upon Viollet-le-Duc, gives continuity to a historical approach that extends back to Julien-David Le Roy's *Histoire de la disposition des formes différentes que les chrétiens ont données à leur temples depuis Constantin le Grand jusqu'à nous* (Paris, 1764).²⁴ It explains the genesis of the Romanesque, ranging from the influence of the Orient—from Syria to Byzantium—to the early Catholic appropriations of the Roman basilica and Romanesque architecture. The gradual evolution is explained in terms of the functional needs of Christian ritual, exploring the technical solutions and principles that characterize the distinct typologies.

In functional and spatial terms, Corroyer presents the problem as the tension between longitudinal and centralized plans. Romanesque architecture, he posits, emerged directly from Byzantine and Roman architecture (a statement copied by Le Corbusier in his sketchbook²⁵), having undergone a process of wavering between a longitudinal development of space and a centralized plan. This process ultimately led to their reconciliation in the cross plan with a dome of the Gothic church. In compositional and technical terms, emphasis is put on the association between the typological definition and building system, discussed as a set of distinct ways of assembling structural elements with simple geometric forms—from domes to columns and arches—and with each combination corresponding to a different spatial and formal result.

Le Corbusier summarized the main historical steps presented by Corroyer in his sketchbook, in an attempt to understand the association between the structural solutions and simple forms of architectural elements. This is particularly explicit in the pages devoted to Hagia Sophia. He copied Corroyer's illustration (fig.1) and translated the description of the conceptual and building principles into a scheme of assembled structural forms: four large piers with four arches and a central dome, the transition between the square and the circle being achieved by means of pendentives.

The technical principles are nevertheless seen as the means of achieving a given spatial solution, in this case the prevailing of the longitudinal direction. Next to the plan and cross-section Le Corbusier wrote:

“Ste Sophie a voulu se souvenir de la basilique (surtout celle de Constantin de Rome) par la tendance à revenir au plan rectangulaire— les bas côtés par contre sont bien sacrifiés.”

²³ Note that the word “romane” means Romanesque in French, whereas the word for ancient Roman would be “Romaine”.

²⁴ Continuing a discourse which started with the Abbé Jean-Louis de Cordemoy and the Graeco-Gothic ideal, Leroy traces the gradual unfolding process of architecture that had led to the Christian church, from the Roman basilica to Hagia Sophia, St. Mark in Venice, or St. Peter in Rome. On Le Roy see Middleton, Introduction to Le Roy, *The Ruins*.

²⁵ Corroyer, *L'Architecture romane*, 156; Le Corbusier, *Carnet A2-19-108*, p. 47-48.

He then copied Corroyer's statement:

*“La Construction de S^{te} Sophie est une merveille, car nulle part on n'à appliqué av. tant de hardiesse et de franchise les principes de l'architecture rationnelle.”*²⁶

Technique is thus seen as the means of attaining a given spatial solution. Moreover, Schuré allowed him to look at the spatial solution not in functional terms, but as a meaningful experience. The point to be made here is that rationalism meant not an end in itself, but an objective means of attaining the *idea*. This reconciling principle of rationalism and idealism is revealed in his annotations about Notre-Dame.

Apart from reading Corroyer, Le Corbusier had bought Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire raisonné*, where he certainly recognized the source of Corroyer's arguments.²⁷ The time he devoted to both was preparatory to his study of Gothic architecture.²⁸ Allen Brooks has noted that his sketchbook of Notre-Dame does not show a concern with structural problems, but rather with visual effects and decoration.²⁹ He was seeking to learn how art forms embody an idea, Brooks adds, endeavoring to deduce from medieval art how to apply a controlling idea to modern architecture. This is shown by a note in which Le Corbusier writes about *“the subjective impression rendered by the idea.”* Anne Prache, on the other hand, has noted that the sketchbook annotations reveal Le Corbusier's sensitiveness to the environment of the cathedral and to the prospect it offers.³⁰ In fact, these annotations reveal that his study of the Gothic focused on the emotional experience of space. He writes on how the illusion created by the raw stone and light filtered by the stained-glass windows reaches its paroxysm, constituting the *“internal raison d'être”* of the cathedral;³¹ and this *raison d'être*, or *idea*—the illusion—is seen as a product of reason. This paroxysm, he writes, can be translated into mathematics, as the *“common measure and means; a point at which materials are linked to each other in an invisible way.”*³² This passage echoes Provensal's assertions on a synthesis of science and art through mathematical rapports and mystical numerology: art manifests the divine through universal laws of unity, number and harmony, appealing to both the physical senses and mind. At a more general level, however, it resonates with Schuré's synthesis of science, religion and art, the ultimate aim of which is to attain the *idea*.

Le Corbusier was thus searching for a synthesis of spirit and matter, and looking at the rationalist discourse on the Gothic in light of Schuré's assertions on the Egyptian pyramid: an expression of the Absolute combining science and religion within a perfectly built form. If this is so, the insight into the medieval structure of Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire* and Le Corbusier's interest in visual effects must be seen as complementary rather than contrasting concerns—a synthesis in which rationalism is an objective means of attaining a given *“subjective*

²⁶ Le Corbusier, *Carnet A2-19-108*, p. 33; Corroyer, *L'Architecture romane*, p. 124-25.

²⁷ See “Architecture,” in Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire*, vol.1, p.116-452.

²⁸ “Ayant fini l'étude du style roman et ayant bien compris toutes les phases de son développement, je poursuis par l'étude du gothique et, parallèlement à l'étude des livres, je fais l'étude pratique en passant des heures précieuses sur Notre-Dame, le chef-d'œuvre incontestable et le monument unique de l'art pendant vingt siècles.” Le Corbusier to parents, 14 June 1908, repr. in *Correspondance*, p. 188.

²⁹ Brooks, *Formative Years*, 171-172. The sketchbook, hereafter cited as *Notre-Dame Carnet*, belongs to a private collection. For its content I rely on Brooks and on the several quotations in Prache, “Begegnung mit Notre-Dame”.

³⁰ Prache, “Begegnung mit Notre-Dame,” p. 276.

³¹ Le Corbusier, *Notre-Dame Carnet*, p. 14, 16, 18, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 277-279.

³² *Ibid.*

impression.”³³ Furthermore, we might expect this subjective impression to concern a fundamental experience—an ahistorical *idea*. Notre-Dame provided the paradigmatic Parisian laboratory for understanding this synthesis because, as Schuré had written, Gothic architecture expressed the last attempt to re-establish a universal religion. Hence the word “*antique*” to characterize Notre-Dame,³⁴ revealing Schuré's historical conception and view of the Gothic as descended from Egyptian art.

Viollet-le-Duc's ideas and the rationalism of the French discourse on the Gothic, it must be stressed, were quite compatible with, and complementary to, the idealism of Schuré. All shared several key aspects. First, as we have seen, an evolutionary conception of history which, finding its roots in the orient, should be accomplished by the modern era. Second, an idealistic view in which rationalism is the means of achieving something deeper, that is, an artistic expression, understood as a spiritual concept and manifestation of an ideal.³⁵ Third, an experiential and symbolic understanding of architecture, which, being conceived by the spirit, should provoke an essential emotive response: Schuré emphasized the pure geometry and rigorous construction of the ancient symbols of Egypt as the means for an epistemological experience; Viollet-le-Duc saw the Gothic as a model for a new human-centered architecture, connecting man and God.³⁶

In order now to better understand the relevance of this dialectical interaction between rationalism and idealism and its links with the journey to the East it is worth demonstrating that we find the same essential attitude towards architecture during the trip. Hagia Sophia is a paradigmatic example. From Corroyer and Viollet-le-Duc, Le Corbusier was aware that the building constituted a key moment in the evolutionary process of western architecture. The Parisian sketch after Corroyer shows that Le Corbusier was attentive to the technical solutions and compositional principle based on assembled simple forms. This resurfaces in the Turkish sketches, where Le Corbusier attempts to reconstruct the original volumetric expression of the exterior composition. The annotation on one of the sketches (fig.2) reads:

“ce sont les cubes qui agissent et l'embrochement”

³³ The attempt to explain subjective experience through objective means can be found in several discourses in the nineteenth century. This is the case of the idealistic attempts to create a *kunstwissenschaft*, or a science of art, the most radical expression of which is probably Gottfried Semper's comparative method. It permeated discourses on, for example, the theories of *Einfühlung* (empathy), which Le Corbusier would become aware of during his stay in Germany, as well as the architectural debate of nineteenth-century France, namely Viollet-le-Duc's approach to the Gothic. For the influence of the theories of Empathy during the German stay see Passanti, “Architecture,” p. 83-85. On resonances of these ideas on Viollet-le-Duc see, for example, his *Entretiens*, vol.1, p.17-19, 22.

³⁴ “D'autre part à côté de l'abstraction des mathématiques pures, je lis Viollet-le-Duc, cet homme si sage, si logique, si claire et si précis dans ses observations. J'ai Viollet-le-Duc et j'ai Notre-Dame qui me sert de table de laboratoire pour ainsi dire. Dans cette merveilleuse bâtisse je contrôle les dires de V. le Duc, et j'y fais mes petites observations personnelles. C'est là aussi que je vais faire mes séances de dessin 'd'après l'antique'(!) ...” Le Corbusier to L'Eplattenier, 3 July 1908, repr. in *Lettres à L'Eplattenier*, p. 171.

³⁵ “Nous ne parlerons donc que du style qui appartient à l'art considéré comme conception de l'esprit ... Qu'est-ce donc que le style? C'est, dans une œuvre d'art, la manifestation d'un idéal établi sur un principe.” Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire*, vol.8, p.478.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 147-148.

By contrast, and despite his efforts, he found it hard to deal with the interior:

*“L’intérieur de Ste Sophie me porterait volontiers à blasphémer. Mais je ne risque pas l’enfer légèrement, j’attends.”*³⁷

Why this difficulty in interpreting the interior? The crux of the problem was the deciphering of the *idea*, or of the fundamental experience underlying the architectural solution and its rational principles. By the time Le Corbusier visited Hagia Sophia—and this is still so today—the correspondence between structure and form was much clearer inside than outside, where the Ottoman additions attached to the original building compromise the perception of assembled forms. Therefore, his endeavor to comprehend the interior did not consist of a rationalist reading of structure, form and function, which he read in the compromised exterior. Rather, it consisted in deciphering the subjective dimension attained through it. The problem, as in Notre-Dame, was how to explain subjective experience through objective means.

How he understood this subjective dimension can be deduced from his interpretation of the classical mosques of Istanbul, the typology of which was strongly marked by the Byzantine basilica. Auguste Klipstein, his traveling companion, described the mosques of Istanbul in his journal as

*“eternal representations of Hagia Sophia, yet ingenious and often brilliant repetitions, which very often surpass the original.”*³⁸

This shows that Le Corbusier was well aware of the connections between Hagia Sophia and the typology of the classical Ottoman mosque. He could therefore easily interpret the experiential and symbolic dimension of the former through latter.

As happened with Hagia Sophia, he struggled to comprehend the Ottoman mosques (fig. 3). In an article published in two parts in the periodical *Feuille d’Avis*,³⁹ after having left Turkey, he summarized the mosques as an ordering of elementary geometric forms with a square plan, a central dome (high so that prayers may rise) and the mihrab on the opposite side to the entrance (a door to the Kaaba). Underlying these words is the view of a play of elementary forms submitted to a vertical and horizontal axis.

Again, the mediating key to understanding this interpretation is Schuré, his assertions on the meaningful reconciliation of the horizontal and vertical axes in the Egyptian sphinx, and his view of the reuniting of the ontological values in Islam. Schuré had argued that worshippers in Muslim rituals, in turning towards Mecca, also turn towards the rising sun, marking the path of the sun.⁴⁰ What is more, in discussing geometry and axial arrangement as the means for an epistemological experience uniting science and religion, he had discussed the meaning of this axis in Aryan worship as an immaterial light that traverses all ancient religions through the cult of the sun.⁴¹ Le Corbusier saw the classical Ottoman mosque as a sphinx, with its dome as a majestic disc,⁴² and

³⁷ Le Corbusier to L’Eplattenier, 18 July, 1911, repr. in *Lettres à L’Eplattenier*, p. 277-279.

³⁸ See Ivan Zaknic, *Eastern Journeys*, chap. 1. I would like to thank Ivan Zaknic for an advance view of the manuscript of this chapter.

³⁹ Le Corbusier, “Les Mosquées,” *Feuille d’Avis*, 22 and 25 November 1911; repr. in *Voyage d’Orient* with minor changes.

⁴⁰ Schuré, *Sanctuaires*, p. 40, 60-61.

⁴¹ Idem., *Les Grands initiés*, p. 293-294.

argued that the orientation of the axis of every mosque towards the Kaaba is an awe-inspiring symbol of the unity of the faith.⁴³ Millions of faithful face Mecca, he wrote, radiating the same adoration when boundless horizons bite into the bloody disc of the sun.⁴⁴ It is only reasonable to interpret this reference to an “awe-inspiring” symbol and to the “unity of the faith” in terms of Schuré’s arguments on an ontological solar religion, and in terms of his view of the vertical and horizontal axes as symbols of the “invisible chain” (or *universal will*) that traverses history.

Between Paris and Istanbul, then, Le Corbusier shows the same idealistic attitude towards architecture, searching for a subjective dimension attained through rationalism, common to the main periods of historical development. Also through Schuré, he came to look at the vertical and horizontal axes as a symbol of this *universal truth*. Be it in Hagia Sophia or the Ottoman mosque, rationalism was to resolve the association between these axes, ordering elementary forms, and the epistemological experience of architecture. It was this “eternal” subjective dimension attained through rationalist means that Le Corbusier searched for during these years and the years to come.

Looking at the itinerary of the journey to the East in light of Schuré’s book and Corroyer and Viollet-le-Duc’s conception of architectural history, his decision to extend the initial plans to travel to Rome comes as no surprise. Even if it was Klipstein who challenged him to travel to Istanbul, Le Corbusier did have a purpose in expanding the itinerary to include Turkey, Mount Athos, Greece and the south of Italy. Byzantine, Muslim, ancient Greek and ancient Roman architecture were part of a broad transitional context in the history of western architecture, ranging from ancient Syria to the Renaissance, the study *in situ* of which was necessary for the foundation of a new modern architecture. Significantly, he wished to visit the Egyptian pyramids and the Dome of the Rock, although both were eventually dropped.⁴⁵

Le Corbusier’s repeated refusal to enroll in an architectural school, his endeavor to comprehend Notre-Dame as a rationalist means of attaining a *subjective impression*, the itinerary of the journey to the East and his association of the Ottoman mosque with the Egyptian sphinx, illustrate how Le Corbusier’s autodidactic agenda during his formative years followed a consistent idealistic world-view largely absorbed through reading Schuré’s *Sanctuaires d’Orient*.

4. Idealism and Le Corbusier’s Architecture

The lasting influence that nineteenth-century idealism exerted upon Le Corbusier is too vast and complex to be discussed here. To conclude, then, I will briefly discuss one single aspect of it: the right angle. Let me start with his *Croisade; ou, le crépuscule des académies*.

Le Corbusier’s lifelong rejection of the Academies is well known. In his *Croisade*, the view of his own work as a crusade reminds us of Schuré’s arguments on the last attempt to re-establish a universal religion by the lay knights of the Order of Temple. The connection goes far beyond the title. Ideas such as a “*broad emerging crusade towards the universal thought*,” a “*renewed life form*,” or the search for a new “*balance of spirit and*

⁴² Le Corbusier, “Les Mosquées,” 25 November 1911.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 22 November 1911.

⁴⁴ *Idem.*, “Constantinople III,” *Feuille d’Avis*, 18 November 1911; repr. in *Voyage d’Orient*.

⁴⁵ Le Corbusier to L’Eplattenier, 18 July 1911, repr. in *Lettres à L’Eplattenier*, p. 279.

matter” to be found in a “*millennial relationship between man and nature*,”⁴⁶ clearly go back to Schuré’s call to retrieve an original relationship between Man and nature and to the nineteenth-century conception of history as an evolutionary process. Le Corbusier saw himself as the artist whose task it was to fulfill historical destiny.

Fulfilling historical destiny implied retrieving the “*millennial relationship between man and nature*,” to use his words. This implied the recovery of its symbols: the vertical and horizontal axes. We have seen that, in associating the vertical and horizontal axes of Ottoman mosque with the Egyptian sphinx, Le Corbusier recognized the reuniting of ontological symbols in Islam. Moreover, Corroyer and Viollet-le-Duc, who presented the Gothic as a final stage of the evolutionary process of the typology of the Christian church, reconciling the longitudinal and vertical axes, may well have helped him to look at these symbols as a constant in all great periods of art. Thus he saw the Parthenon in similar terms: a cube extending the vertical thrust of the Acropolis and facing the sea.⁴⁷ This established the basis for the exploration of the theme of the right angle throughout his work.

His *Poème de l'angle droit*, published in the fifties, shows how he incorporated Schuré’s discourse into his poetic world. The connection is first revealed in 1924. In the article “L'Angle Droit” published in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, the right angle is presented as the key issue of modern art, articulating the main themes of Schuré’s idealistic worldview. The article calls for a sense of the sacred through a laicized “*hiératismes*” to be attained through the spirit of order of the right angle in art. Defined by a vertical and a horizontal axis, the right angle is a sign or conventional symbol. Its roots are to be found in the art of the past (ancient Egypt provides the epitome) but it traverses all great periods of art history. The constancy of this symbol is explained by the applicability of constant laws to the work of art of all times. These laws are the vertical axis, a primary instinct established by gravity, and the horizontal axis, defined by the movements of the human body, from which proceeds Man’s knowledge of the world. Because these axes are a result of the constancy of the human body (the physical and sentimental organization of Man), they act upon the senses and satisfy the imperative of Man’s sensibility, independently of historical time. The right angle, it is posited, is a universal fact. Contemporary art cannot therefore stand in opposition to this primary instinct of human nature. It must incorporate the spirit of order of the right angle and accomplish the aim of the new cycle that started with the Enlightenment: to attain a period of “*hiératismes*” (“*knowledge of the means, choice of signs and spirit of geometry*”), meaning the state of mind (*état d'esprit*) attained by a civilization after leaving the empiricist period and acquiring consciousness of what previously had only been felt (Schuré’s *complete life*).

In this article, then, we find the main points of Schuré’s idealism: the belief in a universal truth that traverses history and the evolutionary conception of history associated with it, permeated by the “life cycle theory”; the call for a lay movement in order to re-establish an existence fusing science, religion and art; the view of art as a means to an epistemological experience and its capacity to re-establish the ideal existence; and the belief in a new emerging society and art. All this is symbolized by the right angle, ultimately related to the symbols of ancient Egypt.

Schuré’s discourse on the Egyptian sphinx, I mentioned, feeds upon Hegel’s aesthetics, involving a reductive translation of form into meaningful geometry and axes. For Hegel, the sphinx is the symbol of the symbolic

⁴⁶ Idem., *Croisade*, p. 17-18, 25-26.

⁴⁷ Idem., *Voyage d'Orient*, p. 153-154.

itself, the “*objective riddle*” *par excellence*. With a human head, it expresses the will of the human spirit to break free from the dull weight of matter. This pressure for self-conscious spirituality and its links with the notion of universal will were expanded by Arthur Schopenhauer’s discourse on *free will*⁴⁸ and translated by Gottfried Semper into visual physical terms in his *Style*⁴⁹ by exploring the symbolic meaning of the vertical and horizontal axes in the creation of form. The vertical axis, Semper argues, expresses the struggle of the organic vital force against matter (gravity). The horizontal axis expresses the freedom of will and movement. The right angle, defined by both and expressed in the human head, is the symbol of absolute free will.

Le Corbusier had become aware of Semper’s arguments, at least through Charles Blanc, as far back as his school years.⁵⁰ Following on from Semper, Blanc discusses how the axes are reflected in the human face, their meaning in terms of spiritual and moral values, and the applicability of this principle in art. What the 1924 article shows us is how these discourses were preparatory to, and enriched, Le Corbusier’s interpretation of Schuré’s discourse.

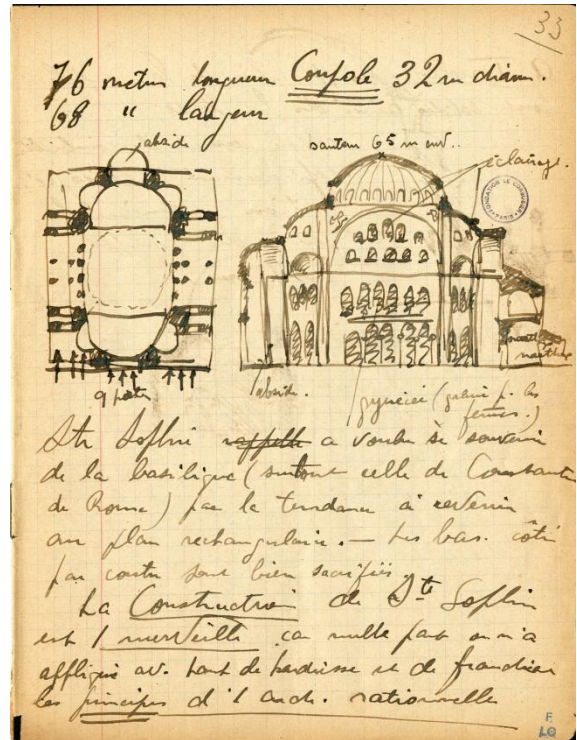
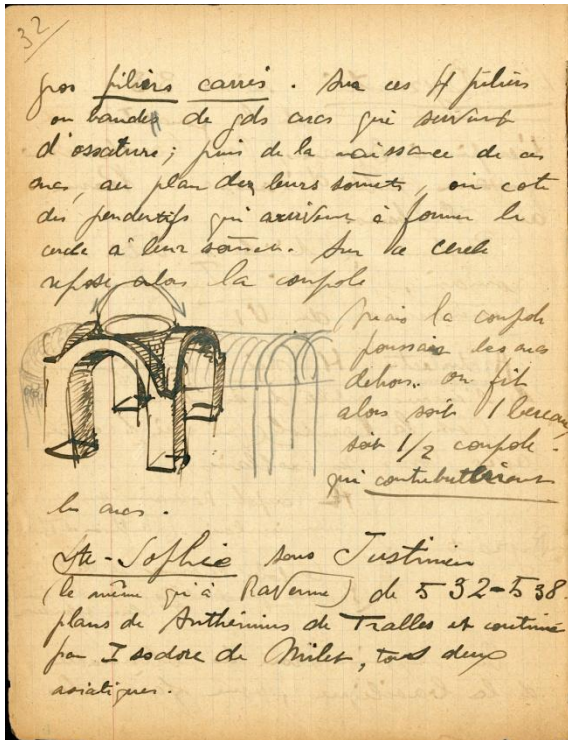
Indeed, the meaning that Le Corbusier attributed to the right angle expresses the lifelong influence of nineteenth-century idealism and of the German philosophical tradition: the absolute free will of the modern man and the renewed life form of modern society. Cases such as the *unité d’habitation* of Marseilles illustrate well how Le Corbusier constructed his architecture upon this idealistic legacy, incorporating the right angle both in symbolic terms and as a proposal for the new way of life of the *Übermensch* of an emerging society (fig. 4). Architecture, with its vertical impulse and orientation towards the rising and setting sun, expresses the ontological symbol and enacts its experiential pantheistic dimension.

⁴⁸ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*.

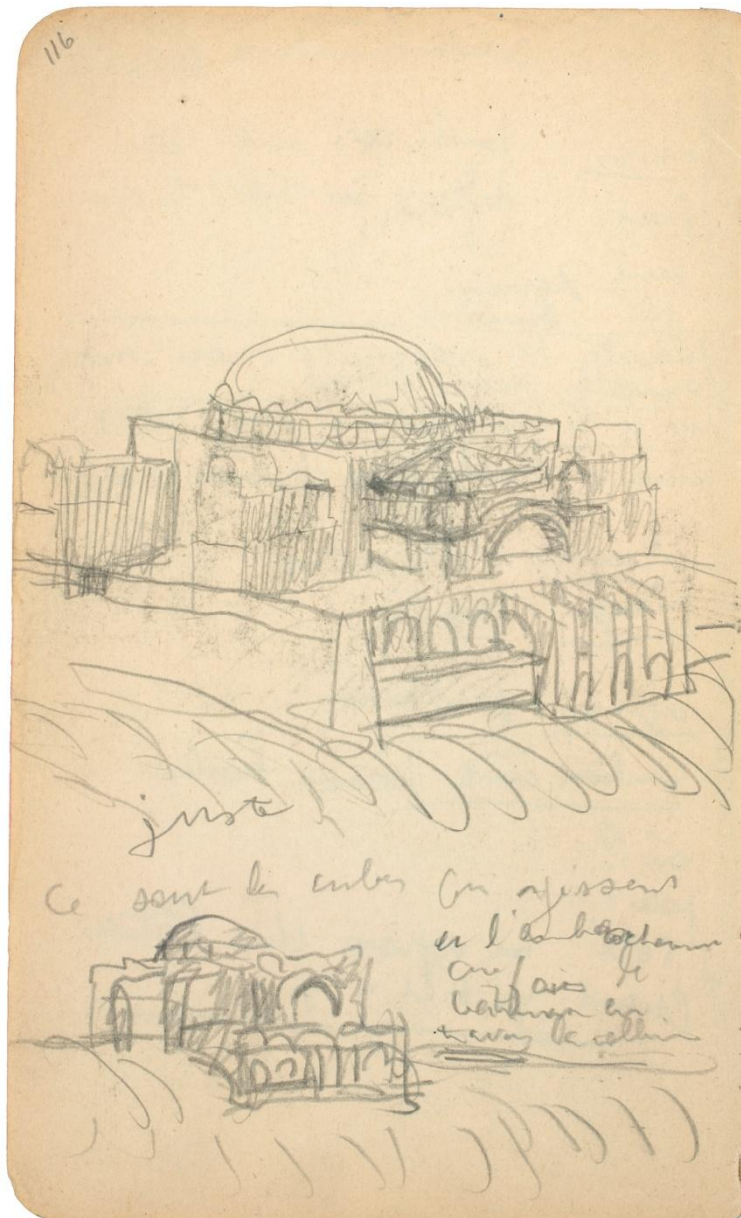
⁴⁹ Semper, “Prolegomena,” in *Style*, p. 83-96.

⁵⁰ Blanc, *Grammaire*, p. 26-37. Blanc’s book was a recurrent reading of Le Corbusier at least since 1907.

5. Figures



1. Le Corbusier. Notes after Corroyer's *L'Architecture romaine*. Hagia Sophia. Structural principle, plan and cross-section. FLC A2-19-108, 1908, p. 32, 33.



2. Le Corbusier. Hagia Sophia, 1911. Sketchbook 2, p. 116.



3. Le Corbusier. Süleymaniye mosque. Sketch, 1911. FLC 2384.



4. Le Corbusier. From *Le Poème de l'angle droit*, p. 61.

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