A Brief Study on the Application of Corinthian Columns in Jianghanguan (Hankou Customs)

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Keywords: Jianghanguan; Symbol; Cultural vision; Corinthian column; Embrace things of diverse nature.

Abstract. The Building of Hankou Customs, a building built in the 1920s on the riverside in Hankou in Wuhan and one once regarded as a landmark of Wuhan, has stood upright on the bank of the Yangtze River in Hankou for almost a century. She was a witness of the opening of the commercial port of Hankou, and a monument of the vicissitudes of Wuhan as well. Today’s Jianghanguan, almost submerged by the towering high-rises around, has lost its significance as a symbol of Hankou and a focus of the cultural vision. In this paper, through analysis of the artistic characteristics of architecture with Jianghanguan as a typical example, the author discussed the historical origin, popularization and application of Corinthian columns while referred to some foreign materials as well as local conditions in Wuhan. In the meantime, the author further proposed the idea that “architecture shall draw on others’ successful experience and embrace things of diverse nature”.

The Origin and Artistic Characteristics of Corinthian Columns

Corinthian columns originated from Ancient Greece and were first adopted in the Corinth region. It emerged in the 5th century B.C., later than the Doric Order (appeared in the 7th century B.C., the earliest one among three major orders of classical architecture) and Ionic Order (originated from Greece, one of the three orders of classical Greek architecture; slender and graceful in style, also known as the female column; featuring 24 grooves on the column shaft and a pair of downward decorative scroll work on the column cap). It failed to catch on in Ancient Greece, but was widely adopted after being spread to Rome. It rose in the 15th century during the Renaissance, when architects drew on ancient art to form their own architectural styles and abandoned the Gothic style that was once regarded as a classic.

There was a moving story about the generation of Corinthian columns. Vitruvius of Ancient Rome was the first architectural theorist in mankind’s history of architecture that has left works of his own. This engineer, who once worked for Caesar and Augustus and enjoyed collecting information and summarizing ideas, wrote the first handbook with systematic discussion of architecture in the architectural history after his retirement, the Ten Books on Architecture. In this book, he described the origin of the Corinthian column cap.

Once there was a beautiful young lady in Corinth, who died from illness before getting married. Her wet nurse, who loved her dearly, collected her favorite toys and items into a basket and set it in front of the young lady’s grave. To protect the items in the basket from rainfall, the wet nurse placed a stone plate on top of the basket. The next year, grass grew around the basket. Blades of grass stretched up but were blocked by the stone plate on top of the basket, from where they rolled outward, thus forming a swirling shape. A sculptor named Callimachus passed by the grave just at the right moment. At the sight of this beautiful basket surrounded by blades of Acanthus, he caught a sudden artistic inspiration, from which the Corinthian column cap was born. This story informed people in a vivid way that inspirations of architectural art actually originated from the beauty of life.

As we could notice, landmark buildings completed around the 19th century in the most important countries in Europe—Germany, France and Italy—all adopted ancient Greek orders dating back to more than 2000 years ago. Ancient Greece boasted three orders, which were selected by architects
of the aforesaid three countries in a convincing way. The ancient Greek orders indeed lived up to their expectations by presenting the spiritual pursuit of different nationalities in an accurate and appropriate manner.

Columns were the supporting structure of a building used to hold up the roof, especially in large space, where the combination of columns and beams was the simplest and most convenient choice. Many Renaissance buildings adopted the column structure. Certainly, people could not be resigned to building columns merely as slaves for heavy work; they wanted them to be more good-looking or exquisite, to be more artistic to please the viewers’ eyes. In such a context, a number of architects began to work on the columns’ styles, trying to attach people’s pursuit of beauty thereon, which in fact accelerated the birth of Corinthian columns. People in ancient Rome loved columns. Not only the Romans, Europeans loved columns, which influenced and was reflected by the European architectural styles. Obviously, columns could be regarded as an architectural language, which has nagged for more than 2000 years without people being annoyed thereby. Why was the glamour of orders so strong and enduring?

This was a question of aesthetics, or maybe one of philosophy as well. Large-scale buildings could develop majesty and momentum with columns; small buildings could present nobility and elegance with columns. Before the arrival of the age of steel and concrete, among buildings built from heavy stones, columns truly were the irreplaceable decorative elements.

Now, we would look into Corinthian columns in detail. The column cap was in the shape of an inverted bell, which was surrounded by decorative leaves (usually the leaves of winter honeysuckle) in serrated form with pairs of volute in the center sometimes. Decorations of the column were varied, adding elegance and luxury. In Vitruvius’ eyes, the “feminized” Corinthian order was just the opposite side of the resolute and masculine Doric order; Lord Wotton even remarked that the Corinthian order was “very lascivious” by dressing up like a slutty courtesan.

To sum up, column structures were fixed in the time of ancient Greece, yet the Corinthian order was the most legendary one of them. From its discovery to adoption and the later comprehensive application in the Renaissance, it has played irreplaceable roles in the history of architecture. Architects of the later ages and even the present age have continued to use the Corinthian order as the architectural decoration.

**Corinthian Columns in Jianghanguan**

To meet the requirements of the commercial port and business operations, on January 1, 1862, Hankou customs authority—Jianghanguan was established. Since the end of the 19th century, the import and export trade at the port of Hankou has ranked second nationwide, second only to Shanghai. On November 4, 1922, the very day of the grand cornerstone-laying ceremony of the Jianghanguan Building, guests gathered along the riverside of Hankou with colorful flags fluttering in the air. After 20 months’ intense construction, the Jianghanguan Building (Building of Hankou Customs) was completed on January 21, 1924[1, 2]. The building, which could be rated as a manifestation of the world-leading level in both appearance and construction quality, added more magical and dream-like colors to Hankou, an ancient yet young city known as “the Oriental Chicago”.

The Jianghanguan Building has achieved an advanced level in design and quality in an international view. Designed by Hemmings & Berkley, the building was completed under a quite open design concept. It was not the result of a single architectural style, but the combination of the characteristics of several schools of architecture. Strictly speaking, it represented an eclectic architectural style. It might also be explained that, throughout the 19th century, classicism and eclecticism remained their mainstream positions in Western architectural trend of thought. Till the turn of the 20th century when architectural concepts began a fundamental reform that led to the emergence of many new trends and new theories in ideological and cultural fields in western countries and the rising of many “anti-traditional” tendencies, the architectural circle also started its exploration on new architecture, i.e. the modernism architectural trend of thought. Different from the vigorous rising of the new architecture trend of thought in Europe, in modern China, modernism,
as an imported concept like classism, could only come into fashion for a short period at that time with blind absorption of western thoughts. Around the 1920s, the modern architectural styles of Europe were spread to Wuhan. As the most active agency of architectural design in Hankou, Hemmings & Berkley was certainly influenced by such new styles, which actually lay the foundation for the early architecture in Wuhan.

The Jianghanguan Building was a typical building representing the style of Classical Revival of Wuhan. Reinforced concrete structured, it included a four-story main building, a semi-basement on the bottom layer, a four-story bell tower, whose top was 83.8m above the ground. The building adopted the raft foundation, with granite-built external walls. The east, west and north sides of the building were all built with granite columns decorated with deformed classical “Corinthian” column caps. The granite was produced in Hunan, engraved with patterns and lines, boasting firmness and magnificence. Especially the 8 columns on the north side facing the concession, each of which was about 10m high and 1.5m in diameter, so thick that two people could just get their arms around. For its elevation design, designers employed tripartite composition method, using the bell tower to highlight the center entrance, giving expression to the classical style; the process of walls, flowers, wiggles and the Roman arch at the entrance, on the other hand, displayed the classical Renaissance architectural style[3, 4]. The entire building was in a triple-house courtyard layout with the south side open behind the building. The building’s second to the fourth floor was built with middle corridors, from which hollowed-out black iron railings connected to the granite columns, forming a contrast between rigidness and softness and an integration of the thick and the thin—such superlative craftsmanship! Standing at the middle corridor on the fourth floor, admiring the columns decorated with deformed classical “Corinthian” column caps, who could find these delicate engravings in the shape of leaves and waves not strikingly beautiful[5]?

Conclusion

Bramante (1445-1514), a representative figure of Rome, designed Tempietto in 1502, which was crowned as the first symbolic work of the High Renaissance. In Tempietto, Corinthian columns were applied as a symbol of the female, which agreed with the connotation of Greek orders and has presented the distinctive beauty of harmony in ancient Greek buildings.

Architects of later ages preferred classical orders. On the one hand, they introduced flexible adaptations and daring innovations thereupon, or even integrating architectural styles of different regions with classical orders; they applied many Renaissance ideas to the field of architecture, practice and creation. For instance, in this paper, Jianghanguan represented a style that combined the classical Greek forms and the European Renaissance orders; in the meantime, it also contained traditional Chinese characteristics, which on the other hand reflected the so-called architectural idea of “embracing things of diverse nature”, drawing on others’ strengths and integrating them into one for our own. Architecture was no longer a simple symbol or a fixed model. At the mention of Wuhan’s history and culture, one would usually thought of “Chu Culture”, “Bosom Friend Culture”, “River City Culture”, “Xinhai Culture”, etc., which were all unparalleled “Wuhan characteristics”. Yet Jianghanguan, as a representative work of imported goods’ rooting in Wuhan, also cast far-reaching influences on different aspects.

References


