

# The Order of the World in James Fergusson's Histories of Architecture

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**James Fergusson created one of the earliest comprehensive narratives that systematically incorporated non-Western traditions within the history of European architecture. Although it was later overshadowed by Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture*, Fergusson's work played a significant role in establishing the common structure of future survey books. Fergusson's history of architecture (first appeared in 1849) was shaped through three different versions. Throughout these three versions, he explored different methods of groupings, exclusions, and distortions in order to create a comprehensive, yet cohesive narrative. From the first book's chronological arrangement, he moved to a combination of geographical and religious classifications in the second and eventually established his narrative around a central, Eurocentric narrative in the third. Fergusson considered this arrangement his main contribution to architectural history. Nevertheless, this new structure was also supported by a methodological shift from universalism towards ethnography. This paper compares Fergusson's three surveys to explore the development of his narrative of world architecture. Despite many differences in methods and materials, his work bears many similarities to the mainstream approach to surveys of architecture in the twentieth century. Most significantly, the classificatory system that he gradually developed would eventually establish the binary division between Western and non-Western traditions. While the current desire to go beyond the Western canons in history courses and textbooks has faced many practical, pedagogical, and ideological challenges, this paper explores some of their roots in the early phases of the global history.**

## INTRODUCTION

Living in the heydays of Neoclassicism and Gothic Revivalism, James Fergusson was one of the few British architects who condemned the mainstream architecture of "modern Europe." Aligning himself with the Design Reform movement, Fergusson attacked the imitation of medieval or Classical architecture, with terms such as "copysim," "false styles," and "monkey styles." He complained that associations had "completely blinded" the nineteenth-century architects to "the true processes of art."<sup>1</sup> Yet, his solution was not a readymade recipe. "What would I propose to substitute in their place?" he asked rhetorically. "The answer is [...] I do not know."<sup>2</sup> In fact, his entire career

in architectural history could be seen as an attempt to answer this question. Similar to the theorists of the Design Reform Movements, such as Owen Jones, Fergusson looked beyond Europe in search of universal principles through which European architects could be "rescued from their present degraded state" and find a new direction.<sup>3</sup> The result of his endeavor was one of the earliest comprehensive narratives that systematically incorporated non-Western traditions within the history of architecture.

His was a working history, spanning over multiple articles, books, and revisions. The revisions to his surveys reflect the impact of the developing sciences of archaeology and geography on the one hand, and ethnography and racial theories on the other. Not only did he update and revise the content of what was included in his history, but he also revisited its structure. Moreover, as a nineteenth-century scholar, Fergusson was fascinated with classification. Throughout his works, he explored different methods of groupings, exclusions, and distortions in order to create a coherent structure. His survey of world architecture appeared in three main versions. In 1849, Fergusson published the first volume of *An Historical Enquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art more especially with Reference to Architecture*. However, as he recalled 16 years later, the *True Principles* "was not, nor was it intended to be, popular in its form."<sup>4</sup> The first and only published volume was dismissed by architects and the public alike. This discouraged him from writing the other two volumes. Six years later, Ferguson utilized the same material in writing *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture*.<sup>5</sup> With a significantly different format, *the Handbook* was immensely successful. Yet later, Fergusson lamented that *the Handbook* "was written in a very much more popular manner than that I had previously adopted, or than I liked, or now think worthy of the subject."<sup>5</sup> Above all, he denounced the *Handbook's* format, which he would revise in the final version – *A History of Architecture in All Countries from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, published from 1865 to 1867. Now as an established authority, he claimed to return to the "scientific" tone of the *True Principles* and adopt a form "more worthy of the subject, and better capable of developing its importance."<sup>6</sup>

This paper discusses Ferguson's three versions of architectural history to explore the development of his narrative of world architecture. In what follows, I will first discuss his *True Principles*

and his interest in looking beyond Europe to find universal principles of architecture. Next, I will discuss the introduction of ethnography in his second version, the Handbook. Then, I will add to the discussion his last book – *A History* – to explore his system of classification that eventually led into a form very similar to the contemporary mainstream practice.

### TRUE PRINCIPLES AND THE UNIVERSAL RULES

As its title indicates, “An Historical Enquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art, more especially with Reference to Architecture” was not a typical survey of architecture. Fergusson distanced himself from the contemporary art historians and criticized the existing surveys as “little more than a technical description of buildings chronologically arranged” and devoid of any general theory of art. In *True Principles*, he intended to provide this theoretical foundation that he deemed necessary for a historical account that could serve the future of architecture.<sup>7</sup> Borrowing from different disciplines, *True Principles* was heavy in theory. About 170 pages set a complex foundation to help the reader go beyond formal features and focus on the underlying principles that created “true architecture.”

In *True Principles*, the main problem of contemporary architecture was the misperception that grouped architecture with painting and sculpture as fine arts and applied to it the principles driven from the latter. To address the issue, the book starts by clarifying architecture’s place among arts and sciences. In a long and rather convoluted discussion, it first separates politic arts (medicine, morals, and religion) from Anthropic arts. Then it divides the latter into Technic, Aesthetic (sensation) and Phonetic (expression). This division defines three classes of beauty: the lowest class is “technic or mere mechanical beauty” which rose from mere “perfection.” The second class “aesthetic or sensuous” is mainly created through composition and arrangement. The third and highest class of beauty is intellectual beauty offered to the mind through language. In a typical nineteenth-century table, *True Principles* arranges different arts based on the degree to which each should attain to each divide of Anthropic arts.<sup>8</sup> The table is also an illustration of the difference between architecture and painting with regard to expression (phonetic art). Unlike the painting and sculpture, Fergusson claims, “architecture can repeat no narrative, \_ it imitates nothing, illustrates nothing: it tells no tale, and barely manages to express.”<sup>9</sup>

The *True Principles* is more a theory than a conventional history. Predicting that “some may consider its introduction to be too long and somewhat irrelevant,” Fergusson defends it as the main argument, while “the rest of the work is merely the illustration of what is there stated.”<sup>10</sup> Fergusson’s interest in the architecture beyond Europe rests in this quest to show what he deems as universal principles. Similar to many critics of his time, such as Owen Jones, he looks at examples across the globe to discover the universal principles that could guide contemporary Europe out of Classicism into finding a style for its present

condition. Towards the end of the introduction, he explained this relevance:

though I do not and cannot know what form art is in future to assume if cultivated on true principles, I do know that there is only one path by which man ever did any thing that was great or good in science or in art ; [...] the only path by which any nation, at any age or in any country, ever accomplished any thing that was great or good [...] was by steady progressive aggregation of experience, without ever looking back or attempting to copy.<sup>11</sup>

This universalist approach allowed him to look beyond Europe for solutions. With no architectural background, Fergusson became interested in Indian architecture during his time in India as a businessman. In the 1830s, he 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.<sup>12</sup> Prior to writing the *True Principles*, he had published *Illustrations of the Rock-Cut Temples of India* in 1845.<sup>13</sup> He also had studied some structures in Jerusalem to be published in 1847.<sup>14</sup> These studies are used in *True Principles* to create a theory of architecture that admittedly is “elaborated from a study of Indian, Mahomedan, and Gothic architecture.”<sup>15</sup> *True Principles* treats non-European architecture not simply as a subject of knowledge and mastery, but as an illustration of the “path toward perfection.” “In the East,” he claims, “men still use their reason in speaking of art and their common sense in carrying their views into effect.”<sup>16</sup>

### THE HANDBOOK AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Only the first volume of *True Principles* is published. Among the few who respond to his call, John Ruskin regrets that “there is no end to the fallacies and confusions of Mr. Fergusson’s arrangement” and recommends that he overthrow the entire system instead of revising it.<sup>17</sup> In 1855, Fergusson publishes *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture*. Here, the heavy theoretical discussion of the True Principle is replaced by a short introduction. Instead, Fergusson focuses on the structure of the book. He dismisses all the contemporary works for their “want of arrangement or of criticism,” which have left them “little value beyond a storehouse for future reference.” The Handbook, in contrast, claims to be comprehensive, “without attempting to be scientific.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, to create this comprehensive account, in practice it adopts the same format and method of art history that he criticized. By moving away from the idea of universal principles, the Handbook’s focus shifts away from exploring similarities towards explaining differences.

While a general principle of a living culture was present in *True Principles*, in the Handbook, change is explained through the scientific language of ethnographic and racial theories. In an appendix to the last volume called “Ethnology from an Architectural Point of View,” he describes 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."<sup>19</sup> Writing in the golden age of Victorian geology (between 1820 and 1860) Fergusson sees ethnography as a science that "takes up the history of the world at the point where it is left by its elder sister Geology."<sup>20</sup> Criticizing the contemporary history for its heavy reliance on written documents, he proposes to supplement its deficiencies with "a lithic mode of investigation." So that architecture would become "one of the most important adjuncts of history."<sup>21</sup> As Mullane points out, Fergusson reads historical changes in architecture through a fossil paradigm borrowed from geology.<sup>22</sup> According to Fergusson, "a race may be obliterated, [...] but it has left its traces, either as its fossil remains in the shape of buildings [...], or impressed on those who supplanted the perishing race."<sup>23</sup> Changes and differences in architecture are explained in terms of "various strata in which mankind have been distributed." For instance, he traces Turanians in four continents. Being the "outlying strata" in East Asia" in West Asia, they have been topped by Semitic or Aryan races, and in Africa, by the Semitic. In Europe, they have been overpowered by the Celts, which are, in turn, replaced by Aryans. This fossil paradigm turns *the Handbook* from an otherwise linear evolutionary narrative into a more complex account of affiliations and differences.

In *Handbook*, architectural historiography and ethnography were fundamentally connected. On the one hand, architecture is praised for the ethnographic information that it provides. "Looking on an ancient building," he claims, "we can [...] tell in what state of civilization its builders lived, or how far they were advanced in the arts, [...] to what race they belonged, and what their affinities were with the other races or tribes."<sup>24</sup> In return, ethnography is expected to give order to the chaos and save the history of architecture from being "a mere dry recapitulation of uninteresting facts and terms."<sup>25</sup> This close relation between architectural history and ethnography is so fundamental to his theory that Fergusson adds the "ethnographic value" to his principles of architecture. Buildings are now ranked according to what they tell about a nation. Similar to historical buildings, the present architecture is judged based on its ethnographic value, or the lack of it. Equipping his attack on "copyism" with ethnographic theory, Fergusson criticizes the styles after Renaissance. "Beside [...] its intellectual value," the building whose design was borrowed from other times or places, "lost all ethnographic signification."<sup>26</sup> Here, too, despite his attack at contemporary practice and the apparent praise of non-European architecture, we can see the Eurocentric foundation of the nineteenth-century ethnography that considered Europe as above (or in this case, below) ethnography. Typical of his time, his ethnography is based on racial theories. Borrowing from different sources, he divides mankind into four main racial families whose architecture is explained based on "the leading characteristics" that race. Greek and Roman architecture are Aryan; most contemporary European is Celtic; Saracenic is

Semitic; and almost anything else including Buddhists, Turks, and Mexican is Turanian.<sup>27</sup>

While *True Principle* admired Indian, Mahomedan and other architectures for their organic quality and their ability to adapt and change, the ethnographic narrative of *the Handbook* could barely accommodate changes within a culture. It supports a fixed notion of race. The Chinese, for instance, are defined as "a people naturally excelling in constructive talent, and in all technic arts, but wholly devoid of either aesthetic feeling or desire to share in that higher class of human utterance."<sup>28</sup> In this system, changes could be explained only through interaction among races. "Progress among men," according to him, "seems to be achieved not so much by advances made within the limits of the group, as by the supersession of the less finely organised beings by those of a higher class."<sup>29</sup> In other words, the "Higher class," which is another term for Aryan race, is always the latest layer of the strata. Fergusson's ethnographical foundation created a mode of classification that eventually lead into a binary division of Western core and non-Western other.

#### THE ORDER OF THE WORLD IN A HISTORY

Fergusson's last and best-known book was published in 1865 as *A History of Architecture in All Countries from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. Now an established authority, Fergusson offers his most ideal format. The theoretical principles set in the introduction shows an attempt to bring together the two earlier versions. The introduction is composed of three parts: The first part is an 8-page version of the 170-page introduction of *True principles*. The second part is a revised copy of *Handbook's* introduction. And the third part comes from the latter's appendix on ethnography. The overall tone of the introduction is close to *Handbook*. However, its arrangement shows some important changes, which could be traced from his first book.

Only the first volume of *True Principles* was published. However, Fergusson provides a general outline of his ideas for the other two volumes. It divides world architecture into three parts. The first volume covers "Egypt," "Western Asia," "Greece," "Etruria," and "Rome." Despite following the common Classical styles in volume 1, the proposed arrangement of *True Principles* incorporates many non-Western styles in volume 2 along with the Western ones. The second volume would include "Eastern Asiatic Art," "Mahomedan Art," "Byzantine Art," "Gothic Art," and "Lesser and Exceptional Styles." The last volume would be given to European architecture after the Renaissance. Throughout his three versions, Fergusson remains consistent in keeping modern styles in a final book to underline what he denounced as "the Monkey Styles of Modern Europe."<sup>30</sup> However, there are important changes in the rest of his classification.

In the *Handbook*, Fergusson faces the issue of creating a congruous narrative and explores different ideas on topographical or chronological arrangements. Obsessed with classification, he explains his system in the introduction, which

includes attempts to justify some of the incongruencies as well as hints at some of his underlying presumptions. For instance, he later criticizes *the Handbook* for its mainly topographical arrangement. Yet, in fact, topography is secondary to other principals that he took for granted. On the one hand, consistent with his earlier approach, modern European styles (after the Renaissance) are separated in the last volume, defining modernity as exclusively Western. On the other hand, *the Handbook* draws a line between Christian and Non-Christian. The former is divided into Romanesque, Gothic, and Byzantine, and the latter included Buddhist, Hindu, Chinese, Western Asian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Sassanian, and Saracenic. This division, which is explained as “both obvious and convenient,” is in effect a clear line between Europe and its others. Though *the Handbook*, he struggles to justify this divide. For instance, to account for some chronological incongruities, the influence of Christian style on the Saracenic is dismissed; and the “Turkish style of Constantinople” is deemed as “too insignificant [...] to require a change in classification to make room for it.”<sup>31</sup>

Not only does this Eurocentric narrative exclude many traditions as the other of the “Christian style,” but it also structures the divisions within the latter. Within each volume, he adopts a topographical arrangement so that “commencing from the East, all those styles which have no internal relation with those of the West [are] first described.” For instance, Assyrian comes before Egyptian to separate the “Eastern World” from “the thread of the Western styles of art” who “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.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, not only is the category of non-Christian (superimposed on non-Western) emphasized, its internal narrative turns the far away into the long ago, reflecting the inner logic of the nineteenth-century anthropology.<sup>33</sup> On a similar basis, he refuses to interrupt this narrative “to make way for the Indian, the Mexican, and other styles,” which according to him, “have no connexion either with those which preceded, or which followed.”

Fergusson considered the *History*, as his most successful version, in part because of its system of classification. In fact, with a few exceptions, the scope of *A History* is relatively similar to that of *Handbook*. However, Fergusson claimed that the new arrangement “entirely altered the argument of the book.”<sup>34</sup> In fact, the change in the structure of the book is little, yet effective in creating one core narrative of European architecture. Emphasizing the self-evident “immense advantages of the historical over the topographical method,” *A History* adapts the former to provide the most convenient arrangement to prevent repetition and confusion. To achieve this “historical” arrangement, “Saracenic” along with American, and other “irrelevant and insignificant styles” were moved out of the first volume and grouped together in a third volume to appear after “Christian Architecture.” By removing Saracenic architecture

from the end of volume 1, Roman architecture was connected to the Romanesque in the second volume. Buddhist, Hindu, and Chinese were also removed to another volume to be published separately. By eliminating these styles, the first volume was not simply rendered as non-Christian; it turned into an earlier stage of the Christian Architecture of volume 2.

One of Fergusson’s main goals is replacing the earlier “static description” with a “dynamic narrative” that lets the reader “pursue without interruption the history of that great style.”<sup>36</sup> 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.”<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSION

*A History* remained popular long after Fergusson’s death only to be surpassed by Banister Fletcher’s *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method for the Student Craftsman, and Amateur* (1896) in the turn of the century. In 1886, the *Builder* magazine’s obituary praised Fergusson “as important a writer on architecture in the modern world as Vitruvius was in the ancient world.” While Fergusson’s idiosyncratic mixture of architecture with different sciences has largely disappeared, in his hands, the historiography of architecture turned from cataloging buildings into an ethnographic mode of investigation, which has been since embedded within the discipline. Fergusson was also one of the first to include extensive discussions on non-Western traditions in his histories of architecture.

As a child of his time, however, he exhibited many Orientalist traits. Since his earliest works in India, he approached its architecture part as the picturesque, part as the sublime, and often as the object of scientific scrutiny. The typical comments on the supremacy of Europeans were dominant throughout his ethnographical note, rendering non-Westerns as declining or static societies equated with Western childhood. His favorite Indian architecture never reached the Greek examples. And at the end, the eastern practice was “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.”<sup>39</sup> Individuality was absent in his narrative of non-European architecture. And in fact, even in *True Principles*, part of their value came from the dominance of the commonplace. “In the East,” he claimed, “it was not [...] the men, but the system, that made all men capable of creating these beautiful things.”<sup>40</sup>

However, perhaps the most lasting legacy of Fergusson was his contribution to the narrative of World architecture. His books played an important role in naturalizing the Eurocentric view

that still arranges the history of world architecture around a linear narrative of Western traditions and often creates a class of non-Western traditions whose main common feature is their exclusion from the main narrative. Fergusson's classification set the precedent for Banister Fletcher's highly influential book that divided world architecture into historical, Western and non-historical, as illustrated in his famous tree of architecture. Despite many differences in methods and materials, his work bears many similarities to the mainstream approach to surveys of architecture in the twentieth century. Until the late-twentieth century, the most dominant approach divided world architecture into "Western" and "non-Western." A typical example can be found in the two volumes of the *Encyclopedia of World Architecture* by Henri Stierlin.<sup>41</sup> The first volume covers Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, Byzantine Empire, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque and Modern. India, China, Persia, Turkey, countries of South-East Asia and South America and 'Classical Islam' are fitted into the second volume. More commonly, however, an otherwise coherent procession of a Western core is interrupted with non-Western traditions compressed and placed between Western topics to which they bear little connection. For example, Pre-Columbian architecture is discussed between Gothic architecture and Renaissance architecture. China and Japan in one group and India and Southeast Asia in the other seat between Greece and Rome.<sup>42</sup> In fact, many ethnographical presumptions that formed Fergusson's books have no place in today's historiography; the content of chapters have been significantly changed. However, the structure that was sanctioned by racial theories has mostly remained intact.

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23. Fergusson, *Modern Styles*.494
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28. *Ibid.*124
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5. *Ibid.* viii
6. *Ibid.* viii
7. Fergusson, *True Principles*.179-80
8. *Ibid.* 140
9. *Ibid.* 121
10. *Ibid.* xv
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15. Fergusson, *True Principles*. xiii
16. *Ibid.* xiii