

# Art, production and market conditions Gottfried Semper's historical perspective on commodities and the role of museums

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Figure 1 Canada, plate 11(vol.2), from Joseph Nash et. al., *Dickinsons' Comprehensive Pictures of The Great Exhibition of 1851*, 1854, London, Dickinson Brothers.

When the Great Exhibition of 1851 opened its gates, many contemporary commentators extolled this 'industrial exhibition of all nations in the capital of world economy' as 'a decisive event in the cultural history of mankind'. They praised the exhibition as the result of 'speculative entrepreneurial spirit' which made this 'temple of freedom' possible to arise.<sup>1</sup> Their notions illustrate what the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Die Industrie-Ausstellung aller Völker', in *The Illustrated London News, German Supplement*, 1, 3 May 1851, 2-3. 'der spekulative Unternehmergeist', 'Friedenstempel der Industrieausstellung'.

Great Exhibition represented; it was a celebration of free trade policy, a demonstration of economic progress through industrialization, and a glorification of an affluent future through social accumulation. Only a few years after revolutions on continental Europe had failed, the Great Exhibition manifested hopes towards a free and liberal world.<sup>2</sup> Among the enthusiastic commentators was also the exiled German architect Gottfried Semper. As a republican fighting against the predominant aristocracy in the Dresden upheavals of 1848, he embraced this vision of liberty. As an artist living in material scarcity and struggling for work, he perceived this vision that the exhibition offered to the arts much more problematic.<sup>3</sup>

Semper saw the Great Exhibition as a 'world phenomenon'<sup>4</sup> which represented contemporary cultural conditions. For him, building was 'to a certain extent the embodiment of the tendency toward which our age seems to be moving, and that rightly came up for discussion (...) (in) the exhibition'<sup>5</sup> and he asked himself if this event was indicating a new 'world spirit'<sup>6</sup> that was just on the verge of being born. The exhibition inspired him to carry his theoretical reflections on art and architecture forward. The unique opportunity, which the Great Exhibition offered to Semper and his contemporaries, was to study different cultures from all over the world. By juxtaposing different cultures side by side, the exhibition provided an overview of human past and present. It allowed comparison between them and implied assumptions to the progress of civilisation or rather technology, art and industry.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the event intended not only to encourage manufacture but also to improve the application of art and design to industries. Understanding himself as a practicing architect and artist, this was of great interest to Semper.

However enthusiastic all these comments might have been, they vividly illustrate how Semper and his contemporaries saw a tremendous shift happening, not simply as abstract numbers or narratives but palpably represented by the Crystal Palace and its material objects. The exhibition provided a favourable opportunity to study contemporary conditions and to find new aesthetic solutions

<sup>2</sup> Wolfram Kaiser, 'Cultural Transfer of Free Trade at the World Exhibitions, 1851–1862', *The Journal of Modern History*, 77:3, September 2005, 563-90.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A nation on display*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999; Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *Britain, the empire, and the world at the Great Exhibition of 1851*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008; Paul Young, *Globalization and the Great Exhibition. The Victorian New World Order*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', in: Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann, eds, *Gottfried Semper: The four elements of architecture and other writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 130. The term 'Welterscheinung' has been translated in as 'world-renowned event'. The suggested translation above might be more appropriate to the German original. For a collection of writings Semper had published in this period see Gottfried Semper and Henrik Karge, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Olms, Georg, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 165.

<sup>6</sup> Gottfried Semper, Manuscript 94, ETH Zurich – gta Archives, 5-6. 'das noch so lückenhafte Ganze'.

<sup>7</sup> Mari Hvattum, 'A complete and universal collection: Gottfried Semper and the Great Exhibition', in *Tracing modernity manifestations of the modern in architecture and the city*, Mari Hvattum and Christian Hermansen, eds, London: Routledge, 2004, 124-36.

to the problem with which many writers and artists were struggling; the way in which artistic reflection and production can respond to the social-economic conditions and represent the capitalist reality at the time, a reality which in many traditional aesthetic categories were challenged or even seemed to be obsolete.

Coming from the relatively small city of Dresden, in London, Semper was confronted with an abundance of material objects generated by capitalism, industrialisation, and international trade. These impressions challenged many of his previous ideas. He now understood how everything becomes commercialized, even architecture. At the same time, being surrounded with cultural objects from all over the world, Semper was inspired to think of universal principles by which art and architecture are driven. In the end, Semper's scientific approach was a practical endeavour to find contemporary artistic and architectural forms that reflect their time adequately. Like nature, ornaments consist of basic types and symbols reflecting its specific social, political, and economical conditions, as well as its scientific understanding of the world. For Semper, the task of good architecture is to communicate these aspects and to become the 'speaking expression' of its time, a capacity architecture had lost in the nineteenth century. When Semper walked through the Crystal Palace, he found himself in a 'Babylonian confusion': the exhibited objects did not speak intelligibly anymore.<sup>8</sup> At this time, the science that Semper was trying to achieve would provide a comparative system or a 'practical heuristics' that would allow the detection of new appropriate art forms. In this sense, museums provide a crucial space because they allow the study of objects and thus the discovery of empirical laws and facts on which the artist reflects and creates 'living analogies'.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, classification is the preliminary stage of what Semper calls 'constructive combination'.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Great Exhibition had a great impact on Semper, he did neither change his overall idea of style, nor his historical concept, nor his theoretical and practical aims but turned his attention much closer to the production. He now understood the crafts as the underlining principles of architecture. Enlarging upon his *Four Elements of Architecture* he had finished shortly before coming to London, Semper's theoretical works resulted within the next ten years in his major contribution to the study of design, 'The Style'.

The starting point to Semper's major theoretical endeavour was the Great Exhibition however. Most scholarship on Semper has usually stressed the impact of industrialisation, mass production, the consequent production of objects, and their artistic reclamation. Hence, the emphasis has been almost exclusively on the crafts and how Semper – like the arts and crafts movement – tried to reconcile modern modes of production with the arts. Alternatively, this paper proposes a different

<sup>8</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 130.

<sup>9</sup> Gottfried Semper, *Style in the technical and tectonic arts, or, practical aesthetics*, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004, 80.

<sup>10</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 133. The term 'construierende Combination' has been translated in as 'hypothetical inference'. The suggested translation above might be more appropriate to the German original and indicate the construction of knowledge rather than a hypothetical deduction.

reading of Semper's writings in the context of the Great Exhibition, a reading that does not only start with industrialisation but also focus on what Semper calls speculation, that is to say capitalism. Semper is quite clear when he says that 'the process that our industries and the whole of art will inevitably follow is clear: Everything will be designed for and tailored to the marketplace.'<sup>11</sup> Semper recognizes the fundamental dependency of industrialisation on capitalism and of capitalism on industrialisation. Furthermore, while observing the objects in the Crystal Palace, Semper found himself forced to define the commodity further, potentially because he sensed a shift caused by capitalism in the object – subject relation, a shift, which made him think of the commodity and its distinctive qualities.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, this paper tries to develop an understanding of Semper's concept of commodities, the market conditions belonging to it, and how they fit into some of his theory, especially with regard to collections and museums.

### **Semper's characterization of a commodity**

'A marketable ware should allow the broadest possible use and elicit no associations other than what the object's purpose and material permit. The place for which it is designed is not determined; as little known are the qualities of the person whose property it will be. Thus it should possess no characteristics and local colour (...), but should have the quality of harmoniously agreeing with every surrounding.'<sup>13</sup>

In this short paragraph, Semper defines the commodity according to four typical qualities: Firstly, it serves a variety of uses, secondly, that the commodity only expresses relations which are closely related to purpose and material, thirdly, that it bears no personal characteristics of a client, and, lastly, that it does not have any kind of local characteristics but that it should conform itself easily to any place. Besides the second characteristic, the other three characteristics in Semper's argument go into the same direction, which indicates the commodity's generality. The commodity needs to be generally adaptable in terms of usage, place, and personality. Hence, it is independent of any specific cultural context unlike objects of artisan production. What he actually alludes to is nothing but standardisation which is crucial to capitalist production on the one hand, but threatens artists and their individual workshops on the other. Accordingly, Semper understands how capitalism makes the artist dependant and unfree without going much further into this. The promised liberal vision of the Crystal Palace seems to have a serious aftertaste.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 141.

<sup>12</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.

<sup>13</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 141.

<sup>14</sup> Concerning the Great Exhibition and commodity culture, see: Thomas Richards, *The commodity culture of Victorian England: advertising and spectacle, 1851-1914*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

The second characteristic, however, indicates something different. According to Semper, art forms are the 'expression' of its time and place including all its political, social, technical circumstances, and refer to certain primordial motives which have been changing throughout history. But the standardized commodity that needs to be generally adaptable is not supposed to exceed any symbolic meaning beyond its actual 'purpose and material'. 'Although an object destined for the marketplace is prevented from achieving great significance, this individual expression is always obtainable to a certain extent as long as the object has some usefulness or intended purpose and does not exist simply for itself.'<sup>15</sup> The commodity does not communicate these primordial motives or ideas since its symbolic qualities are limited to its immediate use. If it would represent more than its immediate use, it would tell something about this history which is linked to a cultural context, thus interfering with its generality:

Although an object destined for the marketplace is prevented from achieving great significance, this individual expression is always obtainable to a certain extent as long as the object has some usefulness or intended purpose and does not exist simply for itself.<sup>16</sup>

The need for a broadly usable object does not prevent capitalism from using all sorts of motives however. Semper who seeks 'true representations' understands the deceptive character that commodities can obtain. Capitalism neither seeks historical awareness nor 'true representations' but is only interested in market revenues, and – as Semper observes – if there is no demand, the market just creates a need. 'Speculation interposes itself there and lays out the benefits attractively before us; where there is none, speculation creates a thousand small and large advantages. Old outdated comforts are called back into use when speculation cannot think of anything new.'<sup>17</sup> Taking into consideration this situation, capitalist production can deploy historical forms. The commodity's symbolical quality must not necessarily come out of the object's immediate purpose and material conditions but rather from external demands of the market. Likewise, he criticizes the fact that industries often neglect material properties in the production of objects so that material is often misused. Thus, the commodity of industrial production is of a rather deceiving character and uses material and purpose insensibly and unreflectively.

Semper continues with his argument by discussing objects of 'oriental artistic activity'. For him, these objects seem to match adequately with all four features with which he characterizes the commodity. Oriental objects adjust themselves perfectly to every kind of surroundings, and they become all the more suitable for the market the less traces of historical origin that these objects contain within their style:

<sup>15</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 141-2.

<sup>16</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 141-2.

<sup>17</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 134.

'These conditions seem to correspond completely with the products of Oriental industry, and even more so when the latter are not intermingled with the splintered remains of annihilated, higher art phases, either their own or foreign ones. Oriental products are most at home in the bazaar, and there is nothing more characteristic of them (...) than their convenient accommodation to every surrounding.'<sup>18</sup>

What is again interesting is the notion of history. It seems to be a characteristic feature of the commodity that it does not refer to any original motive, and, thus only bears little historico-cultural meaning. So, if an object carries few or even no historico-cultural meaning, it renders a good commodity. In other words, if an object bears a great historical background, it renders a bad commodity. Semper defines the commodity as an object without much history in terms of a primordial motive and maybe also its conditions of production. It is neither geographically nor historically locatable. The only determining factor that makes the commodity palpable in time and space is its immediate use and materiality. And because Asian styles can be adapted so conveniently to any purpose, Semper alludes that these styles will have an enormous impact on European industries, industries which are producing commodities regardless of any historical or local circumstances, objects which were supposed to serve the needs of international trade.

Semper understands that Asian objects must be very interesting to capitalism, presumably because of their enticing ethnographic curiosity. The according artistic problem, however, is to deal with capitalism and to find a fertile way to reconcile design appropriately with modern modes of production without surrendering to the market's demands. But this seems to be an ambition that only few designers will achieve without falling into fanciless imitation; 'Only very few see their ambitious dreams of youth fulfilled, and then only at the cost of reality by the negation of the present and by the phantasmagoric invocation of the past.'<sup>19</sup>

Semper indicates again the deceptive character of capitalist commodities. The term 'phantasmagoria', in the way that Semper might have understood and used it, points to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's second part of *Faust* where a phantasmagoria is a kind of lunatic and distorting performance. A phantasmagoria deceives the viewer and does not depict the world accurately, or, as Semper says, negates the present. This is, of course, an attack on any kind of artistic practice which does not embrace the current conditions but simply emulates old styles. But with regard to capitalism and commodity fetishism, this very notion has implications beyond stylistic arguments. Semper predicts that the emulation of 'oriental styles' will be a customary practice in capitalist production. But as phantasmagorias, these styles only appear to be new while they are not. In fact, they deceive the consumer and, as performances, are deliberately staged. In this sense, Semper alludes to an understanding of the commodity that Walter Benjamin

<sup>18</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 141.

<sup>19</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 146. The German original ,phantasmagorisches Zurückbeschwören' might be better translated as ,phantasmagorical invocations of the past' rather than ,phantasmagorical exorcising of the past'.

developed much later with regard to the nineteenth century. According to Benjamin, the commodity's essential characteristic is the perpetual reoccurrence of the same theme, and the experience of the commodity as the perpetual reoccurrence of the same theme forms the basis of modern experience.<sup>20</sup> For Semper, however, this would mean no artistic reflection on the present social conditions, thus, no scientific innovation and progress. Instead of producing 'living analogies', capitalism produces silent objects, for they do not speak a certain symbolic language belonging to a certain time and place, but rather accommodate to every surrounding. When Semper found himself in a 'Babylonian confusion' in the Crystal Palace, the objects might not only have been unintelligible to him but mute and without much historico-cultural meaning – commodities by his definition, which are agreeably adaptable and silent but elusively enticing.

### Semper's concept of history and the commodity

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Semper was not sure whether the Great Exhibition indicated progress or not. The idea of the perpetual reoccurrence of the same comes through in some of his unpublished manuscripts where he reckons that 'nothing new happens in the world' and that 'everything has already once been around'. But if there was progress, he writes, than 'society moves (...) in a spiral line'.<sup>21</sup> Besides the strong doubt on progress that Semper utters here, the interesting point is to see how he combines the circular model of history with a spiral. The spiral model of history enables progress as well as stagnation, and allows the same to reoccur in a different way. This historical concept was not singular to Semper but rather a model adherent to German idealism. At the time, however, it was already challenged by Hegel's linear model of history and already materialized in Schinkel's and Hegel's *Altes Museum* in Berlin.<sup>22</sup> However, what characterizes this spiral model is the rise and decline of cultures in which the primitive indicates both, decay by representing signs of former cultural richness and contingency by indicating a new beginning:

'The extremes touch on each other; In this worn common saying lies a great truth. (...) The end draws on the start in the trajectory of celestial bodies such as the human conditions' ways of development. Everything has already existed. Only the passed trajectories are not closed curves but spiral lines, because otherwise, progress (which is evident) would not be possible.'<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life. Essays on Charles Baudelaire*. Michael W. Jennings, ed, Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 144.

<sup>22</sup> Beat Wyss, 'Der letzte Homer: Zum philosophischen Ursprung der Kunstgeschichte im Deutschen Idealismus', in: Peter Ganz, eds, *Kunst und Kunsttheorie 1400-1900*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991, 231-55; Douglas Crimp, 'The end of art and the origin of the museum', *Art Journal*, 46:4, Winter 1987, 261-66.

<sup>23</sup> Gottfried Semper, Manuscript 95, p. 5. 'Die Extreme berühren sich; In diesem abgenutzten Gemeinpruch liegt eine hohe Wahrheit verborgen. Das Ende knüpft an den Anfang an in

Progress is vital, however, for Semper's understanding of science. Following Alexander von Humboldt's view on the history and development of science, Semper defines three stages. First of all, there must be an actual need or problem that causes thought for its resolution. The second stage is concerned with doubt and analysis of the found material. Classification, and thus the museum, is part of this stage that Semper understands as a relatively easy task. It is also the stage on which he recognizes his own time in general and the Crystal Palace as its phenomenon in particular. The third and last stage is the one of 'genius' which absorbs the vast amount of material in order to create new forms and ideas by integrating the fully understood historical information.<sup>24</sup> If his own time was to be in the ascendant or in decline, Semper was not sure. But with regard to Crystal Palace with its objects, he indicates that his own time appears to be on the second stage of disintegration. And that is also where speculation and industrialisation come into play.

The commodity, however, is not an entirely new phenomenon for Semper. Already 'many thousands of years ago', precious objects and 'luxury dwelt in crude tents' which 'the market and trade' provided or were gained through 'robbery'.<sup>25</sup> Objects of 'artistic activity' have always been part of trading, and trade has existed in every culture and in all times, despite its stage of civilisation, and even before architecture. The commodity as such is therefore a universal principle independent of time. But the commodity as a mass-produced object of trade whose main purpose is to serve the needs of the market seems to be new in the age of industrialisation. In other words, what is new at the time was speculation and mass production, while speculation's interest would only lie in the market and revenue. This will have an enormous impact on the arts in Semper's terms: 'It is already evident that inventions are no longer, as before, a means for averting privation and for enjoyment. On the contrary, privation and enjoyment create the market for innovations. The order of things has been reversed.'<sup>26</sup> Capitalist production has not only superseded the old 'order of things' where the artist controls his own designs in his workshop but also endangers the creation of knowledge by interfering in the order of creating knowledge. Doing so, capitalism disturbs civilisation's progress for it takes possession of inventions and the sciences.

Capitalism interrupts Semper's universal principles of civilisation and cultural development or even preventing progress in civilisation in favour of market interests and the account of historical and geographical awareness. By revolving around the tension between capitalism and history, Semper underpins his second thoughts on capitalism. Nevertheless, Semper is fascinated by the technical possibilities that capitalism and industrialization have yielded but it is intriguing

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der Bahn der Himmelskörper so wie in dem Lauf der Entwicklungen menschlicher Verhältnisse. Alles war schon einmal da. Nur dass die durchlaufenen Bahnen keine geschlossenen Kurven sondern Spirallinien sind, denn sonst wäre kein Fortschritt möglich, der doch sonst evident ins unmöglich.'

<sup>24</sup> Michael Gnehm, *Stumme Poesie. Architektur und Sprache bei Gottfried Semper*, Zürich: gta Verlag, 2004, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 144.

<sup>26</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 133-34.

how he does not necessarily see capitalism in the tradition of liberal thinkers such as John Locke or Adam Smith who saw capitalism as a driving force in the progress of civilisation. At the same time, he tries to integrate capitalism and its repercussions into his historical concept by saying that speculation and industrialisation devalue ornamental forms or rather dismount forms of art to its original types and forms. This should help the arts to come closer to original types and forms which in turn should allow the arts to create a new representative style of the present age or, as Semper says, 'universally understood expressions of a true idea':<sup>27</sup>

'Let the discoveries, machines and speculation work as hard as they can, so that the dough will be kneaded out of which interpretive science (the healing lance of Achilles) will be able to shape new form. In the meantime, however, architecture must step down from its throne and go into the marketplace, there to teach – and to learn.'<sup>28</sup>

But instead of bemoaning the loss of influence, Semper takes capitalism as a spur to action. He asks artists to learn from capitalism and its principles in order to have an influence again on the production of goods. Thereby, the fact that capitalist production destroys original motives is also an advantage. The commodity which does not have much historical or cultural meaning in the first place but which is also as a result of an all-shattering capitalism helps the arts to find its roots and its history. Original type and forms are reconquered by the artist who deploys them according to the object's purpose and the market's need. The artist may be able to regain control over production. Accordingly, objects, motives, and modes of production have to be collected and classified. At the end of Semper's concept of science, there are the arts that reflect upon the found evidence. Science, thus, is only a preliminary stage to art. Doing so, Semper tries to save the old order and tries to regain a strong position for the arts in a cultural context which has faced a tremendous change. This is his attempt not to surrender to capitalism's power of subordinating the arts. The basis of such an endeavour is classification however. And this is the task of collections.

### **The role of collections**

Collections and public monuments are the true teachers of a free people. They are not merely the teachers of practical exercises, but more importantly the schools of public taste. (...) We have found only learned collections of art that the people with their present education in art cannot understand and whose content is often unintelligible even to connoisseurs because it is composed in part of broken fragments torn from their original context. In order to establish collections, we have plundered public monuments that in their original context were proper museums of high art.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 135.

<sup>28</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 146.

<sup>29</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 160.

Collections are supposed to play an important role in the current stage of ordering and classifying objects. But the museums themselves are not unproblematic. They are not only unsystematically and aimlessly arranged but also decontextualize specimens and thus obliterate their original context. The exhibited objects lose part of their significance and ability to communicate their original idea. When he proposes other objects for collections, Semper says something intriguing:

Objects of art that were created for no particular place are far better suited to such collections. The public's taste must be restored to health on these because they were the earliest objects on which the artistic sense of man was active. Among these objects, there are two very distinct classes that dominate a wide field of art, (...) ceramic and textile arts.<sup>30</sup>

Semper proposes that objects that lack local and personal characteristics are better suited for inspiring collections. Compared with his description of the commodity which is supposed to have no local colour and the broadest possible use, what Semper proposes here is something in between: no specific place but the turn to the universal principles of crafts, that is to say, ceramic and textile arts. And if artists understand the basic conditions of craftsmanship and their original motives, they might be better able to create more significant products than current industries did.

However, Semper's main problem remains unsolved. While the commodity obliterates history, it also has neither personal nor local characteristics. The commodity is only supposed to have the broadest possible use in order to conform with the market's demands. Semper's artistically reformed commodity, on the other hand, should make primordial motives of craftsmanship visible. These motives have to be gained through the display of artefacts without many personal and local characteristics so that the inner laws in the development of art forms come most clearly to the front. This should avoid the shallow emulation of other styles and make new forms possible, forms that communicate more adequately the contemporary idea in the first place. In the second place, as the quote above indicates, the reformed commodity could also obtain a certain individuality as long as it conforms to its function.

### **The Crystal Palace as a commodity**

The idea of creating an ideal collection, however, occurred to Semper when he was studying the objects in the Great Exhibition. For him, the Crystal Palace represented an 'incomplete entirety'.<sup>31</sup> This rather contradictory description indicates two things. As an entirety, the Crystal Palace represents the current world of human production. As being incomplete, the Crystal Palace still shows gaps in representing this world. Hence, the task of the Great Exhibition had not been worked out thoroughly and required revision and completion. But even though the Great

<sup>30</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 160-1.

<sup>31</sup> Gottfried Semper, Manuscript 94, 12 and 24. 'das noch so lückenhafte Ganze'.

Exhibition was not completed yet, the Crystal Palace corresponded perfectly to the contemporary conditions in terms of purpose and function. According to Semper, there could not have been a better building for harbouring a market place like this. Consisting of mass-produced elements, the Crystal Palace was itself the product of industrialisation and its liberal market ventures. Semper described it as a glass 'covered vacuum', a notion that also alludes to an ephemeral space in which locality and time are suspended.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, he understands it as a building that could limitlessly be expanded and to which the rest of its environment seems to be waiting to be integrated, hence reflecting the expanding field of capitalism and international trade. Semper thus characterizes the Crystal Palace in similar terms like he characterized the commodity, which is independent from history and locality. The Crystal Palace's vacuum presents the objects as freely floating in time and space, only determined by its factual and material properties on the one hand, speculation and market conditions on the other. As he appreciated and criticized capitalism's commodity, so he reacts to the Crystal Palace.

Semper's fellow critic Lothar Bucher – also an exiled refugee who worked as a correspondent for various German newspapers – described the event as a 'cross section of the history of civilisation' and he even talked of a 'new era in cultural history'. The notion of the Crystal Palace as a 'cross section through history' Semper commented as an 'ingenious word of Bucher's'.<sup>33</sup> Bucher wrote several articles on the Great Exhibition, which enjoyed great popularity in Germany. After the exhibition had closed, he published a book basing upon his essays, called *Historico-Cultural Sketches from the Industrial Exhibition of all People*. In this book Bucher describes the Crystal Palace as a first step towards a historico-cultural collection. Unlike existing national museums which provide a 'longitudinal section' through the history of a specific nation's development, Bucher argues, the Crystal Palace represents a 'cross section' through culture of all people. He implies that certain contemporary people use almost identical tools as we find in historical national museums containing ancient European objects.<sup>34</sup> With this allusion Bucher does not only echo general notions around the Crystal Palace that saw spatially distant cultures simultaneously distant in time – an assumption which clearly underpins Europe's claim to cultural supremacy – but also relates to Semper's struggles with history and time.

Semper's growing interest in oriental ornamentation also corresponds with this confusion of time and space. As described before, Semper sees oriental art as especially purposeful in terms of commodification. In his view, the commodity is an object with only little historicity. By trying to combine oriental art with aspects of commodification, he indirectly deprives Indian culture and makes it independent from time. Indeed, many commentators regarded contemporary Indian artefacts

<sup>32</sup> Gottfried Semper, 'Science, Industry, and Art', 164.

<sup>33</sup> Gottfried Semper, Manuscript 95, ETH Zurich – gta Archives, 3. ,Querschnitt der Culturgeschichte'.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Benjamin, 'Between Materialism and Historicism. Semper's Practical Art in Metals and Hard Materials', in *Gottfried Semper: The Ideal Museum, Practical Art in Metals and Hard Materials*, Peter Noever, ed, Vienna: Schlebrügge, 2007, 13-7.

back in time. For them, Indian culture progressed only up to a certain point after which they only preserved their state.<sup>35</sup> The same simultaneousness of time and space also appears in Semper's thinking. But while the oriental seems to be distant and back in time, only the European culture, accordingly, must have made progress until industrialisation, when its destructive forces came into play. Europe progressed only scientifically and technically but not artistically. Modern Asian art preserved ancient principles and thus provides Semper with a perspective on the ancient world in order to detect universal principles of craftsmanship. However, for both, Semper as well as Bucher, the Crystal Palace dispenses time and space by synchronising and mobilising objects from all over the world at the same time. These aspects also might be represented in Semper's decoration for the Canadian section in the Great Exhibition where he famously arranged a canoe hanging from the rafters of Crystal Palace as a freely floating object in time and space. (Figure 1)

### Critics on the exhibition

Semper's view of the Great Exhibition was multifaceted, though. On the one hand he saw the tremendous shift happening which he criticized, on the other he tried to find a way in dealing with these issues. Conversely, Karl Marx saw the Exhibition only critically. Marx also recognized the widespread impact of capitalism by saying that 'this exhibition is a striking proof of the concentrated power with which modern large-scale industry is everywhere demolishing national barriers and increasingly blurring local peculiarities of production, society and national character among all peoples'. For Marx, the exhibition proved the English bourgeoisie's 'cold-bloodedness' since they frivolously organized this event overshadowed by revolutionary movements on the continent in 1849. His comments, however, resonate more with the Communist Manifesto rather than forestalling his later conceptions. 'The bourgeoisie is celebrating this, its greatest festival, at a moment when the collapse of its social order in all its splendour is imminent, a collapse which will demonstrate more forcefully than ever how the forces which it has created have outgrown its control.'<sup>36</sup> But although Marx was to become the most severe critic of capitalism, over all, he remained surprisingly quiet when the Great Exhibition took place. This silence may indicate that Marx did not have the adequate terminology at his disposal to criticize the Great Exhibition more profoundly. When it comes to the discussion of objects themselves, Marx only states that the Crystal Palace is like the bourgeoisie's modern Pantheon 'where, with self-satisfied pride, it

<sup>35</sup> Lara Kriegel, *Narrating the subcontinent in 1851: India at the Crystal Palace*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001, 146-78.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Marx, 'Revue: Mai bis Oktober 1850', in: Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Band 7, Berlin DDR: Dietz Verlag, 1960, 435. Full quote: 'Diese Ausstellung ist ein schlagender Beweis von der konzentrierten Gewalt, womit die moderne große Industrie überall die nationalen Schranken niederschlägt und die lokalen Besonderheiten in der Produktion, den gesellschaftlichen Verhältnissen, dem Charakter jedes einzelnen Volks mehr und mehr verwischt.' Translation quoted after:

[http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/11/01.htm#\[42\]](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/11/01.htm#[42]).

exhibits the gods which it has made for itself'. The bourgeoisie venerates its own objects in the Crystal Palace. The objects, in turn, testify the bourgeoisie's self-involved idolatry, thus alluding to Marx's later concept of commodity fetishism.<sup>37</sup> In the early 1850s, however, none of the Marxist terms to discuss the commodity had been coined yet. When Marx was starting to use the term fetishism in his Paris papers of 1844, he still idealized the artwork as a different kind of entity, independent of commerce.<sup>38</sup> By understanding the economy as the fundamental principle by which human relations are determined, he eventually changed his conception in the late 1850s and did not differentiate anymore between artwork and commodity in his Foundations (Grundrisse).

Criticism of the exhibition came not only from the political left but also from the right. Unlike many of his liberal colleagues, the political economist Charles Babbage (whose writings were studied by Marx) took a critical turn on the Great Exhibition. Babbage especially criticized the absence of prices on the exhibits. For him, price tags provided crucial information in the valuation and appreciation of marketable good. Hence, the prohibition of prices leads to a false mode of representation since commodities could appear different in terms of quality as they are.<sup>39</sup> As far as the commodity as such is concerned, Babbage does, like Marx, still differentiate between a product of fine arts and products of industrial arts. His deliberations about the commodity are more concerned with the commodity as an object of trade and accumulating wealth rather than as an object with specific qualities that renders and influences its artistic appropriation:

The characteristic of the fine arts is, that each example is an individual—the production of individual taste, and executed by individual hands; the produce of the fine arts is therefore necessarily costly. The characteristic of the industrial arts is, that each example is but one of a multitude—generated according to the same law, by tools or machines (in the largest sense of those terms), and moved with unerring precision by the application of physical force. Their produce is consequently cheap.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike Marx and Babbage, Semper also does not distinguish between art works and commodity. On the contrary, for him, these are all products of human artistic activity. Neither Marx nor Babbage tries to fathom vigorously commodities' properties. At the time of the Great Exhibition, both, Marx and Babbage's intentions are concerned with the system of capitalism in the first place and less with the

<sup>37</sup> Antoine Artous, 'Marx und der Fetischismus. Von der Religionskritik zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie', in: Christina Antenhofer, *Fetisch als heuristische Kategorie. Geschichte – Rezeption – Interpretation*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2011, 97-112.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger, eds, *Art in Theory, 1815 – 1900*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, 170-8.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Bizup, *Manufacturing Culture: Vindikations of Early Victorian Culture*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, 77-9.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Babbage, *The Exposition of 1851: or, view of the industry, the science, and the government of England*, London: John Murray, 1851, 49.

impact of capitalism on the arts. Being an architect rather than a political economist or philosopher, Semper, in turn, is evidently much more concerned with the product of artistic ingenuity rather than economics. However, to discuss the impact of capitalism on the arts in 1851 is very early. Being neither adherent to extreme socialism nor extreme liberalism, Semper tries to establish similar terms by moving along these borders of political discourse already eight years before Marx's Foundations.

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