Ethnography at the Foundation of Architectural Survey

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Fergusson is often credited with writing the first history of architecture that systematically incorporated different traditions around the world within a history of Western architecture. Using ethnography, the nascent genre of survey was able to account for difference of styles based on the percieved characteristics of their associated races. This paper argues for the significant impact of the ethnographical method on establishing the binary of a-historical non-Western architecture.

Already in the eighteenth century, a few European narratives of art and architecture incorporated some traditions beyond Europe. By the mid-nineteenth century, as the expansion of imperialism both increased the Europeans' encounter with the other cultures and made the rest of the world subject of scrutiny, places beyond Europe gained more pronounced presence in histories of art and architecture. More coverage did not mean more equal treatment. While in the eighteenth-century Hegel's influential theme of the Spirit's development had systematically placed non-European cultures in an inferior state of progress, the nineteenth-century account further buttressed these hierarchical perceptions through sciences like archeology, philology, geology, and ethnography.

Not coincidentally, the oldest attempt at composing a global survey of world architecture in the work of James Fergusson is also one of the earliest to employ an ethnographical model. The survey, which was developed in contradistinction from the atlas and the manual as a new mode of arranging historical styles, positioned the "style" in the context of historical and material condition. Increasingly, this contextualization relied on ethnography to divide up and organize its content. Drawing on the earlier Winkelmannian paradigm of art history, the ethnographical model of the survey was able to distinguish styles of buildings in relation to peculiarities of the cultures that created them. Yet, ethnographical methods proved more effective than the Wonckelmannian approach both in linking the specifics of individual styles to an abstract, larger picture and in accounting for change and difference; that is, dealing simultaneously with

time and space. In the process, however, it only strengthened the existing biases against non-European architecture.

The paper argues for the significant impact of the ethnographical method on construction of non-Western architecture as a-historical as opposed to the historical West. While other scholars have disused the roots of Fergusson's theories and methods in different sciences of the time, my goal in this limited spaces is not as much to delve into the context in which his ethnography was developed, as it is to explore how ethnography shaped his narrative. In fact, Fergusson's account of world architecture developed through multiple editions and revisions. His survey appeared in three main versions: *An Historical Enquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art more especially with Reference to Architecture i*n 1849; *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture* between 1855 and 1857; and *A History of Architecture in All Countries from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* in 1865. From the earlier universalist tone of the *True Principles*, which valued many non-European styles as examples of "true architecture," Fergusson moves on to a complex system of hierarchy, which was developed by bringing together notions and methods from different sciences under the umbrella of ethnography. I explore changes that the introduction of ethnography brought to Fergusson's account of world architecture, looking specifically at the function of ethnography at two distinct levels: the book's overall structure and its treatment of individual styles.

EARLY INTEREST IN ASIAN ARCHITECTURE

Fergusson was a Scottish middle-class man with no formal training in art history or architecture. He first became interested in Indian architecture during his time in India as a businessman. In the 1830s, he extensively traveled throughout India and studied many of its monumental structures, which would become an important focus of his explorations as a self-trained architecture historian. This background sets him apart from art connoisseurs, historians and designers trained in classical architecture. Unlike them, he did not approach Indian architecture though an established framework of classical architecture. Notwithstanding his interest in Indian architecture, however, Fergusson's historiographical activities were mainly driven by what he saw as a crisis in contemporary European architecture. Writing in the heydays of Historicism, he condemned this practice with terms

like "copysim," "false styles," and "monkey styles." Yet, his so-lution was not a readymade recipe. "What would I propose to substitute in their place?" he asked rhetorically and answered, "I do not know." *The True Principles*, and the consequence histories of world architecture were centered on this very question.

Similar to some other design reformers, like Owen Jones, Fergusson looked beyond Europe in search of "the true pro-cesses of art." "In the East," he claims, "men still use their reason in speaking of art and their common sense in carrying their views into effect. They do not, as in modem Europe, adopt strange hallucinations that can only lead to brilliant failures." In so using non-European architecture to establish the natural status of the discipline, Fergusson evoked a universalist notion of architecture that would function as a common ground for Europe to return to the "true path" of architecture. At the same time, his universal-ism shows traces of German romanticism that emphasized the collective, rather than the individual. The latter gains more domi-nance under the notion of ethnography. I will return to his ideas on ethnography and their impact on his historiography after a short review of the alternative approach in *The True Principles.*

The True Principles is not a typical architecture history; rather with a heavy theory, the historical narrative of the book was, according to him, "merely the illustration of what is there [in the theoretical introduction] stated." In About 170 pages, he sets a complex theory, drawing from different disciplines and following multiple lines of argument that occasionally contradict-ing one another. Part of the introduction frames architecture within human activities, marking its difference from fine arts and aligning it with science. At the same time, a parallel line of argu-ment deals with positioning architecture within the world, which would justify application of scientific principles to architecture.

Before discussing changes to his later books, it is important to note that from the beginning, non-western architecture was primarily a tool for constructing his theory and illustrating his presumably universal principles. This construction itself main-tains the East outside history. Throughout his different versions, Fergusson consistently criticizes contemporary European prac-tice against an ideal system or a true path of architecture. To create this universal model, the distant time and place (such as Gothic as the long ago and Indian as the far away) are often used interchangeably. Beyond this trace of romantic Orientalists' search for the lost past of Europe in the East, Fergusson's writ-ings are full of typical Orientalist tropes of the inferior other. For instance, the aforementioned passage on reason in the East continues "they are perfection itself compared with what we do, when we take into account the relative physical and moral means of the Asiatic and the Anglo-Saxon."

This sense of European supremacy paralleled a sharp awareness of the power-knowledge relationship with the colonies. In his early publications on Indian architecture, Fergusson had taken an explicit Imperial tone, presenting his work as a complement

to Britain's knowledge of its Indian subjects. While in these three survey books, the imperial tone is far less explicit, the East re-mains an object of knowledge, rarely asked to explain its own practice. As his ethnographic approach develops, Fergusson fur-ther solidifies the hierarchy of Europe and its others, this time sanctioned by sciences.

The first and the only published volume of *The True Principles* was dismissed by architects, art historians, and the public, dis-couraging him from writing the rest of the book. Six years later, Fergusson rearranged his historical material into *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture. The Handbook* had a significantly dif-ferent format. In the place of the heavy theoretical discussion of the *True Principle*, a short introduction explained principles driven primarily from European architecture. From this ver-sion on, the theoretical weight of his narrative is increasingly carried by ethnographical methods and concepts. The third ver-sion, *A History,* would extend the ethnographical logic to the organizational principles of architecture. Presented in a quasi-scientific form, this ethnographical approach signaled a shift from the universalist approach of his earlier works to an explicitly racial hierarchy.

ETHNOGRAPHY
Fergusson praised ethnography as "not only the principal — but almost the only circumstance which renders the study of the history of Architecture worthy of the attention of the man of science or of intellect." But what was "ethnography"? Fergusson never clearly defined the term. It appears that he had devel-oped some of his ideas through his engagement with the Asiatic Society in 1830s and 1840s. However, his initial use of ethnog-raphy is limited. The term is absent from the theoretical part of *the True Principles*, appearing only a few times in the history part of the book. Without defining it, Fergusson uses the term to loosely mean race/ethnicity or study of it. For instance, he distinguishes "ethnographic" information from artistic value. We might read of a monument that "carries [...] ethnography in its style" or those which are "interesting so far as ethnology or history are concerned." In his consequent works, this vague perception of building as a source of ethnographical information develops into a more complex system.

A more systematic discussion on ethnography first appears as a two-paragraph section in the introduction of *the Handbook*, along with other principles of architecture such as proportion, uniformity, and color. He also provides a longer discussion as "Ethnology from an Architectural Point of View," as an appendix to the last volume, published in 1862 (some seven years after the first two volume). In *A History* (the third version), Fergusson moves this 30-page discussion to the introduction where it remains in the subsequent editions. Fergusson's notion of ethnography brings together different disciplines, especially archeology, racial theories (based loosely on philology), and geology. From each discipline he adopts certain methods and concepts that eventu-ally make his idiosyncratic idea of ethnography.

ARCHEOLOGY

In *the Handbooks'* discussion of ethnography, architecture has a temporal dimension similar to archeology. As Mullane points out, Fergusson reads historical changes in architecture through a fossil paradigm. Fergusson claims, "Looking on an ancient building, we can [...] tell in what state of civilization its builders lived, or how far they were advanced in the arts." To this then he adds the place dimension. As the passage continues, "we can say also to what race they belonged, and what their affinities were with the other races or tribes of mankind." While in *the True Principle,* ethnography is primarily about geolocational differences, in *The Handbook*, it gains an additional temporal dimension. Through its connection to archeology, ethnography becomes the study of the cultural trace through architecture. I will return to the temporal and spatial dimensions of Fergusson's survey. Here it is important to note that to him this ethnographic information was the main contribution of architecture to science. Like an archeologist, who found traces of the past, architecture historian would read the buildings to understand the by-gone cultures.

At first glance, Fergusson's history looks like a typical Winkelmannian art history using the physical and cultural conditions to explain different styles of art. However, Fergusson also uses the paradigm of archaeology to flip this relationship and argue for architecture as a source of understanding cultures. According to him, "a race may be obliterated, [...] but it has left its traces, [...] as its fossil remains in the shape of buildings." He even goes on to criticize history's heavy reliance on written documents. We read in *the Handbook*:

> Languages alter and become mixed, ... but a building once erected stands unchanged to testify to the time when it was built, and the feelings and motives of its builders remain stamped indelibly upon it as long as it lasts.

This mutual relationship between architecture and ethnography as trace was so fundamental to his theory that Fergusson added "ethnographic value" to his principles of architecture. In this approach, architecture not only can, but also must mirror its culture. This second element—that architecture must be a reflection of its time—sets his work apart from much of his contemporary historiography. Aligning with design reformers, he used this argument to reinforce his attack on historicism, claiming that "Beside [...] its intellectual value," the architecture that copied the style of another time or place, "lost all ethnographic signification."

RACIAL THEORIES

Typical of his time, Fergusson's ethnography was based on racial theories. Yet departing from more popular theories of the time, Fergusson created a system that best served his history of architecture, especially the arrangement of the book. Mixing different sources, he divided mankind into four main families whose architecture was explained based on "the leading characteristics"

that race. Greek and Roman architecture were deemed as Aryan; most contemporary European was Celtic; Saracenic was Sematic; and almost everything else including Buddhists, Turkish, and Mexican were Turanian. As Kohane points out, even throughout his earlier diaries in India, Fergusson, emphasized the superiority of a Western physiognomy. Nevertheless, the introduction of ethnography to his later histories creates a more systematic racism.

In *the True Principle,* Fergusson looks at architecture as part of a system (as opposed to the individual) that progresses through what Bacon identified as the method of induction and aggregation of experience. And at the same time, he sees the world as moving toward unity. Following this model, his study of architecture of the world is primarily a means of obtaining knowledge about the progress the mankind has hitherto achieved in order to move forward. In the ethnographical model, *the True Principles'* emphasis on the universal process of architecture and the unity of mankind, is replaced by a system that mainly accounts for difference and hierarchy.

This idea of difference brings us to another aspect of his ethnography, a system of mapping world architecture based on race that would accommodate both chronology and geography, both time and place. While, at one level, the issue of organizing time and place in one coherent narrative is a complexity embedded in any global survey, to Fergusson, this was grounded in a deeper human condition, which he had discussed in *The True Principles.* This earlier work shows some of the theoretical framework that ethnography provided, which would allow us better understand his applications of this new science. The idea of time and place was dominant in the theoretical discussions of the *True Principles.* Drawing from what he calls "universal scientific classification," he applies this dual dimension to human. Time was formulated in the idea of progress through aggregation of experience. As the only path for improvement in any given society.

> the only path by which any nation, at any age or in any country, ever accomplished any thing that was great or good either in science or in art, was by steady, progressive aggregation of experience, without ever looking back or attempting to copy.

The notion of place appears in the idea of "the division of labor," which on the one hand divided the world into different classes, but under hand, it was worked out into an ideal unity of mankind. While the division of labor is about place, looking at the whole world synchronically, progress is about time looking at each single place diachronically. These two dimensions of time and place were interconnected in theoretical discussions of *The True Principles.* However, in the historical discussion of the book, time and space did not integrate. Instead, following the common, Eurocentric model of the time, world architecture was first divided into three time periods (Classical; mediaeval; and modern). And then each time cut, included isolated places within it.

It is by the introduction of ethnography and its development in *A History* (his third version) that the two dimensions of time and place eventually integrated to create one coherent narrative.

GEOLOGY

As mentioned before, Fergusson's notion of ethnography captures both temporal change and geographical difference. If the temporal aspect of the ethnographic approach, which analyzed buildings as traces of cultures, was taken from archeology, another science, geology, helped him to arrange different styles into "a map of the architectural world." In fact, to him, racial affinity was a geographical question, one to be mapped. "Ethnography," Fergusson claims, "takes up the history of the world at the point where it is left by its elder sister Geology." Using geology, now changes and differences in architecture are explained in terms of "various strata in which mankind have been distributed."

In his idiosyncratic racial theory, there is an original perfect status from which all races have descended one by one. He overlays this history on a geological model, where the lowest strata across the globe, which logically had to be the oldest one, belonged to the least developed, Turonian race. Spreading across the globe, this becomes the common layer on the ground of which other differences were developed. The resulting history becomes the narrative of upper races covering overcoming the Turonian race and creating a new layer of civilization. He then traces this development in four continents: They remain the "outlying strata" in East Asia." In Africa, they have been topped by the Semitic and in West Asia, by the Semitics or Aryans. In Europe, they have been overpowered by the Celtics, which have, in turn, been replaced by Aryans. In this model, the common layer justifies the universal against which he criticizes contemporary European historicism, while simultaneously a Eurocentric hierarchy is established by which only the Aryan strata are capable of change and advancement.

Another consequential aspect of the paradigm of geological strata is the isolation of racial layers. In this system, changes could be explained only through interaction *among* races," not in terms of developments within individual cultures. According to him, "[p]rogress among men seems to be achieved not so much by advances made within the limits of the group, as by the supersession of the less finely organized beings by those of a higher class." While still condemning Historicism and advocating for "restor[ing] to art its progressive vitality," now this progress is less understood as a universal quality than as a feature preserved for the Aryan race.

Although not quite faithful to the model presented in the chapter on ethnography, the structure of *A History* (his third version) follows a similar integration of time, space, and race. Applying different religious, geographical, chronological, and racial divisions, he connects isolated styles of *the True Principles* through a dynamic narrative. Discussing his system, Fergusson highlights the resulting thread of architecture which, according to him,

"carried forward the progress of the art, without any interruption of its continuity, from its first appearance on the banks of the Nile till it sunk with the fall of the Roman Empire, to make way for the era of Christian forms." His "dynamic narrative", however, is entirely focused on the European core at the expense of expelling non-European styles from history. Non-Western styles are dismissed as "generally hav[ing] little connection with each other," and "so much less important than the others that their mode of treatment is of far less consequence." In the end, the arrangement that appears in *A History* is very similar to the conventional art history of the mid-nineteenth century, such as Franz Kugler's self-proclaimed first global art history.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Fergusson mixed ethnography with archeology, philology, and geology to develop his criticism of modern architecture, analyze individual styles, and above all, map the world architecture. Archeology found traces of time in architecture; racial theory and philology distinguished styles of different places; and geology arranged them all into one coherent narrative. These seemingly objective sciences together naturalized the resulting Eurocentric narrative of world architecture.

Although Fergusson was the first to use ethnography for understanding world architecture, he was not an exception. In the mid-nineteenth century, ethnography and anthropology were the leading sciences of studying the "other" cultures. The survey of world architecture, which was motivated by similar impulses, borrowed many methods and concepts from ethnography (initially not fully distinguished from anthropology). Despite many differences in methods and materials, many of these concepts lingers in our surveys of architecture. While current models of architectural history are sensitive to explicit racist ideas, their implications continues in the methods developed through the ethnographical approach to architectural history, from the perception of architecture as a mirror of a culture to the structure of the survey.

ENDNOTES

1.   On the early examples of the survey, see Petra Brouwer, "The Pioneering Architectural History Books of Fergusson, Kugler, and Lübke," *Getty Research Journal* 10 (February 1, 2018): 105–20.

2.   See for example, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India, Cultures of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Peter Maxwell Kohane, "From Scotland to India: The Sources of James Fergusson's Theory of Architecture's 'True Styles,'" *ABE Journal. Architecture beyond Europe*, no. 14–15 (July 28, 2019); Matthew Mullane, "The Architectural Fossil: James Fergusson, Geology, and World History," *Architectural Theory Review* 20, no. 1 (2015): 46–66.

3.   On Fergusson's works on Indian architecture, see Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories.*

4.   James Fergusson, A*n Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art, More Especially with Reference to Architecture* (London, Longmans, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1849), 161.

5.   Fergusson, *An Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art,* xiii.

6.   Fergusson, A*n Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art,* xiii.

7.   James Fergusson, *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture : Being a Sequel to the Handbook of Architecture* (London, J. Murray, 1862), 493 ff, 23.

8.   Fergusson, A*n Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art,* 462.

9.   Matthew Mullane, "The Architectural Fossil: James Fergusson, Geology, and World History."

10.   James Fergusson, *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture: Being a Concise and Popular Account of the Different Styles of Architecture Prevailing in All Ages and All Countries*, vol. 1 (London: JMurray, 1855), lii.

11.   See Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories.*

12.   Fergusson, *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture*, 493–94.

13.   Fergusson, *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture*, 1:lii.

14.   Fergusson, *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture*, 3.

15.   Kohane, "From Scotland to India."

16.   Fergusson, *An Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art*, 155–66.

17.   Fergusson, *An Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art ,*162–63.

18.   Fergusson, *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture*, 493–94.

19.   James Fergusson, *A History of Architecture in All Countries from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, 83

20.   James Fergusson, *A History of Architecture in All Countries from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1874), viii.

21.   Fergusson, *An Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art* 1:86.

22.   Franz Kugler, *Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Ebner & Seubert, 1842).

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