
VIEL DE SAINT-MAUX AND THE SYMBOLISM OF PRIMITIVE ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract: *One of the sources usually disregarded by the scholarship on 18th century architecture is a volume of seven letters published in 1787 by an obscure architect, Viel de Saint-Maux, under the ambitious title Lettres sur l'Architecture des Anciens, et celle des Modernes, dans lesquelles se trouve développé le génie symbolique qui présida aux Monuments de l'Antiquité. The author of these letters speculated on the grounding of (classical) architecture onto an essentially tectonic culture, disregarding completely the paradigm of the forest. More precisely, according to him, the modern architecture must have been rooted in the megalithic assemblies which, furthermore, were religiously connoted through the medium of mysterious inscriptions. Extravagant and obscure as they were, the conjectures advanced by Viel de Saint-Maux are worth being read as an attempt to revive the theoretical discourse – even if virulently contesting the Vitruvian tradition – by resorting to allegory and symbolism. It is precisely this intricacy of myth, metaphor and history encapsulated within Viel de Saint-Maux's discourse that my paper deals with.*

Keywords: *architectural language, metaphor, symbolic genius, primitive, architectural origin.*

Jean-Louis Viel de Saint-Maux is not quite a notorious name in eighteenth century architectural theory. Largely ignored during the past two centuries, his very identity made the object of a dispute, solved only in 1966.¹ His contribution to the contemporary debate on architecture was a small volume of seven letters, published, in the eve of the French Revolution, under the title *Lettres sur l'Architecture des Anciens, et celle des Modernes, dans lesquelles se trouve développé le génie symbolique qui présida aux Monuments de l'Antiquité* (1787).

Viel's volume obviously lacks a coherent structure, probably due to the

previous publication of most of its content, individually, from 1779 to 1785. The first two letters, initially issued as pamphlets, were meant to indicate the profound connection between building and cult, while describing the “symbolic types” which determined the monuments of Antiquity. The third one, instead, scrutinized the ancient communities, whose festivities, temples or simulacrum participated in a unique symbolic language, destined to express “Nature's causes” and the “attributes” of the Divine Creator. The fourth letter proposed an unusual analysis of the architectural order, while the next one elaborated on the architectonics of caves and grottos. After a comparative examination of modern and ancient architecture in the sixth letter, the volume was closed by an essay on the genius of the agrarian communities.

Apart from being mentioned or briefly summarized in various historical surveys², these letters benefited from the illuminating and erudite reading of several scholars. Anthony Vidler, in his classical book published in 1987, emphasized Viel's symbolical approach of architectural origins, as well as the epistemological complexity on which it was grounded, mainly the contemporary voyage accounts

and the cosmology of Antoine Court de Gébelin.³ Five years later, Nadir Lahiji dedicated a PhD research to the phallic symbolism implied by Viel's letters, interpreting them as a sort of treatise on the origins of the cult of fertility.⁴ More recently, in 2007, Richard Witmann discussed the theories of Marc-Antoine Laugier and Viel de Saint-Maux from the perspective of "the aspirations and anxieties imbedded in these two narratives", considered as important hallmarks of the profound "contemporary changes in the structure of the French public sphere".⁵ Finally, particularly comprehensive is the detailed analysis of David E. Winterton, centered – *inter alia* – on Viel's approach to nature, presumably shaped by the evolution of the natural history as mirrored by the revolutionary work of Buffon.⁶

Confronted with such a variety of viewpoints, one can hardly add something new. Running this risk, my intention is to explore the instrumentality of Viel's discourse in relating architecture to allegory, myth and metaphor. As Alberto Pérez-Gómez thoroughly observed, two consequential transformations marked the boundaries of the crisis of modern architectural culture. The first one occurred toward the end of the seventeenth century, when Newtonianism, within a more comprehensive process of mathematization and systematization of knowledge, also informed the architectural theory. Nearly one century later, the second mutation was caused by the loss of the poetic content, transcending the mere technological process to which architecture had gradually been reduced.⁷ Among other queer approaches of architecture (Le Camus de Mézières, Ribart de Chamoust, Étienne-Louis Boullée or Claude-Nicolas Ledoux), Viel de Saint-Maux's extravagant ideas aimed at disclosing long forgotten truths, meanings and energies, destined to pervade the void of an excessively rationalized architecture.

Underlying Knowledge

The knowledge on which Viel's ideas were grounded is lavishly displayed in the

footnotes of five of his seven letters which, according to the contemporary standards, must have been regarded as a scientific work. Overflowingly manifold, this knowledge can be classified in several categories, such as ancient historiography and literature, natural history, mythology, physiocracy, ethnography and viatic literature. Mostly revealed as fundamental for Viel's *Weltanschauung* are two types of texts, namely the monumental work of Antoine Court de Gébelin, *Le monde primitif [...]* (1773-1782), and various descriptions of exotic territories, among which the voyage accounts of Engelbert Kaempfer, Frederick Norden, Cornelius de Bruyn and Richard Pococke.⁸

On the one hand, Gébelin's encyclopedic enterprise, centered on the theme of the universal language, grammar and writing, was important as it configured Viel's own version of the primitive world, as described in the first of the nine volumes, which was a synthesis of the entire material. In short, supposedly the most important and genuine authority for world's history was the ancient mythology, a vast allegory of astronomic phenomena and agrarian customs, the junction of which was symbolically codified through the main characters of the mythological pantheon: for instance, Ceres was seen as the allegory of crops, Hercules stood for clearing the forest and so on. According to Antoine Court de Gébelin, the primitive human must have lived in harmonious communities and, unlike an instinct-driven savage, he must have had an allegorical conception of the world.⁹ The impetus to this allegorized mythological universe was the "symbolic genius of Antiquity", a force supposedly able to "animate the entire Nature, to personify all inanimate or moral beings, to provide the desirable instructions as accounts of past events; to depict the most elevated, respectable and important objects as corporeal figures."¹⁰

On the other hand, the travel accounts – mainly those of Kaempfer and Pococke, which were, in fact, substantial treatises, exceeding the mere "touristic" interest –

provided the material culture instrumented as evidence for Viel's theory. Accordingly, various edifices – temples or just simple decorative stones – were thoroughly depicted and ascribed to a barely explained timelessness, insofar as the geographical remoteness was turned into a remote temporality. At the same time, this scenario emphasized the displacement of the architectural prototype, which was no more European, but somehow exotic.

Apart from the various texts mobilized into Viel's discourse, one can also discern more subtle flows of knowledge, derived from diverse epistemological trends circulated in the late eighteenth century Paris: for instance, a certain "ontology" of agriculture inferred from François Quesnay's physiocratic theories¹¹, as well as a sort of "natural history" rooted in the works of Buffon or Roger Schabol¹², not to mention a dialectics of a universal "pneumatology" nurtured by the largely influential ideas of Franz Anton Mesmer.¹³

Viel's Scenario: Primitive World and Symbolic Architecture

Recomposed from the straying narrative of his letters, Viel's theory may be outlined in several key-assertions.

Firstly, an unbridgeable gulf separates the modern architecture from the ancient one. The entire European architectural discourse, starting with Vitruvius and ending with Jacques-François Blondel, was built on error, mystification and concealing of an irreversible loss.¹⁴ In fact, Viel was convinced that *De Architectura libri decem* was even a modern forgery, since Vitruvius' epoch would hardly have felt necessary to convert into written discourse a language – the architecture itself – that was instinctively comprehensible for everybody.¹⁵ More precisely, all that survived from the primeval being of architecture was the exterior aspect – ratios, structures, ornaments – whereas the inner symbolic meaning was lost, and this situation was covered and justified by the

Vitruvian exegesis.¹⁶ According to Viel de Saint-Maux, this disruption was further increased by the invention of printing, which facilitated the dissemination of a false discourse, leading to the disappearance of the comprehensive sense of the things and, in the end, to the epistemological and social disintegration of the world.¹⁷

Secondly, the ancient architecture was profoundly intertwined with religion and ritual. More precisely, in an agrarian-allegorical primitive world, governed by a "symbolic genius", architecture evolved in close connection with the earth, its fertility and the order of seasons. As a result, the worship of fertility and the solar rites would have informed the symbolic shapes and the iconography of architecture.

Thirdly, the prototype of architecture was not the primitive hut, but an "altar". Likewise, the first sacred buildings were not temples but sanctuaries, holly places structured by a precise number of stones, significantly configured to correspond to the number of the months, or planets.¹⁸ Consequently, the architectural order – the keystone of classical architectural theory – had been wrongly believed to have derived from a wooden structure, whereas it must have developed from a sort of menhir (*pierre agricole*).¹⁹ Relying on the examples given in Pococke's book²⁰, he explained the component parts of the classical order, such as the capital, the triglyph or the architrave not as the logical articulation of precise constructive elements – presumably originated into the primitive hut – but as the expression of some lost rituals. For instance, the term *caput* (from which "capital" derived) was not referring to the human head, as in the Vitruvian dogma, but to the divinity masks which adorned the monoliths of the sanctuary. Likewise, the architrave (*zoofor*) derives from the beam surmounting the monoliths, which must have been decorated with zodiacal signs and topped by symbolic tripods (triglyphs).²¹ It is worth noting that, from this perspective, the origin of architecture is displaced from the realm of necessity into the one of sacredness.

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Par M. VIEL DE SAINT-MAUX,
*Architecte civil & militaire, Associé de l'Académie
Royale des Beaux-Arts & Architecture navale
de Marseille, & Correspondant de plusieurs
Académies.*



A P A R I S.

1787.

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Fourthly, the primitive architecture pertained to a complex and comprehensive symbolism. Viel de Saint-Maux, echoing Court de Gébelin's conviction that the primeval symbols were rooted in nature, considered the agrarian rites to have been the very foundation of architecture. Elaborating on this hypothesis, he describes certain architectonic entities – mentioned as “agrarian types”, “symbolic stones”, or simply “emblems” – spread across the entire world and destined to intermedicate the access to Divinity, the attributes of which were engraved in their shape and signs.²² These stones were, in fact, a sort of votive altars, suitable for worship and sacrifice and, at the same time, the first repositories of knowledge, since they were covered with the mysterious hieroglyphs of the primeval symbolic language.²³ The first column, for instance, must have been such

a “symbolic stone”, with letters and signs encapsulating a lost message.

Fifthly, in the Primitive world, the architecture was, in fact, a sort of language. Moreover, this universal symbolism carried on by architecture was a sort of “writing” as well, having preceded the speech itself. This “architectural text” turned the ancient monuments into a sort of book left to posterity – almost literally, through the union between tectonics and words. Hence, the architecture is not only the foundation of the original language, but also a “sign” in the great “prose of the world”, destined to be deciphered, recovered and reenacted.²⁴

Among multiple events contextualizing Viel's letters, two significant realities should be considered. On the one hand,

starting with the 1740s, from various reasons pertaining to political authority and social (self)representation²⁵, architecture was included in the public sphere as a means for debate. Moreover, the key-role played by architecture, as well as the readiness to discuss about it, were (indirectly) advocated by Jacques-François Blondel himself.²⁶ These circumstances paved the way for unusual approaches, like that of Le Camus de Mézières on the sensory responses to architecture, or that of Ribart de Chamoust on the natural origins of the French order.²⁷

On the other hand, the architectural imagery informed an occult discursiveness, with various implications (freemasonry or mesmerism among others), which symmetrically contributed, on its turn, to architectural discourse.²⁸ Antoine Court de Gébelin, for instance, whom Viel must have known personally, was a devout mesmerist and one of the prestigious Freemasons, a member – just like Viel himself – of the “Neuf Soeurs” Masonic Lodge.²⁹ The commitment to such a “secret society” might explain, in Viel’s case, the resort to ritual and symbolism in elucidating the conditions of primitive architecture. Likewise, the fashionable hypothesis of Franz Anton Mesmer concerning the “superfine fluid” that surrounded, penetrated and acted upon the entire universe, from planets to plants, could be traced into the ascensional forces relating primeval architecture to various divinities and constellations. In the late eighteenth century, such speculations were regarded as scientific truth, if not the very return to a lost and ancient science, possibly revealing the real nature of the primitive world.³⁰

However, the most resourceful among Viel’s propositions concerned *architecture as language*, not only as tectonics carrying forgotten messages, signs or hieroglyphs, but a sort of alphabet derived from the very architectural forms.³¹ This “linguistic” theory mirrored, in fact, a more widely preoccupation in the eighteenth century.

It was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, several decades before the issuing of Viel de Saint-Maux’ letters, hypothesized the precedence of the figurative language on the verbal one. His argument, however, emphasized the pressure of instinct: the “man of nature”, in a state of unceasing apprehension towards the surrounding world, would have been inclined to exaggerate the magnitude of events, phenomena, creatures or things, describing them disproportionately. Subsequently, after acquiring experience and with an improved reasoning, the primeval humans would have gradually replaced the figurative language, resorting only to metaphor when needed.³² After 1700, a constant philological inquiry into the origins of speech and the hypothetical Adamic language was paralleled by an increased interest for allegory and metaphor.³³ In his monumental book *Principj di una scienza nuova [...]*, published in 1725, Giovanni Battista Vico postulated the existence of two types of language, literal and metaphorical, while also asserting that metaphor and allegory were two fundamental – inasmuch as they were natural – categories of knowledge, used within a poetical thought since the “childhood” of the mankind. Therefore, the primitive human beings must have been naturally inclined – as by necessity – to create figurative concepts, communicating through the medium of a sort of hieroglyphic language.³⁴ Even if Vico’s theory was not widely reverberated during his lifetime, one cannot disregard, in the first half of the eighteenth century, the persistence of a mythical-poetical vision of the world, which could have influenced, during the following decades, the description of the primitive world, either by Jean-Jacques Rousseau or by Antoine Court de Gébelin. These three thinkers, separated by many decades, shared the conviction that the prehistoric stage of humanity was essentially figurative, and that the primeval form of communication was much more complex than a simple verbal articulation.

The “language” spoken by the primitive architecture, made of hieroglyphs, emblems and symbols, prefaced the confuse concept of “architecture parlante”, which covered a wide reality, from decipherment to rhetoric, from the didactic inscriptions on the walls to a more subtle process of (nature) speaking *through* architecture. Moreover, it opened up the way for the linguistic approach of architecture, which theorized the analogy between architecture and language, (using both grammar and vocabulary) or perhaps the more appropriate notion of “code”.³⁵

Unquestionably, Viel’s letters are radically different from any other contemporary discourse on architecture. Not only that he virulently contests the authority of the Vitruvian tradition, but he apparently rejects the very technical vocabulary and the concepts of the (French) architectural theory as well, such as *symétrie*, *disposition*,

ordonnance, *bienséance* or *caractère*.³⁶ Although he pretends to be a civil and military architect, he hardly speaks like an architect at all. In fact, his approach is *fundamentally exterior to architecture* and even, to a certain extent, useless if not *against* it. In these circumstances, it is quite challenging to argue that Viel’s discourse and the vision underlying it were, on the contrary, beneficial to architectural thought; that, unlike any other author of the late French Enlightenment, he tempted to articulate a very comprehensive (and strange) body of knowledge, previously let aside, to the main epistemological stream of Vitruvianism; that, last but not least, he infused a creative openness towards allegory into the traditional reflection on the art of building. Even if deprived of recognition, it is revealing to see some of Viel’s ideas surfacing into the twentieth architectural reflection – if only we were to think of semiotics and phenomenology.

Notes

¹ The confusion was made between Charles-François Viel and Jean-Louis Viel, presumably his brother. Sometimes in the 1780, when reinventing himself in Paris, Jean-Louis added the particule “de Saint-Maux” to his name. See Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos, *Charles-François Viel, Architecte de l’Hôpital general et Jean-Louis Viel de Saint-Maux, Architecte, peintre et avocat au Parlement de Paris*, in *Bulletin de la société d’histoire de l’art française*, 1966, p. 257-269.

² The most relevant are the following: Hanno-Walter Kruft, *Storia delle teorie architettoniche da Vitruvio al Settecento*, Laterza, Bari, 1988, p. 199; Liane Lefaivre & Alexander Tzonis, *The Emergence of Modern Architecture. A documentary history from 1000 to 1810*, Routledge, London & New York, 2004, p. 455-456; Harry Francis Mallgrave, *Modern Architectural Theory. A Historical Survey, 1673-1968*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2005, p. 86.

³ Anthony Vidler, *The Writing of the Walls. Architectural Theory in the Late Enlightenment*, Princeton Architectural Press, 1987, p. 139-146.

⁴ Nadir Lahiji, *The Column in the Mirror of Medusa: The Question of Symbolic Origin in Viel de Saint-Maux’s Lettres sur l’Architecture*, University of Pennsylvania, PhD dissertation, 1992.

⁵ Richard Wittman, *The Hut and the Altar: Architectural Origins and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France*, in Jeffrey S. Ravel & Linda Zionkowski (eds.), *Studies in Eighteenth-*

Century Culture, vol. 36, The John Hopkins University Press, 2007, p. 239-253; Richard Wittman, *Architecture, Print Culture, and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France*, Routledge, London, 2007, *passim* and especially p. 1-5.

⁶ David E. Winterton, *Toward a Natural History of Architecture. The Vegetal Culture of Viel de Saint-Maux*, McGill University, Montréal, MA Thesis, 1995. See also David E. Winterton, *Architecture and the Vegetal Soul*, in Alberto Pérez-Gómez & Stephen Parcel (eds.), *Chora Three. Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montréal, 1999, p. 255-280.

⁷ Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of the Modern Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 10-12.

⁸ The major works of all these travelers were available in French translations: Engelbert Kaempfer, *Histoire naturelle, civile et ecclesiastique du Japon*, 1732; Frederick Norden, *Voyage d’Egypte et de Nubie*, 1755; Cornelius de Bruyn, *Voyage [...] en Persia, et aux Indes Orientales*, 1718, Richard Pococke, *Voyages [...] en Orient, dans l’Egypte, l’Arabie, la Palestine, la Grèce, la Thrace &c*, 1772.

⁹ “Les Hommes du Monde primitif ne sont plus ces Etres méprisables & stupides [...] on les voit du moins connoitre les Arts les plus nécessaires [...] L’on voit dans la suite le culte du *Soleil* & de la *Lune* se mêler insensiblement avec celui de la Divinité: plus insensiblement encore s’y joindre celui des *Planettes* & des XII Constellations directrices des

mois, & celles-ci former l'assemble des XII grands Dieux; d'où résulte le dernier degré de l'Idolatrie, celle des Grecs & des Romains, qui avoit commencé par le Sahéisme Oriental, seule & unique Idolatrie." *Confer* Antoine Court de Gébelin, *Monde primitif, analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne considéré dans son génie allégorique et dans les allégories auxquelles conduisit ce génie*, Paris, tome premier, 1773, p. 68-69.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 66.

¹¹ The utopia of a return to the rule of nature was theorized in the conjoint work of François Quesnay & Victor de Riquette, marquis de Mirabeau, *Philosophie rurale: économie générale et politique de l'agriculture, réduite à l'ordre immuable des loix physiques et morales, qui assurent la prospérité des empires*, 1763.

¹² The speculations on the grounding of architecture in botany were advanced in the treatise of Roger Schabol, *La Théorie et la pratique du Jardinage et de l'Agriculture, par Principes et démontrées d'après la Physique des Végétaux*, 1767.

¹³ See Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*, Harvard University Press & Cambridge, 1968, *passim*.

¹⁴ "Ils sont tous bien éloignés du vrai point-de-vue, sous lequel l'antiquité la plus respectable envisagea l'ordre d'Architecture". Viel de Saint-Maux, *Lettres sur l'Architecture des Anciens, et celle des Modernes, dans lesquelles se trouve développé le génie symbolique qui présida aux Monuments de l'Antiquité* (Paris, 1787), I, p. 16.

¹⁵ The doubts concerning Vitruvius are expressed in the first letter: "[...] livre fort audessous de sa réputation, par ses contradictions et par le rebus dont il est plein." *Ibidem*, I, p. 14. Likewise, in the last letter: „Tout prouve donc que ce Livre a été fabriqué dans une époque plus moderne." *Idem*, VII, p. 52-53.

¹⁶ In ancient times, according to Viel de Saint-Maux, the architecture embodied the unity of knowledge. *Idem*, I, p. 6.

¹⁷ Richard Wittman, *The Hut and the Altar* [...], p. 249. See also Viel de Saint-Maux, *op. cit.*, I, p. 6.

¹⁸ "De pierres seules, élevées à quelque distance les unes des autres, & don't le nombre égalait celui des planets, des mois de l'année, ou enfin des jours du moi, composoient ce lieu sacré, qui étoit le point de reunion des familles & de sociétés voisines." *Idem*, II, p. 8-9.

¹⁹ "[...] il fallout, avant que de la faire deriver d'un pilier de cabane, ou piece en support, la comparer avec les piliers ménages avec soin dans tous les souterrains que creusèrent les anciens" [...] "Après ces exemples, comment nos Antiquaires ont ils pu se refuser à l'évidence sur l'origine de la colonne?" *Idem*, IV, p. 9,16.

²⁰ "Ces pierres étoient quelquesfois en forme de gaîne, quoique circulaires, comme sont les colonnes de *Hajar*, *Silcily*, ou comme les pilastres de *Nebi-Abel*." *Idem*, IV, p. 13 and note 15, p. 39. See also Anthony Vidler, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

²¹ "C'est sur ce *Zophore* [...] des fameux trépieds, symbole des trois Saisons de l'année chez les peuples Orientaux. Nos Artistes ont appelée ces trépieds, des Triglyphes; ils ont prétendu même qu'ils signifioient les bouts des poutres de la cabane [...]" *Idem*, II, p. 15.

²² "[...] une chaîne dans tous les types agricoles qui constituent ces superbes édifices, & cette chaîne se suit de l'Europe à l'Asie, de l'Asie à l'Afrique & de celle-ci dans ce qui reste encore de monumens religieux dans le Nouveau-Monde." *Ibidem*, p. vij.

²³ "Ces Oratoires symboliques étoient autant d'Autels votifs sur lesquels on exposoit les offrandes, & l'on brûloit des plantes aromatiques en l'honneur de la Divinité & de l'Astre du monde [...] On peut considerer ces mêmes pierres comme les meres des Sciences & des Arts; ce sont ells porterent les premiers Hiéroglyphes, ou signes representatifs [...]" *Idem*, II, p. 9.

²⁴ "[...] tout prouve que les monumens parmi les Anciens étoient le livre qu'ils offroient à la posterité. Ils la jugeoient incapable d'oser jamais les détruire." *Idem*, « Introduction », p. v.

²⁵ Richard Wittman, *Architecture Parlante – an anti-rhetoric*, in *Daidalos* (June 1997), p. 14-15. See also Richard Wittman, *Architecture, Print Culture, and the Public Sphere* [...], *passim*.

²⁶ "[...] l' étude de l' Architecture, qui concourt plus que tout autre à faire fleurir l' Etat & la Patrie; qui met seule en mounvement toutes les autres sciences, & tous les genres de talens, ou du moins qui, dans son origine & ses progrès même, a donné lieu à plusieurs grands decouvertes." *Confer* Jacques-François Blondel, *Discours sur la nécessité de l'étude de l' Architecture*, Jombert, Paris, 1754, p. 48-51.

²⁷ Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, *Le genie de l'architecture ou l'analogie de cet art avec nos sensations*, Paris, 1780; Ribart de Chamoust, *L'Ordre François trouvé dans la nature*, Paris, 1783.

²⁸ James McQuilan, *From Blondel to Blondel: On the Decline of the Vitruvian Treatise*, in Vaughan Hart & Peter Hicks (eds.), *Paper Palaces. The Rise of the Renaissance Architectural Treatise*, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 344-345.

²⁹ Anthony Vidler, *op. cit.*, p. 142. David E. Winterton, *Toward a Natural History of Architecture* [...], p. 68.

³⁰ *ibidem*.

³¹ "[...] ce qu'on appelle moulure, soit des bases, soit des autres parties qui constituent l'ordre d'Architecture, pouvoit deriver des lettres de l'alphabet. [...] Le lettres étoient hiéroglyphiques; dans leur principe, elles peignoient, par leurs divers contours, les objets de la nature, & leurs rapports symboliques: donc les bases participeroient de ces symboles." Viel de Saint-Maux, *op. cit.*, IV, p. 18-19.

³² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues où il est parlé de la mélodie et de l'imitation musicale*, Gallimard, Paris, 1990, p. 68-69. Although already written in 1755, this text was not published until 1781, few years before the issuing of Viel de Saint-Maux's letters.

³³The interest for the origin and unity of languages, as well as for the deciphering of supposedly primeval languages also marked the seventeenth century, even if sporadically. Before 1700, the most significant contribution was that of the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher. See Umberto Eco, *La ricerca della lingua perfetta*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1993, *passim*.

³⁴“Adunque la Sapienza poetica, che fu la prima sapienza della gentilità, dovette incominciare da una Metafisica, non ragionata ed astratta qual è questa or degli addottrinati, ma sentita ed immaginata quale dovette'essere di tai primi uomini [...] Questa fu la loro propria poesia, la qual in essi fu una facultà loro connaturale (perch'erano di tali sensi e di sí fatte

fantasie naturalmente forniti) [...]”, Giambattista Vico, *La Scienza nuova giusta l'edizione del 1744*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, Parte prima, 1911, p. 212-213. See also Moshe Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art. From Winckelmann to Baudelaire*, New York University Press, 1990, p. 7-16.

³⁵On the problem of language in the contemporary architectural theory see Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 84-90.

³⁶The classical reference remains Werner Szambien, *Symétrie, goût, caractère. Théorie et terminologie de l'architecture à l'âge classique 1550-1800*, Picard, Paris, 1986, *passim*.