

Reviews

Felice Romano

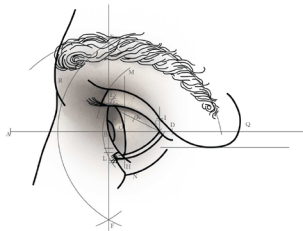
**Nouvelle Méthode
di Jean-Jacques Lequeu.
Ridisegno, analisi grafica
e rilettura critica**

FrancoAngeli

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FORME DEL DISEGNO
FrancoAngeli

When I received for the first time the assignment of teaching Architectural Representation Techniques in 1996, I made a small handout with my course notes: for the cover I chose precisely Table 4 of Jean-Jacques Lequeu's *Architecture Civile*.

“On voit sur ce dessin des instrumens à l'usage de celui qui dessine ou trait, qui ombre; enfin qui fini et termine une représentation géométrale où perspective sur du papier, avec le soin et la propreté du bon dessinateur” (“we see on this drawing tools for the use of those who draw or reproduce, those who shade; finally, those who refine and finish a geometric or perspective presentation on paper, with the care and neatness of a good draughtsman”).

So I agreed to review Felice Romano's book with extreme interest, which brought me back, with nostalgic joy, to the time when, more than five lustra ago, I used to show my intrigued students the singular, sometimes bizarre, pictures from Jean-Jacques Lequeu's *Treaty*.

“Lequeu's drawings, whatever the object of representation, are endowed with such a fascination as to intrigue and enthrall the observer, holding him captive in a whirlpool of cross-references and dense accumulations of meaning, ready to vanish and mutate into something else”, as Edoardo Dotto writes in the preface of the volume on page 9.

Lequeu, a singular figure, undoubtedly an artist, as the possessor of what the Greeks called the ‘*techné*’, mastery, the

decidedly all-hand art of knowing how to make an artifact.

“*Très habile dessinateur*”, very skilled draughtsman, “*dessinateur infatigable*”, indefatigable draughtsman, these are the defining adjectives for Lequeu we often find in the past literature that has dealt with him. Most of his drawings done in pencil, pen, Lavis-colored ink and watercolor show us unequivocally his high and unquestioned graphic skills. Through the relevant illustrative set of his book, Felice Romano presents and reveals Lequeu to us as a draftsman obsessed with perfection, a solitary, isolated artist, basically misunderstood by his contemporaries, who would build little and nothing, even never selling any of his extraordinary drawings.

Jean-Jacques Lequeu, in the biographical notes that Romano presents to us, appears as one of the many architects disappointed by the society that surrounded him (a concept that is always very relevant), by the outcomes of the Revolution, the actions of Bonaparte and the Restoration, who takes refuge either out of necessity or vocation in fantastic and dreamlike drawing, in profound observation of human beings, or who ventures into reasoning expressing utopia, skepticism, irony, scientific interest and technical experimentalism. “Lequeu's architectures exist only in the seemingly limited region of the paper sheet [...] they have been classified as revolutionary, dreamlike or visionary [...] a game of mirrors” [Romano 2021, p. 58].

In his book Felice Romano shows us, with explicit examples, how Lequeu, whose brilliant talent mostly eluded his contemporaries, became a forerunner and, at times, inspirer of artistic currents and authors that would follow, even long after his death.

References to Ruennese's drawings can be found, latent or manifest, in the anguish of the Symbolists, in the dreamlike atmospheres of the Surrealists, such as Salvador Dalí, in René Magritte's men in bowler hats, or in Giorgio de Chirico's silent architecture, Marcel Duchamp's actions, Eduardo Paolozzi's sculptures or Igor Mitoraj's chalky fragments.

Felice Romano leads us in exploring the corpus of Lequeu's drawings he collected under the title of *Architecture Civile*. A work that can be considered as his diary and, probably, his spiritual testament, between whose pages, hidden among the strokes of pen and charcoal, his tormented personality emerges: amid utopian buildings, vegetation as lush grotesque figures as disturbing that seems likely to submerge the constructions, a microcosm not only technical, but also philosophical develops.

Although inspired by Étienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, Le-

queu went further. Indeed, one can think of *Architecture Civile* although inspired by Étienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, Lequeu went further: in fact, one can think of it as a collection of thoughts translated into images aimed at creating, through architecture, the ideal environment where the drives and terrors of humanity can be expressed in a controlled manner; through reasoning. Ideally, indeed utopically, Lequeu pursues the reconciliation of De Sade, Voltaire and the Directory, that is, a new society where republican orthodoxy gives way to individual freedom.

In unfolding his thought, Lequeu obviously does not neglect the human figure, which is after all his real subject of analysis, and in this light architecture becomes an ancillary discipline, useful to the extent that it succeeds in creating environments that best accommodate the needs and aspirations of the individual. He studies the emerging science of physiognomy with amused interest, but not without a certain biting satire and without denying pornography either; numerous are his self-portraits somewhere between the real and the caricature.

Romano also attempts to summarize, as much as possible and in a general

way, the polymorphism of the issues contained in the *Nouvelle Méthode*, with the intention of being able to skim the different facets. The emphasis on aspects related to the origins of drawing, anthropometric questions, as well as the approach to the debate on physiognomy, brings new useful elements of framing Lequeu's character within his own era.

Felice Romano, tracing the directions traced by the Ruennese, arrives at delineating the geometric construction of a face, in a series of ideal, golden ratios, obtaining at the end of the process an accomplished physiognomy, which, however, no longer has anything human about it. The geometrically perfect result, however, is depersonalized, a face that brings to mind the humanized features of Rotwang's robot: the android Maria of Metropolis.

Lequeu's drawings even to this day mesmerize, fascinate, provoke, unsettle, a veritable trap for the eyes; the numerous enigmas that crowd his plates, for the most part still unsolved, will still constitute mere 'entertainment' for several generations of drawing scholars.

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