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Review Essay: John Onians, *Bearers of Meaning: The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance*

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Book Reviews

GENERAL

John Onians, *Bearers of Meaning: The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance*, Princeton University Press, 1988.

This unusual and stimulating book on architectural history will prove useful to historians interested in the visual *mise-en-scène* of the upper social strata of European culture before 1600. Initially the author's subject may seem dauntingly narrow, as this is a tightly structured and highly particularized examination of only the architectural orders. Readily characterized by their distinctive capital shapes, the original Hellenic trio of Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, together with the two essentially Roman contributions, Tuscan and Composite, are ubiquitous and today represent the most easily recognized and all-pervasive attributes of classical civilization. Although John Onians's book is certainly not the first monographic examination of the classical orders, it is considerably more ambitious in its historical scope than are, for instance, the two classic studies of Erik Forssman (*Säule und Ornament*, 1956; *Dorisch, Ionisch, Korinthisch*, 1961), the scope of which was narrowed to an examination of the usage of the orders from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Onians, by contrast, surveys the *entirety* of the historical employment of these supportive devices – from sixth-century B.C. Greece to mid-sixteenth-century Italy.

The sense of meaning began with the Greek writers, who clearly ascribed an anthropomorphic significance to the columns, seeing them often as representatives of moralized, masculine vs. feminine, qualities. For Europeans, however, the impact of Greek architecture and art was felt only through the distinctively Roman translations of the canonic forms – and their purposes were rather more rhetorical than strictly aesthetic. Onians's detailed (and very well illustrated, both pictorially and textually) discussion of the use of the classical orders during the medieval period is, to the best of my knowledge, the most thorough to date, culminating in his convincingly moralized interpretation of Giotto's architectural settings for the frescos in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. Similarly original is Onians's evaluation of the first kind of Renaissance architectural classicism, Brunelleschi's, which Onians treats as a specifically Tuscan–nationalistic (vs. antiquarian Roman) kind of rhetoric. Also useful are new evaluations of the theoretical writings of

L. B. Alberti, il Filarete, Francesco di Giorgio, Francesco Colonna, and Luca Pacioli, followed by new and comprehensive interpretations of the High Renaissance architects in Rome who did not write about their works, namely, Bramante and Raphael. The book concludes with an absolutely superb study of the Venetian milieu as based upon the scenographic prescriptions given in Sebastiano Serlio's immensely influential architectural treatise.

As readers reach the conclusion of the book they are left a bit bereft, wishing the erudite and imaginative author had carried his eye-opening story of all these varied "bearers of meaning" right up to the present day. Just think of the implications of this approach for a minutiae-grounded analysis of the supportive details of postmodernist architecture!

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MEDIEVAL

Charles Dahlberg, *The Literature of Unlikeness*, University Press of New England, 1988.

In *The Literature of Unlikeness*, Charles Dahlberg traces what he perceives to be the underlying influence of Augustine's concept of the fallen world as a "land of unlikeness" (*regio dissimilitudinis*) on later medieval works. Although admitting that the concept "does not offer a unified field theory for medieval literature," Dahlberg claims it was a "persistent idea" (ix). Essential to his argument is his belief in an "underlying coherence of outlook" among medieval writers and readers. The influence of D. W. Robertson and his followers thus pervades this work in the same way that Augustine is said to pervade more than a dozen works from Boethius to Malory.

Augustine's "land of unlikeness" (*Confessions* 7.10) is a spatio-temporal metaphor for man's state of physical and spiritual "far-offness" from God. For Dahlberg it evokes a double significance, thematic and stylistic; hence its advantage over the more limited terms of *allegory*, *irony*, or *metaphor*. He explores its thematic manifestation in Boethius's *Consolation*, Chaucer's Boethian ballads, and *Beowulf* and its stylistic consequences in, among others, Chrétien's *Chevalier de la charrette*, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung's *Roman de la rose*, and Chaucer's *Troilus*.

Much of Dahlberg's detailed study of particular works contains interesting and perceptive comments, but often it wanders from the subject under discussion.