A Positivist Reading of Labrouste's Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève

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The upheaval of the French Revolution necessitated major social and political adjustments. As a result, the first half of the nineteenth century in France was a time of political and economic ferment, of rapid industrialization, and of unprecedented richness in social theorizing. A new architecture evolved during this period that has been termed Rationalist-Romantic, a mode which has concerns and solutions related to the philosophy of Positivism. The Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris (Figure 1), designed by Henri Labrouste, is an excellent example of this confluence of architecture and philosophy. The Positivist elements in the design of the building have been noted by architectural historian Neil Levine. This discussion will expand on Levine's observations to show that Labrouste was directly involved in Comtean thinking and that the decoration of the library is a consistent Positivist program.

The Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, formerly part of the Abbey of Sainte-Geneviève, was nationalized in 1791. By the 1830s it was housed in an attic of the Abbey where it was heavily used by students from nearby colleges. In 1838 the attic was illuminated with gas and became the first library in Paris to be open at night. Part of the reason for the construction of the new building was to provide a fire-proof structure with gas lighting, central heating and ventilation. These practical needs determined the spatial arrangement of the structure. The library is Rationalist in its approach to structure and function. It is Romantic in seeking to be of its own time and place.

Labrouste's design for the library was approved in January 1840, but funds for the building were not allocated until July of 1843. Construction began in August 1843. The building was completed in December 1850, and was opened to the public the following February. Construction of the building was virtually complete before Labrouste conceived the decoration that determines the final programmatic reading of the building and gives visual expression to many of the concepts embodied in the Positivist philosophy of Henri de Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, and Hippolyte Taine.

Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) is generally credited as the founder of Positivist philosophy. Positivism has been defined variously as a philosophy of history, a sociological theory, a religious theory, and/or a theory of knowledge. It has also been described as a general attitude of mind in which confidence in the scientific method is combined with religious and metaphysical skepticism. Saint-Simon believed that the emerging industrialization
would provide a safeguard against all threats to social order. Like Saint-Simon, Comte saw human history as progressing upward in successive stages from superstition toward a utopian future. Comte's impact was profound and his philosophy became one of the major bodies of ideas that emerged into wide public awareness and profoundly influenced French thinking in the 1840s. This was also the decade in which Labrouste's library was constructed.

Labrouste's ideas about the social role of art were especially germane to Labrouste's artistic choices in the library design. Like Saint-Simon, Comte viewed art as an ideal instrument of propaganda, capable of stimulating actions necessary to bring about the regeneration of society. He believed art, "determined" by its milieu, developed out of and was related to its particular time and place. Comte believed that art integrated the community by reflecting its feelings and ideas and by motivating its common actions. Architecture was important to Comte because of the powerful and permanent impressions it conveyed. He viewed great public buildings as especially significant for they stood out "as the most imposing record of each successive phase of social development."11

Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893), writing a decade later than Comte, attempted to apply scientific methods to art, literature, psychology and history. He, however, sought truth without any ulterior intention, such as the reorganization of society that preoccupied Comte. Taine believed the best art was that which most clearly represented the image of a society and the age in which it was produced. The surrounding circumstances which produce art, which he described as race, milieu, and moment, meant that art was never an isolated phenomenon.

The view of history espoused by the Positivist philosophers appealed to the thinking of a group of young French architects who won the Prix de Rome in four consecutive years and worked together as students at the French Academy in Rome in 1827-1828. Their association with Saint-Simonian thinking has been documented and it seems only reasonable that they would have been acquainted with the ideas of Comte and Taine as well. One of the main figures in this group was Henri Labrouste, who won the Prix de Rome in 1824 and worked in Rome for five years beginning in 1825.

During their fourth year of study in Rome the French Academy students designed and described the restoration of an antique monument. The designs Labrouste and his fellow students sent back to the Academy in Paris reflected Taine's belief that history is evolutionary and that each age has a separate, distinct ideal. In 1829 Labrouste submitted his controversial study of the Temples at Paestum. The traditional dating of the buildings had been based on the progressive refinement of the Doric order as it appeared in the three temples. In his written commentary that accompanied the drawings, Labrouste explained his rationale for reversing the dating. He rejected the idea of external ideal form and read the buildings as signifiers of specific states of mind of the colony of Greeks. He explained the changes in the order as the result of its transmission away from its time and place of origin. This concept of form evolving with the passage of time and from place to place was perceived as an attack on the continuing use of classical architecture. If the Doric order could not survive intact in Paestum, how could it have validity in the architecture of early nineteenth-century Paris? This attitude conflicted with the Academic view, strongly upheld by Quatremère de Quincy, the Secrétare Perpétuel of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, that the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome manifested a universal and eternal ideal. In Quatremère's view the task of modern architecture was to reproduce the ancient orders as accurately as possible.

Labrouste's controversial student envoi and his participation in attempts to reform the École des Beaux-Arts in 1830 seem to have cut off his access to official commissions for years. On returning to Paris in 1830 Labrouste set up an atelier where for twenty-six years he devoted his energies to his students. His first official commission of note, the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, was not obtained until 1839, a year after Quatremère de Quincy retired from the Academy.21

Labrouste's rejection of a slavish adherence to classical architecture and his knowledge of Positivist philosophy combined to produce a strikingly novel building. At first glance the exterior of the library seems classically derived, but then one notices there is no classical order. The design of the simple entrance was not worked out by Labrouste until the cast bronze doors were put into place in August of 1850. The doors are flanked by relief carvings of "lamps of learning," a reference both to the function of the building and to its novel gas-lighting and evening hours. The lower floor supports a continuous arcade on the second floor. Inscribed panels are placed below the nineteen arched window openings along the primary facade.

The function of the building as a receptacle of human knowledge is announced by its legible decoration. Both Labrouste and the Positivist philosophers had excellent visual models of schematization from the Encyclopédists, such as the "System of Human Knowledge" from the Encyclopédia of 1754 by d'Alembert and Diderot. Here a chart shows human knowledge divided into three major categories, which are then further subdivided. Another visual depiction from the same source shows human knowledge arranged like a tree. The trunk of the tree divides and subdivides into limbs and branches that represent various disciplines. This ability to compress, simplify and categorize as in the graphics of the Encyclopédia is a trait of Positivist thinking. Taine has been described as having a passion for formula and an ability to reduce ideas to their essentials. He said every man and every book could be summarized in three pages, and every three pages in three lines.22

The panels below the library windows, inscribed with 810 names, were designed by Labrouste in 1848 (Figure 2). There is striking similarity between these panels and
the descriptions of a Positivist religious system that Comte was formulating in the late 1840s. Both the library panels and Comte's system summarize historical personalities and recall their importance simply by the letters of their names. Comte's religious system, a worship of humanity, consisted of various festivals graphically displayed in his *Conspectus of Sociology*. His Positivist calendar of 1849 (Figure 3), in which significant men and moments are organized into a graph, was intended as an intellectual system of commemoration and as an introduction to his religion. The calendar is arranged in chronological order to provide a sense of the continuity of history. Comte also wanted to emphasize the characteristics and qualities of various types of civilizations and of human energy and thought. All this is achieved by merely recalling the names of individuals. Each of the 13 months in Comte's calendar is given a separate focus. “Initial Theocracy” is the subject of the first month, Moses. The last month, named after a French scientist Bichat, commemorates “Modern Science!” The names within each month are also arranged chronologically. Comte's calendar lists 520 names, plus an additional 180 names that are substituted in leap years, for a total of 700.

The library panels are stone imitations of the print medium. Like a card catalogue, they signify the building’s content. As Levine observes, they also recall the graven stone tablets of Moses. The format of the panels is reminiscent of a chart, like those from the encyclopedia, and thus suggests a synthesis and organization of knowledge. The panels, however, are even closer to the organization of Comte’s calendar. Consistent with Positivist thought, they record a progressive, evolutionary history of mankind.

Positivist ideas expressed two-dimensionally on the exterior of the building are amplified on the interior by a three-dimensional presentation. The lower floor is divided in half by a central vestibule that extends the depth of the building (Figure 5). Positivist ideas about contemplation are expressed in the vestibule space. Comte described art as an “instrument to turn minds of the young towards contemplation, which will serve them in their scientific work later on.”

He also described art as affording a “suitable transition from the active to the speculative life.” Parallel with these thoughts, Labrouste regretted that the constricted site for the library prohibited the incorporation of a forecourt “planted with big trees and decorated with statues . . . to shield it from the noise of the street outside and prepare those who came there for contemplation.” To compensate, he decorated the deep vestibule as an illusionistic garden, which, he stated, had “the advantage of offering trees always green and always in bloom.”

Lining each side of the vestibule are portrait busts of French artists, writers, scientists and philosophers, arranged chronologically. The inscriptions of the exterior panels are thus converted into three-dimensional forms—busts that provide an intellectual and sensory stimulus to augment the exterior listing of abstract names. Trees were painted behind the busts, to create the illusion of outdoor space while the ceiling of the vestibule was originally painted blue and the iron columns green, furthering the illusion of an outdoor garden.

Both Comte and Taine in their writings discuss “types.” Comte believed that “the beautiful” has an effect on our emotions which is a stimulus to action. These emotions are aroused by the contemplation of moral and immoral types, which must be exaggerated in order to be an effective tool to social reform. For Taine, race, moment and milieu found their embodiment in a representative man—the cultural hero of the period and the primary subject of its art. The vestibule with its representative busts can be read as a gallery of moral types.

The dark vestibule terminates in a grand stairway, illuminated by light from above, signifying the transition, through study, to the “light” of knowledge. A copy of Raphael's *School of Athens* is placed on the stairway landing, so that as the visitor climbs the steps to the reading room he assumes the role of participant in the painting, suggesting that the world of Renaissance knowledge is within the reach of anyone utilizing the library. The painting can be seen as representative of the historical tableaux described by Saint-Simon. As such, it shows the collective state of human existence.

The entire second floor is given over to the spacious reading room (Figure 6). Labrouste utilized an internal cast-iron frame, which is frankly exposed in the reading room. The cast-iron frame was an approach to making the building fireproof. The internal iron frame of the building is only hinted at by the black cast iron discs on the exterior which terminate the tie rods. The Saint-Simonians advocated the use of iron, believing this industrial product could contribute to raising the general standard of living and the quality of life. The architectural treatment of the walls of the reading room mirrors that of the facade, except the spaces below the windows and behind the inscribed panels are filled with bookshelves. Labrouste described the principal decoration of the exterior as words, and the interior decoration as the books themselves.

The building reveals itself in progressive fashion, from the literal to the more abstract and complex. The outside, with its incised list of authors, is a written listing of history. The vestibule sculpture is concrete in its suggestion of morality and the passage of time. The stairway painting provides a complex narrative scene, but its two-dimensional format is a more abstract mode of representing material reality. The clarity, logic and order of the building is analogous to the writing and ideas of Comte and Taine. For Taine the perfect art was that which combined formal content, culminating in social order. According to one scholar the words used most frequently by Comte were organization, structure, construction, unity and harmony—all concepts valued in Rationalist architecture and expressed in the library through the simplicity of its exterior and the austerity of its decoration.

Comte's *General View of Positivism*, published in
1848, the same year Labrouste designed the inscribed panels of the library, summarizes Comte's ideas for social reorganization, which were first presented as a series of lectures in 1847. He believed social order had to be achieved before progress could be realized. He compressed the description of his plan into a three-line slogan:

“The principle, Love;
The basis, Order;
The end, Progress.”

Love was the principle to channel scientific effort into inquiries that would be useful to mankind in the achievement of order and progress. The availability of the library to all who sought knowledge would be consistent with this principle. Comte's fondness for order is apparent in the content and structure of his writing style. Order is also visibly expressed in the systematic decoration of the exterior of the library building. Progress is the end result of love acting on order, resulting in a harmonious new society. Comte believed that “... positive philosophy will lead us on to a social condition the most comfortable of human nature, in which our characteristic qualities will find their most perfect respective confirmation, their completest mutual harmony, and the freest expansion for each and all.”

The library’s decorative scheme clearly expresses this Positivist goal of personal and social progress. Its function was to contribute to the needs of the general public, conforming to the Positivist belief in art that serves a social function. The library is the kind of “national luxury” advocated by Saint-Simon. In its novel technology and system of decoration, a modern, nineteenth-century statement is added to the Positivist progressive view of history.

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1 A detailed description of the library and its decoration and an interpretation of the interior space as a sequence of historical signs is found in Neil Levine's essay, “The Romantic Idea of Architectural Legibility: Henri Labrouste and the Neo-Grec,” in The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, edited by Arthur Drexler (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977) 325-357. Levine has also noted the similarity in the decoration of the exterior of the library building. Progress is the end result of love acting on order, resulting in a harmonious new

16 These Prix de Rome recipients were Félix Duban, who won the Prix in 1823; Louis Duc (1825) and Léon Vauzoye (1826).

17 Robin Middleton, The Beaux-Arts and Nineteenth Century French Architecture (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982) 217; Van Zanten 46, notes that a friend of the group, the critic Hippolyte Fournal, was a Saint-Simorian.

18 David Van Zanten, "Architectural Composition at the École des Beaux-Arts From Charles Percier to Charles Garnier," Architecture of the École des Beaux Arts 223.

19 Labrouste also argued that one of the buildings was in fact not a temple, but a sta for public meetings. His drawings of the building shows a decorative coating of paint, objects (shields and spears) attached to the walls, as well as graffiti inscriptions on the wall, that seem to foreshadow the inscribed letters on the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève. See Van Zanten, Architectural Composition at the École des Beaux-Arts 219-222.

20 Van Zanten "Architectural Composition at the École des Beaux-Arts" 223; Van Zanten, Designing Paris 49.


22 Levine 334.

23 Wright 297.

24 Levine 351.

25 Bichat (1771-1802) was the founder of the discipline of histology.

26 It is probably not a coincidence that Moses is the first name on the library and also the first name in Comte's calendar. Levine also notes that the last name on the library is the Swedish chemist Berzelius, who died in 1848. Comte places Berzelius at the 20th of Bichat. The 409th name inscribed on the library wall, Psellus, is placed directly over the central date inscription “1848.” Levine sees the placement of the name of this Byzantine writer and philosopher as representing the meeting of east and west. The mid-point of Comte’s calendar is the seventh month, Charlemagne, which commemorates feudal civilization.

27 Boas 301.


29 Levine 334 and 338.
The twenty busts represent: St. Bernard, Montaigne, Pascal, Molière, La Fontaine, Bossuet, Massillon, Voltaire, Basson, Laplace, L'Hospital, Descartes, Poussin, Corneille, Racine, Fenelon, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Mirabeau, and Cuvier. Twelve of the twenty are also represented in Comte's Positivist calendar.

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### TABLE A. CONSPECTUS OF SOCIOLATRY, OR SOCIAL WORSHIP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Weekly Festivals</th>
<th>Synthesised Festival</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>HUMANITY</td>
<td>of the Social Union</td>
<td>of the Great Being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>MARRIAGE</td>
<td>complete, unequal, subjective</td>
<td>religious, historical, national, municipal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>THE PATERNAL RELATION</td>
<td>complete, natural, artificial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>THE MATRICAL RELATION</td>
<td>incomplete, temporal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>THE PATERNAL RELATION</td>
<td>Some substitution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>THE RELATION OF MASTER AND SERVANT</td>
<td>permanent, incomplete, temporary</td>
<td>Some substitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>FETISHISM</td>
<td>spontaneous, intellectual, scientific and philosophical</td>
<td>(myth, religious, public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>POLYTHEISM</td>
<td>systematic, military, aesthetic</td>
<td>(Theo., Polythe., Aes.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>MONOTHEISM</td>
<td>intellectual, social, theological</td>
<td>(Athe., Mon., Sol.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>WOMEN</td>
<td>maternal, wife, daughter, sister</td>
<td>(Fest. of Venus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>THE PRIESTHOOD</td>
<td>incomplete, secondary, definitive</td>
<td>(Fest. of Mars)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>THE PATRIOTISE</td>
<td>bank, commerce, manufactures, agriculture</td>
<td>(Fest. of Jupiter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th</td>
<td>THE PROLETARIATE</td>
<td>active, conservative, contemplative, passive</td>
<td>(Fest. of Inventors: Columbus, Pythagoras, Wall, Voltaire)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th</td>
<td>COMPLEMENTARY DAY</td>
<td>General Festival of Holy Women</td>
<td>(St. Francis of Assisi)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Legend:**
- New Year's Day
- Synthesised Festival of the Great Being
- Weekly Festival of the Social Union
- Some substitution
- (myth, religious, public)
- (Theo., Polythe., Aes.)
- (Athe., Mon., Sol.)
- (Fest. of Venus)
- (Fest. of Mars)
- (Fest. of Jupiter)
- (Fest. of Inventors: Columbus, Pythagoras, Wall, Voltaire)

**Notes:**
- Embracing in a series of eighty-one annual festivals the worship of humanity under all its aspects.

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Figure 3. Auguste Comte's Conspectus of Sociolatry. From Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity* (New York: Burt Franklin; originally published London, 1877) Vol. 4, 141.

Figure 4. Auguste Comte’s Positivist Calendar. From Auguste Comte, System of Positive Polity (New York: Burt Franklin; originally published London, 1877) Vol. 4, 349.
