

The Succession of Style in Viollet-le-Duc's Architectural Thought

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The task of this paper is to discuss the succession of style in Viollet-le-Duc's concept of "style" which is related to four elements such as craving, inspiration, ideal, and principle. Therefore, in this paper, after the comprehension and classification of "style", the analysis of the Abbey of Saint-Denis gave us a sign of the infancy of the styles of Gothic transmitted from the styles of Romanesque. In conclusion, it is made clear that Viollet-le-Duc's indication of the succession of style is valuable in his architectural thought.

Keywords: Viollet-le-Duc, Succession of Style, Style, Characters, Principle, Ideal

1. Introduction

Both ancient and modern civilization left us are those enormous intellectual products in the fields of Art which defined by Viollet-le-Duc as Music, Architecture, Sculpture and Painting in his *Entretiens sur l'architecture*¹. Similar to other 3 sisters, Architecture, in no matter which period, can arouse persons' feeling at their first sight, or rather, its unique style and amazing beauty can make a lasting impression on persons.

Before 1750, architecture was a straight forward matter of building in accordance with established principles, whereby an architect's imagination and artistic sense could be fully exercised whilst keeping within the limits of certain acknowledged rules². Afterward style had been defined in various scales by different people, including in the area of architecture. As mentioned above, the importance of style is its uniqueness. In the long history of human being, the style ceased, while the particular type of civilization it expressed had come to an end; however the name remained. As soon as a new epoch coming, some available ones chosen from the evoked memories would

be defined more exactly for conveying the more expressive idea. Therefore, how ordinary people see style and how architects use the perspective of style into their work is the key point for letting their work to be immortal.

About style writing in architecture, there were three leading architectural theorists of the mid-nineteenth century, John Ruskin, Gottfried Semper and Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, who were absorbed in searching for a style that could represent their age. In *The Seven Lamps*, for the rejection of styles and the pursuit of style, Ruskin argued that "we want no new style in architecture. But we want some style"³. According to Ruskin, as soon as a single style had become universally accepted, its adaptation would eventually produce a new style suitable to a new world. Semper regarded style as the result of an interaction between internal and external conditions. His doctrine of style is to deal with the exigencies of the work itself and which are based upon certain laws of nature and of necessity, which are the same at all times and under every circumstance, moreover, the local and personal influences, such as the climate and physical constitution of a country, the political and religious institutions of a nation, the person or the corporation by whom a work is ordered, the place for which it is destined, and the Occasion on which it was produced, finally also the individual personality of the Artist⁴. Viollet-le-Duc, the last great theorist in the world of architecture, wrote his

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famous theoretical system in a book named *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle*, 10 vols., with an alphabetical order. In the entry "Style", Viollet-le-Duc offers the statement that style is the manifestation of an ideal based on a principle and considers that style belongs to men and is independent of objects. The most important consideration is that style resides in the act of design that precedes execution. Therefore, style can be developed and renewed from generation to generation under the rationality and people's intelligence. Although Ruskin and Semper denied Viollet-le-Duc's practical interpretation of ancient architecture, their description of style were similar with Viollet-le-Duc's at some point.

Actually, Viollet-le-Duc could not create a timeless architectural style by himself, but he showed to others the philosophical foundation and method that they could use to develop even radically new form languages. In order to understand the explicated definition of style, we can start our study from the entry "style" in his *Dictionnaire*.

2. The general meaning of style

In the literacy, the word "style" came from Latin word as "Stilus" in the beginning of the 14th century. In Latin, "Stilus" means "a pike or pale", also "a stylus for writing". Therefore, the original meaning of "style" is "a style of writing". On the basis of this, "style" has been given various extended meanings. For instance, in the context of literature and music, it refers to "genre"; in the arts and architecture, it refers to "design"; in the context of media, it refers to "format"; in the area of the personal expression, it refers to "fashion". From these synonyms, we can learn that the word "style" is referred to the features which belong to the form and expression rather than to the substance of the thought or matter expressed. On the other hand, Furetière, in his dictionary of 1690, defined style by explaining that the lofty of sublime style should be used for public utterances, and the medium or familiar style should be employed in conversation, whilst the low or popular style was to be reserved for comedies and burlesque⁵. Except these literal interpretations, in order to learn, grasp and apply the perceptual style concepts perfectly, the definition of "style" and its profound meaning should be learnt more detailed from Viollet-le-Duc's thorough

exposition.

3. The conceptual meaning of style by Viollet-le-Duc

Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-79), artist, architect and master of historic preservation, was one of the architectural giants of the 19th century. Throughout his life, there were three important persons who decided and supported his career. Under the instruction from his bachelor uncle Eugène Délécluze who was an artist and well known critic, Viollet-le-Duc cultivated the observing and understanding faculties by his skill in drawing, the harmoniousness of colour and the sharp eye of object. Then, receiving the invitation from Prosper Mérimée who was the head of the Monuments Historiques as well as the author of the most famous novel *Carmen*, Viollet-le-Duc gained a rich knowledge on medieval architecture through a series of restoration jobs. Moreover, along with Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Lassus (1807-1857), the collaborator, Viollet-le-Duc carried out the restoration of Notre-Dame de Paris which were lasting 23 years. Being a restorer, Viollet-le-Duc insisted to follow the archeological evidence of the monument he restores. Therefore, this restoration project, the one that ordered outstanding knowledge and talent, gave him a chance to practice his thought and theory, moreover, to prompt him to write down the logical system based on materialism and rationalism through the practices.

In the area of architecture, Viollet-le-Duc has been named as a theorist master, because he not only protected and revived the medieval architectures, but also found out the philosophy behind them and made a definition to a coherent system in Gothic⁶. His remarkable achievement has been represented in his *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle*, 10 vols. and its companion *Entretiens sur l'architecture*. In spite of Viollet-le-Duc's own words as "our deficiencies have perhaps constrained us to give this work the form of a dictionary"⁷, *Dictionnaire* and *Entretiens* still have had a great influence upon people's ideology.

Viollet-le-Duc defined "style" in his *Dictionnaire* and *Entretiens* explicitly. Under the term of *STYLE* in the *Dictionnaire*, there is "*le style*" (the style) as well as "*les styles*" (the styles) within "*style*" (Style)⁸, an abstract noun, which is the appropriation of a form of art to the object⁹.

Every age of architecture can be characterized elementarily by a series of constant features. *Les styles*

(the styles) are just the characters used to make distinguish among the different schools, different epochs. Therefore, using the phrase as “the styles of Greek or Roman or Byzantine or Romanesque or Gothic architecture”, we can classify the monuments of various arts.

For example, in France, both L'église Saint-Trophime d'Arles and la Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris have a long history as they are built in the Middle Ages. Strictly speaking, under the general subdivision caused by the works of Henri Pirenne¹⁰ and Johan Huizinga¹¹, they are the monuments of High Middle Ages (AD1000-1300). The Middle Ages is a period when tremendous changes took place in Europe. Politically, the expansion and consolidation of the State decided the future territory of each country in modern Europe. In the development of language and culture, simultaneously with the translation of ancient works from Greek or Arabic into Latin, lyric and epic, especially the heroic chanson de geste, were tending to mature. In the industry and commerce, the revival of industry brought about a prosperous trade, furthered communications inter-town, inter-region and inter-state. Moreover, ideologically, religions, especially Christianity, began to exercise their dominion. Christ is derived from the Greek word “Christos” which means “the Anointed”. Most of people considered Christ as Jesus Christ. At that time, under the brutal Roman governors, people believed that Jesus was born to save them from untold miseries against the Roman Empire. Without a doubt, Emperors banned the organization. As a result, Pontius Pilate, the governor of the Roman Judaea Province, presided over the trial of Jesus. Things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme. Along with the fact that the elite and the rich became the member of the Christ, the Edict of Toleration was passed by Emperor Constantine in 313. In pace with the spread of the Christian faith, after moving to Constantinople, Emperor Constantine began to set up a large church building for the needs of large meeting. His behaviour symbolized that the architectures in the Middle Ages would take the church buildings as the principal.

Therefore, in the sight of the ordinary people, no matter the edifice is L'église (the church) or la Cathédrale (the cathedral), commonly it is a church for prayer and worship, except a bishop's seat for la Cathédrale. In fact, even the non-professional can understand the styles of something, so long as he or she finds out the characters of architecture and classifies them. In this case, as the styles of

Romanesque architecture are the round arch, the barrel vault, piers, the supporting vault and the cruciform layout, the L'église Saint-Trophime d'Arles built in 12th century is considered as the major work of the Romanesque architectures; then, the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris built from 1163 to 1345, which has the pointed arch, the ribbed vault and the flying buttress that represent the styles of Gothic architecture, is considered as one of the finest examples of Gothic in France.

In Viollet-le-Duc's statement about “*les styles*” (the styles), there is one thing deserved to be studied more. He acquainted the term as Greek style, Roman style, Byzantine style, Romanesque style or Gothic style which was used popularly, but these terms should be rectified as Greek form, Roman form, Byzantine form, Romanesque form and Gothic form, because the word style does not apply to those specific characteristics of art¹². Although the term of “*la forme*” (form) can not be found from his *Dictionnaire*, something similar to this term can be learnt from its etymons. In Latin, “*forma*” means shape and beauty. The oldest ancestor in Greek is “*ειδος*”. In the modern English, the general sense of “*ειδος*” is the look of a thing by means of which person recognizes it, viz. the nature characteristic of the thing. According to Viollet-le-Duc's statement, since *les styles* (the styles) are used to refer to the characters of architecture, the general meaning of “*la forme*” (form) should be the same with “*les styles*” (the styles).

On the other hand, Viollet-le-Duc gave clear definitions to “*le style*” (the style). He stated that “*le style*” (the style) belongs to the art taken as concept of the spirit so that in the works of art it is the demonstration of an ideal established on a principle¹³. Owing to the vague knowledge of what kind of style can express the spirit and idea, he stated that there were two factors in “*le style*” (the style), “*le style absolu*” (the absolute style) and “*le style relatif*” (the relative style) further¹⁴. Follow the literal meaning, relative is used to explain one thing that has a particular content or function only when compared with something else. Hence, among edifices restored by Viollet-le-Duc, there are the Château de Roquetaillade built in the 14th century by Cardinal de la Mothe, nephew of Pope Clement VI and the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris. Obviously, the style in such as the fenced-off forecourt, enceinte walls, cylindrical flanking towers, a gatehouse and an enclosed park is appropriate for château or castle in English, but not for Cathédrale. This style is

the one called as the relative style. In Art which consists of Music, Architecture, Sculpture and Painting, "*le style relatif*" (the relative style) can be modified according to the usage or the destination of the object. Besides, "*le style absolu*" (the absolute style) dominates the concept. If an architecture, for example, a church or a dwelling can leave the vestige of an expression of art with its principle, rather than the object itself, it has the style. We consider it as "*le style absolu*" (the absolute style) definitely.

4. The transition of style from Romanesque to Gothic

Obviously, the reason why a work is acknowledged as a work of art depends upon its style.

Since Viollet-le-Duc likened the works of art to the human body as well as the style to the human blood¹⁵, the style has a great vitality. The key for human being passing on from generation to generation is DNA. Then, style has his own particular DNA to hand down from generation to generation through infancy, youth, the robust and the senile. The constituent elements of this particular DNA are ideal, inspiration and principles. Studying the stylistic transition from Romanesque architecture to Gothic architecture can find out the process of their eternal.

As mentioned above, the Middle Ages is also called the civilizations of Christian. Therefore, the expression of the theory of God had been the focus on the architectures. Although Romanesque churches satisfied the requirement for holding large crowds with its Latin cross shape nave, the stone ribs with intersected barrel or groin vaults caused heavy pressure outward. In order to reduce the pressure, thick walls and small windows were used. However, the revealed weak points such as low and dim did not solved until Abbot Suger's the Abbey of Saint-Denis.

Abbot Suger, reputed as the creator, the inventor or the originator of Gothic church, rebuilt the Abbey of Saint-Denis from 1140 to 1144 which dated the first Gothic edifice under the rich finance. His fruitful and long relationship with Saint-Denis was established not only on being a student, the Secretary and the Abbot of this Abbey, but also on his craving when he was a pupil in school.

From Suger's two books *De administratione* and *De consecratione*, despite the meaning of his used form was not explicated clearly, his ideal of God as the supernatural

light transforming materiality and mortal into immateriality could be learnt¹⁶. Meanwhile, benefited from the spread traditional knowledge of building by the builders moved from one town to another during the 11th and 12th century, and inspired by God first, Suger was successful in gathering the various emerging features of Gothic into Saint-Denis.

The appearance of Saint-Denis gave us the features to be considered as Gothic elements, despite several Romanesque elements. The first feature is the rose window which has the origin of Roman oculus. The rose window in the west front is the earliest known example of the west portal, although Suger's original rose window is no longer remained. From Viollet-le-Duc's drawing, except the vague impression of circular window which is a feature of Romanesque churches, at the center there is a very large ocular space. Moreover, the glasses supported by an iron hoop are surrounded by semi-circular cusped lobes. The second feature is the pointed arch and the ribbed vault. Suger borrowed these features from the Romanesque edifices, Abbey aux Dames in Caen where the vault spaces are curved both from the transverse arch as well as the intermediate arch, and the ambulatory of Morienvall with its recorded earliest structural pointed arch¹⁷, due to their effectiveness in light and shade and line composition. Particularly, Suger showed the great virtues of pointed arch such as its small thrust, as compared with the round arch and its variation in height. Afterward, the ribbed vault crowned in a pointed arch influenced on other buildings. The third feature is the flying buttress. Structurally, the development of vaulting met the concentrated thrusts by flying buttresses. Therefore, the largest clerestory windows were permitted to be inserted for the purpose of space, light and beauty. The forth feature is the ambulatory with radiating chapels derived from the Carolingian basilican church. In fact, the chancel and ambulatory with its famous stained glass windows represented the Gothic elements vividly. At east end of the Abbey, there are two big windows which are thin and transparent for allowing more light in. The last feature is the stained glass window. Although it had been presented in Romanesque churches, Suger is the first person using them widely in an extraordinary manner.

All of these marked features can also be learnt from Viollet-le-Duc's writings. He stated that the ribbed vault,

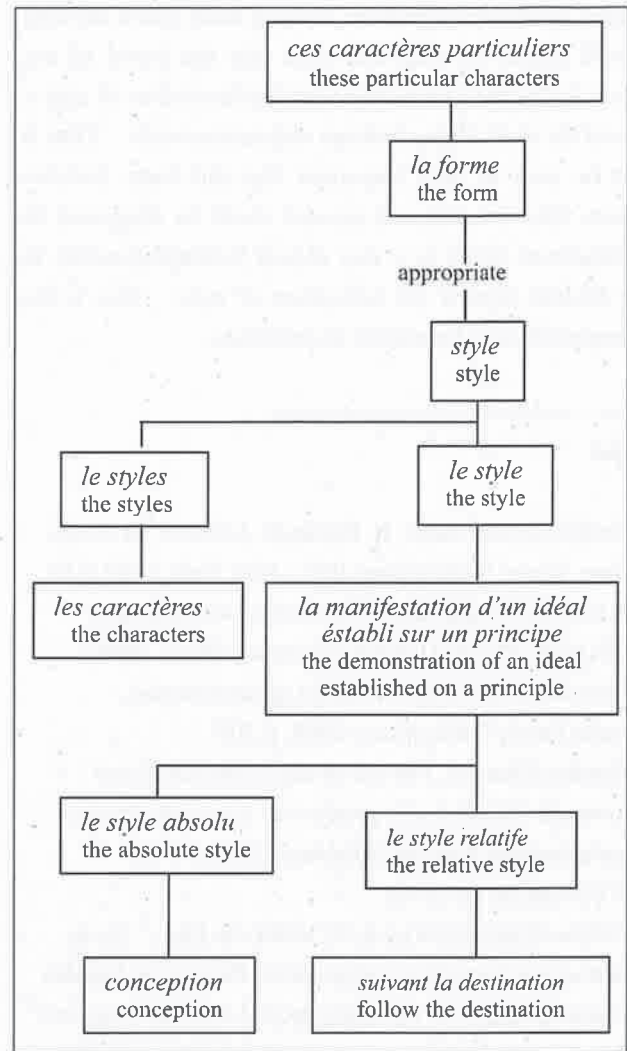
the pointed arch and the flying buttress were the most important particular characters in the analysis of Gothic architecture. The most important is Suger's Saint-Denis, a work of art harmonized the new with the old, declared itself being a bridge between the styles of Romanesque and the styles of Gothic. Meanwhile, just like what Suger stated in his *De administratione*, as well as the verses on the door, that Bright is the noble work; but, being nobly bright, the work should brighten the minds, so that they may travel, through the true lights, to the True Light where Christ is the true door. ... The dull mind rises in truth through that which is material and, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former submersion. These sentences claimed Suger's principle, the classical one, as "Lux Continue" which means the church shines with bright pervaded by the new light. From that on, light became an important element of religious symbolism of Gothic cathedrals.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of the analysis, the crux of Suger's work has been discovered. The craving of rebuilding the Abbey of Saint-Denis from his youngest days as a monk made him not to be thwarted in his desire to express his architectural vision. His ideal of God as the supernatural light was established on the principle of "Lux Continue". Saint-Denis, a place that would celebrate the Holy Light which emphasized the totality of the concept of the Heavenly Jerusalem¹⁸, is just the perfect demonstration which means that it has "*le style*" (the style) as well as "*le style absolu*" (the absolute style). On the other hand, just as Viollet-le-Duc indicated, Saint-Denis has characters which mean that it has "*les styles*" (the styles), so that we can distinguish it from Basilica and Romanesque to the infancy of Gothic.

The following figure shows the studying of Viollet-le-Duc's qualitative distinction of style.

The analysis of these characters shows that Saint-Denis was nurtured by Suger's ideal and principle, in which structure, space and light were fused. It is the demonstration of the vitality possessed by style, rather than by an edifice which imitated Romanesque. The succession of style named by Viollet-le-Duc is witnessed by the rebirth of ruining Saint-Denis. Furthermore, it will continue by coming of newly definite and developed one which man produced by its internal essence.



Family Tree of Style

There are three basic components: that is to say, first, an ideal of lightweight construction applied to the handling of vaulted structures; second, a yearning for increased spaciousness with the feeling of freedom and power; last, a sense of architectural rhythm, a proper way of dividing and accenting forms in space, which decided the unique combination of tendencies in the early Gothic. The terms of "the beauty of length and width" used by Abbot Suger conducted Gothic architecture to start afresh with a renewed sense of its original vitality from time to time during its development and innovation.

In Gustave Flaubert's novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* published in 1881, a character exclaims "but, the style of a monument does not always coincide with the date one supposes. The rounded arch is still prevalent in Provence in the 13th century. The pointed arch is perhaps of an earlier origin, and yet scholars debate the antiquity of the Romanesque over the Gothic style"¹⁹. In the entry *Style*,

Viollet-le-Duc developed the existing ideas that a building should consist of only one style into the world of art. Accordingly, the Gothic style for Viollet-le-Duc is also a one of rib vault, flying buttress and pointed arch. Thus it can be seen as very important that the basic decisive reason why the past and present could be integrated in architectural forms in a way almost incomprehensible to the Middle Ages is the succession of style. This is the presupposition to be studied in the future.

Notes

¹ Viollet-le-Duc, transl. B. Bucknall, *Lectures on Architecture*, Dover Publications, INC., New York, 1987, p.11.

² P. Collins, *Change Ideals in Modern Architecture, 1750-1950*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998.

³ John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Courier Dover Publications, 1989, p.203.

⁴ Gottfried Semper, *Der stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Aesthetik*, Zweite, Durchgesehene Auflage, München, 1878.

⁵ P. Collins, *op.cit.*, p.62.

⁶ Followed the article by E. E. Viollet-le-Duc, *De la construction des édifices religieux en France*, in *Annales Archéologiques*, Vol. IV, 1846, pp.282-283. as: "Aujourd'hui, les particuliers ne voient dans le gothique qu'un surcroît de dépense; car le gothique pour la plupart d'entre eux, c'est ce style troubadour, ou pour le moins ces agglomérations de clochetons, ces prismes, ces feuillages chiffonnés du XV^e siècles ..."

⁷ Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XI^e au XVI^e siècle*, 10 vols., V^c A. Morel & C^{ie}. éditeurs, Paris, 1875, Vol.I, p.x.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.477.

⁹ *Ibid*, Vol.VIII, p.478. as: "Style peut s'entendre aussi comme mode; c'est-à-dire appropriation d'une forme de l'art à l'objet."; H. W. Krufft, transl. R. Taylor, E. Callander & A. Wood, *A History of Architectural Theory: from Vitruvius to the Present*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1994.

¹⁰ H. Pirenne, *Les périodes de l'histoire du capitalisme*, Academie Royale de Belgique, Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres, 1914.

¹¹ J. Huizinga, transl. by R. J. Payton & Ulrich Mammitzsch, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996.

¹² Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XI^e au XVI^e siècle*, Vol.VIII, p.477.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.478. as: "Nous ne parlerons donc que du style qui appartient à l'art considéré comme conception de l'esprit. De meme qu'il n'y a que l'art, il n'y a que le style. Qu'est-ce donc que le style? C'est, dans une œuvre d'art, la manifestation d'un idéal établi sur un principe."

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.480.

¹⁶ A. Speer und G. Binding (Hrsq.) mit G. Annas, S. Linscheid-Burdich und M. Pickavé, *Suger von Saint-Denis Ausgewählte Schrifften: ordinatio, de consecratione, de administracione*, Wissenschaftliche Buchvergesellschaft, Darmstadt, 2000; Abbot Suger, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and Its Art Treasures*, Ed. and Transl. E. Panofsky & G. Panofsky-Soergel, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979. Stefan Muthesius, *The High Victorian Movement in Architecture, 1850-1870*, Routledge, 1972, p.25. as: "However, Viollet-le-Duc seems to have been influenced by this tendency towards massiveness, as is shown in some of his later works, such as Saint-Denis-de-l'Estrée at Saint Denis, begun in 1864. Again contacts between England and France seem to have been quite frequent, but very little influence can be detected in either direction."

¹⁷ J. Bilson, 'The Beginnings of Gothic Architecture', in: *The Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, Vol. 6, 1899.

¹⁸ R. Branner, 'Gothic architecture', in: *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Society of Architectural Historians, Vol. 32, No. 4, 1973, pp.327-333.

¹⁹ G. Flaubert, *Bouvard et péculchet*, Livre de Poche, 1999.

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¹ Fred S. Kleiner, Helen Gardner, Christin J. Mamiya Gardner's Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective, Thomson Wadsworth, 2005.

² Eugène Véron, *L'esthétique*, C. Reinwald et C^{ie}, Paris, 1878.

³ G.J.H Laviron, *L'architecture contemporaine et le style gothique*, 1846.

⁴ R.Christophe, *Les styles de l'architecture et du mobilier*, Jean-Paul Gisserot, Paris, 2000.

⁵ M. Quatremère de Qulncy, *Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages des plus célèbres architects du XI^e siècle jusqu'à la fin du XVIII^e*, Vol. I, Jules Renouard, Paris, 1830.