

## //VREDEMAN DE VRIES: THE ARCHITECTURAL VEDUTA//

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SUBMISSION DATE: 29/01/2014 // ACCEPTANCE DATE: 20/04/2014 (pp. 69-84)

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KEYWORDS: Vredeman de Vries, Architecture, Veduta, Theater, Shadow.

**ABSTRACT:** The architecture, crafts and gardens of late Renaissance Northern Europe would come to owe a tremendous debt to the numerous studied publications of Hans Vredeman de Vries (1526-1609). Vredeman provided his era and subsequent generations with a large body of highly influential artistic representations, largely engravings and paintings. From Dutch town halls and gardens to English Victorian homes to German furniture, his imagination and deep concern for perspective would visibly alter late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture. This essay introduces the connections between Vredeman's engravings of architectural caprices, Mannerist theater backdrops, and the use of shadows in representations. Overall, the paper aims to look anew at the symbolic significance of the perspective engravings of Vredeman. The writing ends with a summary on what it might mean to attend to architecture's shadow.

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### Introduction

As a result of his highly imaginative illustrations, sixteenth-century artist Hans Vredeman de Vries remained at the pivot point of transferring perspectival developments from Italy to a northern European setting. He brought about a revolution in the genre of the architectural city-view, stood as a giant of that artistic category, and

initiated a widespread architectural following that could be felt in buildings from every province of his home country to as far away as regional towns in Peru.

This essay begins by illustrating the origins of Vredeman's architectural caprices in relation to figural narrative art. The text analyzes the connections among Vredeman's engravings, Mannerist theater backdrops and the use of shadows in art. An interpretation of the lightness of the architecture depicted ensues, with particular reference to architecture's relation to the earth.

During the sixteenth century, both the still life and the architectural city-view painting – the veduta – came into being as part of an artist's repertoire of subjects. In this evolution the backdrop or background in painting emerged as its own area of special interest. Vistas of buildings, parts of buildings, and whole cities got represented as entities unto themselves – most often unrecognizable ones and, in some cases, unbuildable. Vredeman de Vries, through his numerous engravings and publications, was chiefly responsible for the advancement of the city-view in northern Europe. Although these city-views need not be explicit presentations of linear perspective, they had an intricate relationship to perspective and, for artists such as Vredeman, the two were inseparable.

## 1. Genre Painting

This new category of painting was often referred to as the “architectural caprice,” (fig.1) and was perhaps to reach its high point in the work of artists such as the French painter Hubert Robert and the German Casper David Friedrich. The genre theme continued to evolve all through the nineteenth century, and would find a twentieth-century home amongst such artists as the Italian DeChirico and the Belgian Delvaux. Classical artists from the sixteenth century who painted such pieces were often less-recognized persons who worked within this theme throughout their lives. Specializing in representations of man-made environments rather than those of the human body, these artists sought to portray architecture as subject matter. For the addition of figurative work on the canvas, some other artist would subsequently paint any humans, generally at a very minute scale<sup>1</sup>. Essential to an understanding of this genre, it may be added, is knowledge of both the division of the primary architectural treatment from the secondary figurative handling, and of the often-occurring extreme contrast in size between the overpowering buildings depicted and the diminutive narrative or story being told.

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<sup>1</sup> Of the figurative painters that provided “staffage” for Vredeman, Dirk de Quade van Ravestyn and Pieter Isaacks are the ones most frequently mentioned.



**Fig. 01.** Hans Vredeman de Vries, *Palace Architecture with Musicians*, 1596.  
Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

There were reasons why this schism should come about during this time period. Something interesting in the background might have enabled those distant views each to become a self-sufficient subject. More importantly, the images of this genre were very much intended to delight their audiences, not to inspire them with religious admiration and fervor<sup>2</sup>. The method of patronage had changed as well, for members of the nobility or well-to-do citizens would most often simply commission the works directly from the artist's studio.

Taken for granted in that era also was the strong link between architecture and stage design. Many architectural veduta-genre painters would have had a command of either or both of these disciplines. Numerous Vredeman depictions are of city scenes decidedly similar to those appearing in theater backcloths of his time, and his architectural façades have a vacuous sense to them, as if they had been painted on a backdrop. Contributing to this is the sense that the scenes portrayed are in some important way uninhabitable. To be sure, human beings wander through the scenes, but they are rarely engaged in everyday activities. The figures in his paintings, executed by other painters, busy themselves in carefree play. Vredeman himself concentrates not on quotidian life, but on the festal and the ceremonial. To a certain extent this must be seen as an outgrowth of his works' patronage. Yet this new freedom does speak of more—of the power inherent in perspective to transcend the here and the now. The human figures in the paintings are burdened neither by the continuity of generations nor by cycles of

<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon was dealt with by Shearman when he wrote of sixteenth century works in general: "Mannerist works of art were made, more assertively perhaps than any others, to be enjoyed. They are the products of an Epicurean society: one, certainly, that was given more to skepticism than to enthusiasm, but with one enthusiasm above all, for artistic beauty." See Shearman, *Mannerism*, 187.

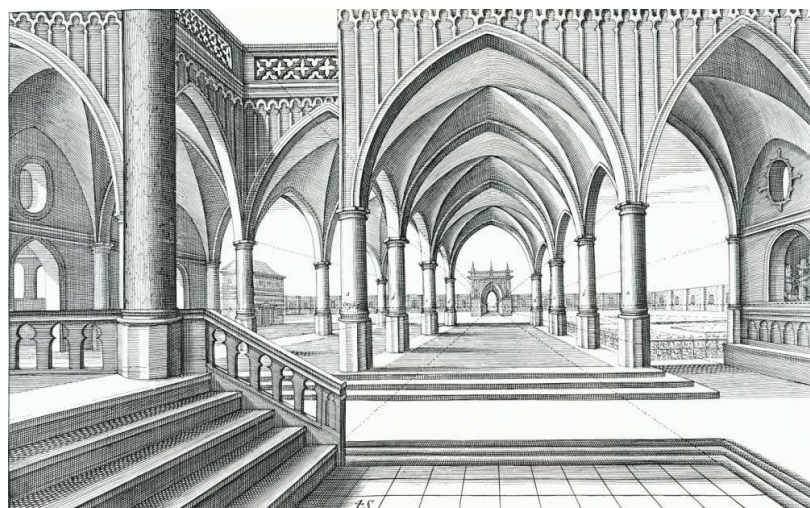
death and rebirth. The architecture depicted rarely dates itself, but rather presents an even state of newness. Here in these artworks is an ageless place, a time beyond time, a setting without real inhabitants. Nonetheless despite the fact that these works are haunted by a lightness of soul and of space, they are not devoid of meaning, and what they address may help us to understand our relation to them and to the promise of perspective.

The figures to be found in these paintings, tiny in relation to the structures, give us clues as to how to sort out any concerns of uninhabitability. The architecture would appear larger than life around the people who are often sketched-in semi-transparently, with their individual body surfaces not covering the painted architecture behind them. Their physiognomies are generalized and lack particular features, and their almost ghostlike anatomies are engaged in gesture, but without emotion. Presentation of ornamental detail now lies not in the human forms, present so as to animate the inanimate façades beyond, but in the architecture, in a self-conscious display of technical mastery. The often non-central placement of the people, they being dispersed in corners, side loggias, and remote balconies, emphasizes their peripheral importance (fig.2).

The artistic representation of works of architecture solely as works of architecture is, on the whole, unusual. Throughout the development of the arts in the West, the primary focus of talent has consistently been on the human figure. Deities, heroes, and heroines have been represented time and time again. Even the most iconoclastically driven societies have found occasional conceptual means of representing the human figure, its attributes, and its environment. The most unseen gods have still manifested themselves through incarnation or through a worldly intercessor<sup>3</sup>. Only in recent times has Western art begun on a large scale to portray inanimate subjects such as still lifes, architecture, and landscapes. Notably, before Vredeman's lifetime, the still life was not thought of as an artistic subject unto itself. The Romans had indeed illustrated such scenes, as in their naturalistic representations of fruit, but their paintings were not self-conscious in the same way as they were in Vredeman's era. This change transpired gradually. In the sixteenth century the new architecturally oriented veduta painting genre got acknowledged and even praised, but it was still thought to encompass a minor theme, one practiced by artists obviously not seeking virtuosity in handling the human figure.

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<sup>3</sup> See Pedro Azara, "Castles in the Air, Cities in the Heavens: Imaginary Architectures in Western Art," in *La Ciutat Que Mai No Existí. Arquitectures Fantàstiques en l'Art Occidental* (Barcelona: Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, 2003) for a brief introduction to the genre of architectural painting.



*Fig 2. Hans Vredeman de Vries, perspective engraving, Perspective, (The Hague: Hendrick Hondius, 1604).*

The depiction of architecture in painting was not unfamiliar to the Renaissance, during which time art was being commissioned less and less by the Church. As evident in a work such as Piero della Francesca's fifteenth-century perspectival panel in Urbino (fig.3), buildings and civic spaces were clearly of thematic concern at the time. Up until the Enlightenment, the majority of these works would not take architecture as their primary theme, but as a backdrop for narrative drama. Much as in landscape paintings, these architectural backgrounds provided supporting settings for the unfolding narrative of each picture. Actual constructed buildings, such as houses or palaces, still remained largely the province of religious paintings.



*Fig 3. Panel in Urbino, View of an Ideal City, c.1470. Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY*

Mythological depictions from classical times, for their part, occurred in natural non-architectural settings, for the people “knew” that the gods of Mount Olympus assembled in bucolic surroundings, domains occasionally punctuated by their violent outbursts and other intemperate behaviors. However, Christian architecture in medieval paintings proclaimed a new age beyond that of the Olympians – one over and above pagan pre-enlightenment. In declaration of the earth's emancipation and redemption, images of churches and their spires had started to appear. Christian religious buildings

denoted that a divine grace had now superseded a pagan world of multiple deities and heroes. Mankind was to live in peace, free from the unreasoned fickle wrath of the gods.

The medieval church was to confirm God as the Prime Architect, and, drawing inspiration from the Temple of Jerusalem, was now to be the House of God. The materials utilized to build such churches not only represented God's domain on earth, but also embodied His flesh. As receptacle and incarnation, an ecclesiastical building in the middle ages was regarded as being profoundly connected to the heavens. By Vredeman's time, during which the built background in painting and drawing was beginning to take center humanistic stage, these connections would gradually loosen.

In tandem with this unraveling was an increase in the importance placed upon authorship. Sixteenth-century aesthetics did witness a rise in the personal expression of an artist, wherein the hand of the creator, and his or her recognition, would be valuable unto itself. This sense of individuality is surely present in Vredeman's prints in which the story or depicted location of the artwork remained less important than the recognition of the hand of the artist. Rather than our witnessing Leiden we are presented with an imaginary city; rather than encountering Rudolf II, we view faceless aristocrats; and rather than experiencing a welcoming scene, we look into a perspectival vacuum. No one could doubt that the work was by Vredeman. Many could doubt that the embodied self had a home.

## 2. Theater and Shadow

That the scenes depicted by Vredeman look like stage sets is a phenomenon that would appear to be readily apparent. Many an engraving of his illustrates a perspectival street perpendicular to the viewer and decorated by imaginative façades replete with exuberant décor. Few are the people depicted as perambulating through the setting, and rarely is there a discernable dialogue appearing to be going on among them. The entire atmosphere can vividly call to mind numerous then-contemporary Mannerist theater backdrops, especially those of Palladio's Teatro Olimpico (fig.4).

This connection between veduta and theater scenery contains significant implications. Conceived not so much as a place to be entered as one to be encountered in a pictorial way by audience members, theater suspends our usual involvement with things around us. The stage is to be confronted as a framed and separate fictional world. Absorbed in its spectacles, we are invited to become oblivious to our surroundings and to view the *mise en scène* as a visual entity giving rise to reflection. The architectural veduta partakes in this theatricality in the sense that it too supplies a framework that solicits idealizing representations of the environment before us.



**Fig 4. Andrea Palladio, *Teatro Olimpico*, 1584.**  
Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

Some earlier history: In ancient Greece the original stage sets amounted to an assortment of unassuming structures placed on a raised wooden plank platform. The entire production, including theater, stage and audience area, had a temporary feel to it; the sets could be assembled and disassembled in response to the needs of the performance or of the viewing public. Among these structures was an unpretentious hut, a model of the king's residence. This transient architecture was referred to as the *skene*, from which word has come the term scenography, i.e. the portraying of *skenai* – the stage huts. The connection between theater sets and architecture was to be even more elaborately considered in imperial Rome, where the stage was sealed off with a fixed marble construction, the *scaenae frons*, which simulated a palace façade, the gateways of which permitted the passage of masked performers overshadowed by the imposing décor.

The meaning of the term *skene*, in relation to theater, drew upon its etymological association with two other words: *skia* and *skotos*. Of the two, *skia*, meaning shadow, referred back to the body, contrasting the latter's materiality with its immaterial, weightless shape. This shadow conformed both to the body from which it came and to another entity onto which it was cast. It followed the body, even in advance of it. In later literature the concept of the body without a shadow would be common, such as in the story of Peter Schlemihl, by Adalbert von Chamisso. The idea of a shadow without a body would come from novels of the middle ages and from an understanding of the lower world as a place where humans would each have undergone transformation into a shadowy spectral condition. The link between shadows, night, and the netherworld is even more pronounced in the word *skotos*, which translates into something like “total

darkness,” a term not dissimilar to Darkness Incarnate, the deity ruling over the abode of the dead.

Simultaneously, however, the word implies the impressing of darkness upon the thoughts of its sufferers. Influenced by and afflicted with *skotos*, those lost in the lightless nether regions of darkness, ancient belief held, became both disoriented and operationally blind. Disconnected from the visible realm, they found themselves located at or in a space with co-ordinates unknown to those of our life-world. Such was the ancient Greek postulation. Many centuries later, and haunted by a geometrically rigorous construction, the work of Vredeman drew from this notion of invisible space to represent a spiritual architecture difficult to unite with our weighted bodily experience.

Scenography, the royal-hut *skenai*, and the construction of the Underworld all stand in opposition to an architecture physically and spiritually habitable for humans. In the architectural caprice, questions are raised as to where borders occur: light and darkness, outside and inside, and order and fantasy blend into each other. For Vredeman, it turns out, pillars predominate over walls, and transparent scenes with frequent diagonal vistas outweigh those of enclosed rooms. His space exists as one in which both eye and body are asked to pass through and not remain.

The serendipitous discovery of the Roman frescoes in the *Domus Aurea*, or “Golden House”, at the close of the fifteenth century, was a crucial event in the development of Mannerist architectural painting<sup>4</sup>. Fabullus, painter to the Emperor Nero, decorated the palace walls with ephemeral architectural structures (fig.5). Painted with a loose brush, these works were outlined tentatively, and they give an impression similar to that produced by stage sets. This essential characteristic, picked up on later by Mannerist artists, was partially of practical origins. Fresco technique, in its working with damp plaster, required a swift and steady touch<sup>5</sup>. A thinly applied film of paint was to veil lightly a colored physical wall beyond. The dream-like appearance of the frescoes did not come into being only as a product of technique, for these walls were regarded as manifesting a liminal zone between our world and that of Hades. The buildings being depicted represented portals to the underworld presenting themselves to the world of the living. The ephemeral and provisional look of the figures spoke directly of the sphere or dimension of the beyond.

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<sup>4</sup> The painted frescoes were discovered not through archaeological work, but by the inadvertent fall of a young Roman into a grotto in the Aventine hillside. Shortly thereafter, artists ranging from Raphael to Martin van Heemskerck were to lower themselves into the cave to view the paintings. An almost immediate influence could be felt, particularly in Raphael’s decoration for the loggias in the Vatican.

<sup>5</sup> Fabullus and his studio were capable of covering a comparatively vast area by only working a few hours each day when the lighting conditions were optimal.



*Fig 5. Fabullus, Fresco at Domus Aurea, 64-69 A.D. Credit: Nimatallah/ Art Resource, NY*

### 3. Meaning and Matter

There is more to this ephemeral lightness. As mentioned previously, the architecture of Vredeman is not one of walls and of enclosures, but rather of loggias and of colonnaded spaces. We are concerned here with more than a stylistic preference – rather with a question of the location of significance in architecture. Spirit incarnate in phenomena would stand at odds with an understanding of phenomena as base material, in which latter case human work would give meaning to matter<sup>6</sup>.

With Vredeman, the ethereal festal architecture appropriate for lovers who are caressing and townsfolk engaged in frolicking awaits spiritualization as well. Here is an architecture that motions toward dismissing a medieval understanding of the essence of building. In the middle ages, there was indeed something that veiled the thought of objects as base material. As did rhetoric, architecture used material that already said something. What got in the way of the experience of something as matter was precisely meaning, for meaning veiled matter. In medieval times everything in a building would signify something. Today, a medieval cathedral could be analyzed aesthetically, but such activity would run athwart the intentions of its builders. Matter was symbolically

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<sup>6</sup> Centuries later, this opposition would be considered in detail by philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831). That human work was necessary to give meaning and order to nature was a driving motif behind Hegel's writings. Unlike Kant, he was not overwhelmed by the beauty of nature, and did not see such nature as a proper object for aesthetics. As beings in the world, Hegel would argue, we are motioned by Spirit to impose that Spirit on matter. Nature exists, in Hegel's view, for perceptual purposes. Spiritual content attempts to present itself as the meaning of the sensible. Sensible phenomena are not inherently meaningful, but await spiritualization through the spirit's intuitive desire to manifest itself. Required, for Hegel, is something like a deep affinity between human spirit and the natural. According to him, although aware of their distance from reality, human beings await a homecoming to themselves.

meaningful even before the architect began his endeavors. Vredeman's work, possessive of a purely geometric, and accordingly spiritual, architecture, while heralding a commitment to objectivity, loosens spirit from its traditional intimate link with matter.

Centuries later, with his acclaimed statement that "thought and reflection have taken flight above art," Hegel was to place art, in its highest sense, in the past. Nonetheless, with art left behind, the embodied self might have been being shortchanged somewhat as well. Hegel's pronouncement, to the extent that it is true, might leave human beings behind, humankind no longer having a physical place in the world.

The biblical God transcends human comprehension through concepts or words, and so too does every natural object. Every such item is, in this sense, infinite. We can never fully describe a leaf on a tree, for example. Every particular would transcend our perspective of it. We all transcend ourselves exactly in our being temporal entities, in our inability to be transparent to ourselves. Beyond this temporal aspect, self-transcendence could also be thought of in terms of the human spirit, and of our ability to transcend ourselves in thought. Thus, while a perspectival veduta ties us to a particular point of view, it remains possible for us simultaneously to imagine ourselves taking up our position from another point.

At stake within a body of work intensely involved with perspective is the notion of opening the architecture-that-is-represented to the infinite. We can begin by asking how that opening is to be understood, and how we are to understand the relationship between the finite and the infinite.

Typically, in surpassing some entity, such as a picture plane, one reaches a kind of beyond. One extends oneself outside the limitations of this earth, a site where, all too obviously, one is subject to one's time, and thus to decline and death. Yet again, one might question whether this extension should be thought of in opposition to the illustrated matter and the temporal reality that got one to that beyond. With Vredeman's overriding reliance on Albertian perspective<sup>7</sup>, there emerges a belief in the power of that perspective to transfer our concrete world into an idealized and rationalized representation, a representation which sacrifices nature in the name of a mathematical essence and the human individual in the name of spirit.

When a Vredeman perspective is to include human narrative, that narrative gives little more than its name to the title of the picture. The architectonic backgrounds, perpetually solemn in character and lacking the qualities of genuine inhabitability, demand the title's suppression. His scenes do not represent places of birth, but rather a world beyond, under, or over ours. This association between fantastic architectures and the underworld had also existed in ancient civilizations. There, imaginary architectures evoked a dream-like world with which embodied humans were at odds. Only human shadows could find life within them.

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<sup>7</sup> As described in Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

#### 4. From Shadows to Spiritualization--The Urban Condition

The architecture presented in the works of Vredeman is an architecture devoid of shadows. Although the buildings are rendered with attention to shade, this shading is nearly always at right angles to the perspectival construction. No regard is taken of the temporal nature of sunlight. Interpreting the action of the sun in this particular way emphasizes the world as receiving a light to which it is opposed. A symmetry within which architecture and light are contrasted with each other presents itself. No longer a part of the world, the sun's brightness becomes radically abstracted – through geometry. Yet true shadows give us a sense of solidity and let us belong to the earth by being bound to that earth. The pursuit of purity, often associated with form, can be thought to be closely allied with the loss of shadow. Vredeman's engravings should, ideally, cast no shadows. Inasmuch as shadows themselves cast no shadows, a lack of reality enters into Vredeman's works. His architecture, having a body, yet casting no shadow, becomes fundamentally estranged within the world of the artwork. Dematerialization here, as in general, begets spiritualization.

Questions ensue: What might it mean to draw a perspectival setting without a true shadow? Are shadows nothing more than physical consequences of light being projected on objects from without? What would it mean for a building or a city to take care of its shadows? In part because of their binding us to the earth, shadows have conventionally been perceived as signs of true embodiment. To cast no shadow would be to render an entity ghostlike—and indeed there is something of the illusory inherent to many of Vredeman's engravings and paintings. In its phantasmal state, we may say, a building's spirit can be imagined as being separated from its body. This presumably wandering spirit will have become free from what attaches it to place. Although the dispossession of a shadow does represent a certain transcendence and freedom, it does so at the cost of abandoning the interconnection between light and matter. In doing so, no longer engaging a light that shines upon us, we—or architecture—in our relation to natural light and thus, historically, to divine light, would become insignificant matter.

An understanding of how shadows bind us to the earth would parallel a recognizing of the role of buildings and cities in relation to the ground. From its outset, e.g., the Bible vacillates in its thoughts regarding the city. The city as heavenly creation sits alongside the city as product of the Prince of Darkness himself. A certain suspicion of architecture in the Bible derives largely from the idea that our true home is not here on earth, in this less-than-Edenic world, but beyond. Cain, the agrarian son of Adam and Eve, the brother of sheepherding Abel, is mentioned in Scripture as having built the first city. These associations of the city with Cain the fratricide and not with Abel are worth noting. For one thing, the city gets identified with being cursed by the earth. Inasmuch as the earth will no longer relinquish its strength to Cain, he must turn to taking up the life of a vagabond. As God informs Cain in Genesis, "When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth" (Gn 4:12). That the building of a city would be linked to being driven from the nurturing soil would seem, at first glance, unusual. After all, is the city not that which grants a sense of rootedness and of stability? Actually, the city and the agrarian lifestyle are historically joined, but there is something in tilling the earth rather than in

safeguarding its animals that warrants this rural-urban association as well.

Since architecture is cursed by the earth, one might, as many have, dream of regaining it in paradise. Abel, in remaining closer to that paradise than his wandering brother, would then become our model. Yet in doing so we would pull back from a life world into a divine setting which has no room for architecture. If there were no city in paradise, how could it possibly be reattained? Any dream of regaining a pure and ideal architecture should remain as such -- a dream.

The earth remains the ground in which all bodies rest after life. Cain tilled the earth to plant seeds, eventually thereafter offering fruits from his garden to God. But then the account in Genesis speaks of the earth opening its mouth to receive the blood of Abel from the hands of Cain. Accordingly, this son of Eve, in his later putting forward bloody fruit, can for such a gesture metaphorically be allied with Lucifer.

However, one cannot imagine a city which does not, as its first act, cut into the ground. Abel followed and watched over the beasts which had been born of the land and named by his father. Abel's brother, although seemingly more stationary, plowed the land in a manner reminiscent of God's planting the garden eastward in Eden. The desire to be like God in the turning over of the soil could represent the outcome of pride as a response to the voice of the Evil One. Even though Abel's occupation would appear to have been a more ambulatory one than a sower's, to follow and watch over sheep is not commensurable to roaming the earth. In light of these associations, seed, blood, and building are, metaphorically speaking, no longer in conversation with the earth. Speaking to God, Cain proclaims "My punishment *is* greater than I can bear! Surely You have driven me out this day from the face of the ground; I shall be hidden from Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me" (Gn 4:13).

Why is this important with regard to shadows? We cast shadows because we are solid created matter, and in this way these umbral images bind us to the earth. Clearly not one of us can cast the shadow of another. The earth receives our shadow just as it receives our blood – willingly. Yet, remembering Cain, to cast another's blood onto the earth, as to cast another's shadow, would be to meet an unwelcoming earth.

In the illustrated pages of the Limbourg brothers' *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* of 1413-16, visible shadows were cast on the ground in painting for the first time since classical antiquity (fig.6). Remarkable perhaps is the fact that the primary figures in the foreground were often peasants, depicted sowing grain or tending sheep. For example, in the panel for October, the persons sowing the winter grain are seen outside of the gates of the aristocratically governed walled city. In the shadows' being cast at some length from the city it would appear as if the scriptural link between the agrarian lifestyle and the city were being invoked. However, whereas the farmers have shadows, the city remains shadowless and thus as if in defiance of the land across the river upon which it happens to be located. The painted figures in the book realistically depict human life in nature as nature changes from season to season. Their bodies, reflecting their passage through time, speak to us of their mortality through their shadows in a way that the city does not. Their everyday nature harmonizes with the cyclical format of the calendar, but the city excludes itself from that role.



**Fig 6. Limbourg Brothers, October from *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, 1412-1416.  
Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY**

The Biblical suspicion of architecture can further be inferred in scenes of the Nativity. Painters throughout Christian history were to place Nativity scenes in a ruin, such as, for example, a dilapidated barn, so as to suggest the insufficiency of human building and thus the need for the Savior. In the *Nativity* from the 1423 *Adoration of the Magi* by Gentile da Fabriano (fig.7), light is celebrated as an independent factor, distinct from rather than internal to the painting's forms and colors. The Virgin appears in this predella, or painting below an altarpiece, as if she were kneeling beside a campfire, her body casting a realistic shadow. God's manifestation of Himself in the Christ child would seem to parallel an architecture which reflects its embodiment through its agedness. In consequence, we can ask if the dream that the builder has to be a second God is not a dream generated from pride, a false dream that attempts to cover up our communal fallen nature. This dream alludes to the story of the Tower of Babel, a narration which provides us with a memorable account of architecture as an act of vainglorious self-assertion. "And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth" (Gn 11:4). Reportedly, God inflicted upon those builders exactly what they were hoping to avoid: "So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city" (Gn 11:8).



**Fig 7. Gentile da Fabriano, Nativity from Adoration of the Magi, 1423.**  
 Credit: Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY

Significantly, this suggested that human beings should not have striven for a pretentious rivalry with perfection. A further implication remains that architecture cannot provide humankind with a community – only God could supply this. The building as a center of a genuine society fails because of God’s intervention – which in turn occurs because of man’s pride. In most illustrations of this event, the tower dominates and disregards the city at its base, and draws a sharp distinction between the vertical and the horizontal. The job of humankind was not to pierce the clouds with towers, but to do something more modest. Cloud piercing represented an attempt at engaging the firmament, or the Spirit, in combat. That kind of rivalry leads persons away from a concern regarding shadows.

Without a respect for shadows, Vredeman’s engravings leave us human beings—in an important sense—untouched. Is the demand for the loss of our true shadow a price we are willing to pay? If perfection gets equated with the devil, how can the achievement of a less-than-perfect building suffice as one’s goal, and how does one know the difference between being less-than-perfect and being mediocre? Is it not human nature to try to get it right? Perhaps the import lies in the difference between attempting and fulfilling. Would we attempt perfection knowing that its realization would help to deny our existence as in the case of Babel? It would seem that the dream-as-dream were enough – richly developed, yet not superimposed on a reluctant world. As to be omniscient is to be without shadows, a world of homogenous bright light would deaden the creative imagination much as the homogenization of space would incapacitate the experience of place. Shadows remain essential in that they allow for the eye to defocus and for the mind to withdraw. Getting it right may be a common human concern, but what the motive behind that quest is may or may not be worthy of respect. An authentic concern for shadows remains a respectable means of participation in human reality. Accordingly, in attending to our shadows, we can meaningfully engage with the earth.

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