

THE PORTFOLIO OF VILLARD DE HONNECOURT

A NEW CRITICAL EDITION AND COLOR FACSIMILE



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Foreword

One particularly tantalizing fact about Villard de Honnecourt is that there is no evidence of his existence outside his Portfolio of sketches. Yet so important is his Portfolio as a source for students of medieval architecture, technology, and art that the compulsion to analyze its contents has been matched – some would say exceeded – only by the temptation to speculate upon its contents. A sizeable section of a library could be filled with the literature on Villard and it would include at least eleven printed facsimiles of the Portfolio, in French, English, German, Spanish, and Portuguese, with others now on line and on disk, the first printed edition appearing in 1858, the most recent in 1997. It might seem reasonable to ask, therefore, if the world needs another and, if so, what should it offer that its predecessors do not?

The Portfolio now consists of thirty-three leaves of parchment, slightly taller than the A5 European size for stationery (148 mm. × 210 mm.), and they contain sketches, captions and text by Villard, and by later hands who added material to the Portfolio. The sketches portray human and animal figures, insects, exercises in applied geometry, machines, gadgets, and ecclesiastical fittings, building construction, sculpture, and architecture. In spite of the preponderance of figure drawing in the Portfolio and the fact that only a small minority of sketches are both architectural and by Villard, as distinct from those by later hands, most of the debate about Villard seems to have been about whether or not he was an architect. To European scholars of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, there was no question that Villard was not only an architect, but a leading master of French Gothic, the Portfolio being his lodge book. Buildings were identified as being his. A career was reconstructed for him. One noted champion of Villard towards the end of the twentieth century almost took it personally if it was ever suggested that Villard was not an

architect, so much did it matter to him that he should be. Doubts about his occupation began to surface in the latter half of the century mainly from Anglo-American medievalists who were pragmatic by training and skeptical by nature. The lack of conclusive evidence to support the architectural status of Villard led some to go further and assert that certain apparent mistakes in his sketches meant that he could not possibly have been an architect. The criticism of architectural imprecision in Villard's drawing by one historian virtually amounted to a personal rebuke of the Frenchman, only for the same scholar to execute an about-turn a few years later.

Just one example from many that may be cited to illustrate the effect that studying Villard's Portfolio seems to have on the normal processes of rational thought and deduction surrounds his trip to Hungary. In different places in his Portfolio, Villard says he went to Hungary and, while there, saw a church pavement, which he recorded but left unidentified. His drawing shows five different patterns of tile. In the 1950s, a Cistercian abbey was unearthed at Pilis in Hungary, revealing a pavement of assorted types of tile design. Two were claimed to be the same as two of Villard's, thereby proving his presence at Pilis. The abbey had a family connection with Cambrai Cathedral, near Honnecourt, the sanctuary of which Villard also drew. The connection was Elizabeth of Hungary, whose mother was entombed in Pilis Abbey. Fragments of the tomb show northern French influence, therefore Villard must have constructed it. Accompanying the apparent confusion of evidence with proof is the *non sequitur* stalking the argument. Many artists and masons from northern France were at work in Hungary at the time, any one of whom could have built the tomb. Thus there is nothing in this to connect Villard with the tomb, with Pilis, or with the occupation of artisan. Moreover, the tile designs

are not the same. One is different and the other has its pattern set normally within its square, whereas Villard draws his diagonally. Whilst his presence at Pilis cannot be ruled out, a theoretical possibility hardly amounts to proof.

In the face of such eagerness to make claims and connections on Villard's behalf, it is surely time to strip away the myth, the supposition stated as fact, the castles in air built too often by art and architectural historians, whereby attribution is based on stylistic coincidence and accidents of survival, and return to the document itself. To attempt this, Carl Barnes is uniquely qualified, as a historian of medieval architecture with a background in archaeology, as a scholar of Villard de Honnecourt over four decades, and as an expert in graphic art and fine prints. Carl was a student of Robert Branner at Columbia University, and his training in architectural history belonged to that generation that required for the first time in the modern era the detailed scrutiny of buildings as above-ground archaeology. This methodology was extended in his doctoral dissertation on Soissons Cathedral to include on-site excavation. Once his attention was drawn to Villard, his interest in the Portfolio embodied that of the archaeologist, approaching the Portfolio as an artifact in its own right, the findings of his investigations being published extensively, including his *Critical Bibliography* of Villard in 1982, followed notably by the painstakingly detailed *Codicology* of the Portfolio, which he conducted with Lon Shelby, himself a former mason and fellow pragmatist, and published in 1988. Yet Carl's interest in the Portfolio equally embraces the subject matter of its sketches and the inferences that may reasonably be drawn from them about the life and times of Villard and, whilst pointing up the significance of the Portfolio, he leaves speculation about the possible signification of its sketches largely to others. His desire to promote scholarship and to maintain rigour in this field was furthered by his presidency of the Association Villard de Honnecourt for the Interdisciplinary Study of Medieval Technology, Science and Art (AVISTA), in which he is still active. Above all, his commitment to Villard studies continues with the maintenance of his *Critical Bibliography* on line more than twenty years after its original publication, not only as a source for Villard

scholars, but as a critical tool for appraising the Portfolio and its contents, and for deconstructing the myths that continually gather around the shadowy figure of its author. Finally, it was from his background in archaeology that Carl Barnes' interest in prints arose, initially in engravings of historic buildings and their sites, which he started collecting. Soon he began studying the history of prints, pursuing a characteristically technical enquiry into the processes of print-making, wood blocks, plates, lithographs and screen-printing, thereby developing an expert eye for graphic material. This he has been able to deploy in the *in situ* examination of the Portfolio itself in 1958, 1978, and again in 2003 especially for this publication. In eliciting in detail the process followed in each drawing, in which drypoint line work and geometric constructions are sometimes inscribed as a preliminary guide, or a sketch in graphite may be overdrawn in one of several different inks, together with the differential sharpness of quills, and the changes of mind and erasures, a sequence of graphic operations comes to light that reconstructs Villard's hand actually at work and thence, to some extent, the working of his mind at that point in time. Similarly, it also reveals many more hands subsequently at work than has hitherto been thought, which raises fresh questions of attribution.

The investigation offers the most thorough forensic examination and analysis of the Portfolio to date, the first since Hahnloser's facsimile edition of 1935, and the first full-size color facsimile ever, a critical edition, moreover, to take its place beside the author's continuing *Critical Bibliography*. The approach adopted is to analyze the Portfolio as artifact, leaf by leaf, its physical composition, codicology, palaeography, and to translate anew its inscriptions, supported now by the first complete Old French–English glossary, and accompanied by a commentary born of the author's encyclopaedic knowledge of the Portfolio and of the voluminous historiography of Villard. The result uncovers numerous new implications for the understanding of Villard de Honnecourt as a historical figure, as a person who actually lived, worked, and thought, and of those who followed him with their contributions to the Portfolio. For example, on reconsidering the evidence, and among a wealth of observations, the

author presents a compelling case for Villard acting as an agent for the cathedral chapter at Cambrai, which might also hold interesting possibilities for his connections with Vaucelles Abbey and the Cistercian world. The scale and thoroughness of the investigation, with its fresh evidence and insights, raise new issues and re-open old ones, such

as Villard's actual occupation, and the true function of the Portfolio in the eyes of his successors, all of which points to the endless fascination the Portfolio holds and will continue to hold for scholars.

Nigel Hiscock
Oxford 2007

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