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Picking up the Pieces of Charlemagne's Column Screens

The Church at Ottmarsheim, the *Westbau* of Essen, and the Discovery of Aachen's Copies

Jenny H. Shaffer

The church at Ottmarsheim and the *Westbau* at Essen are known today as exemplary eleventh-century copies of Charlemagne's celebrated chapel at Aachen: Ottmarsheim a crisp translation of the Carolingian building's opulent classicism into stark early Romanesque, and Essen an ingenious, startlingly exact quotation confined to the church's west end.[1] This filial relationship, suggested by general formal properties evident in polygonal plan and form, is cemented through the buildings' strikingly similar interior elevations of superimposed stories of large, round arch openings, the upper arches filled with distinctive two-story column screens (figs. 1–3).

These relationships have not always been self-evident. In the engraving of Ottmarsheim's interior in his authoritative 'Alsatia illustrata' of 1751, Johann Daniel Schoepflin took out the column screens, though they were then present in the building, placing one in a bubble to the left for the viewer to consider separately; he could not reconcile the screens with his late fourth-century date for the "temple," and postulated that they had been added later (fig. 4).[2] Conversely, Ferdinand von Quast, in the lithograph of Essen's west end interior accompanying his 1856 article on the church, inserted column screens where there then were none; citing the "extraordinary correspondence" between the structure, which he dated to the tenth century, and Aachen, the Prussian scholar took out the organ that then filled the upper *Westbau* to make visible a central screen and inserted matching screens in the lateral arches (fig. 5).[3]

Schoepflin and von Quast presented the structures, not as they were, but as they envisioned them to have been at their inception. That Schoepflin could make sense of Ottmarsheim only by removing the column screens and von Quast, a century later, could make sense of Essen only by inserting some highlights the broad notion that buildings change – both physically and in terms of how they are understood – over time. Moreover, their representations bring focus to the burgeoning concept of Aachen's progeny in mid-nineteenth century German-language scholarship and the relationship between this nascent scholarly category and the current state of Charlemagne's chapel – its column screens in particular.

While terminology is parsed and definitions disputed, the notion of Aachen's "copies" – of a large group of diverse, primarily medieval buildings that are related, in some way, to Charlemagne's chapel of ca. 795–803 – is, today, a scholarly commonplace.[4] Before the mid-nineteenth century, however, the idea of a corpus of Aachen followers and the pursuit of examples to add to that corpus was not a concern. Around this time, German-speaking scholars, von Quast key among them, simultaneously constructed the category of Aachen's copies and set about identifying examples. Ottmarsheim and Essen were among the first structures to be named as followers by these scholars – men at the forefront of the incipient academic discipline of art history taking shape primarily in the Prussian Kingdom – who took particular note of them because, beyond requisite, general, formal ties to Aachen, they had column screens.

The recognition of Aachen's followers and the prominence of Ottmarsheim and Essen within the growing corpus are documented in a cluster of interrelated publications of the 1840s and 50s. These lively scholarly conversations underscore that, while the idea of Aachen having progeny fit neatly within a coalescing discipline focused on formal parentage and developmental relationships, an acute awareness of the present, and unfortunate

circumstances of Charlemagne's chapel – particularly of its column screens, which the occupying French had unceremoniously pulled out of the building and carried off – heightened these scholars' sensitivity to and interest in possible followers as adjuncts to the current interrelated efforts to recover and restore the Carolingian chapel and assert its primacy as a great imperial, Christian, and "German" work in the emerging history of art.[5]

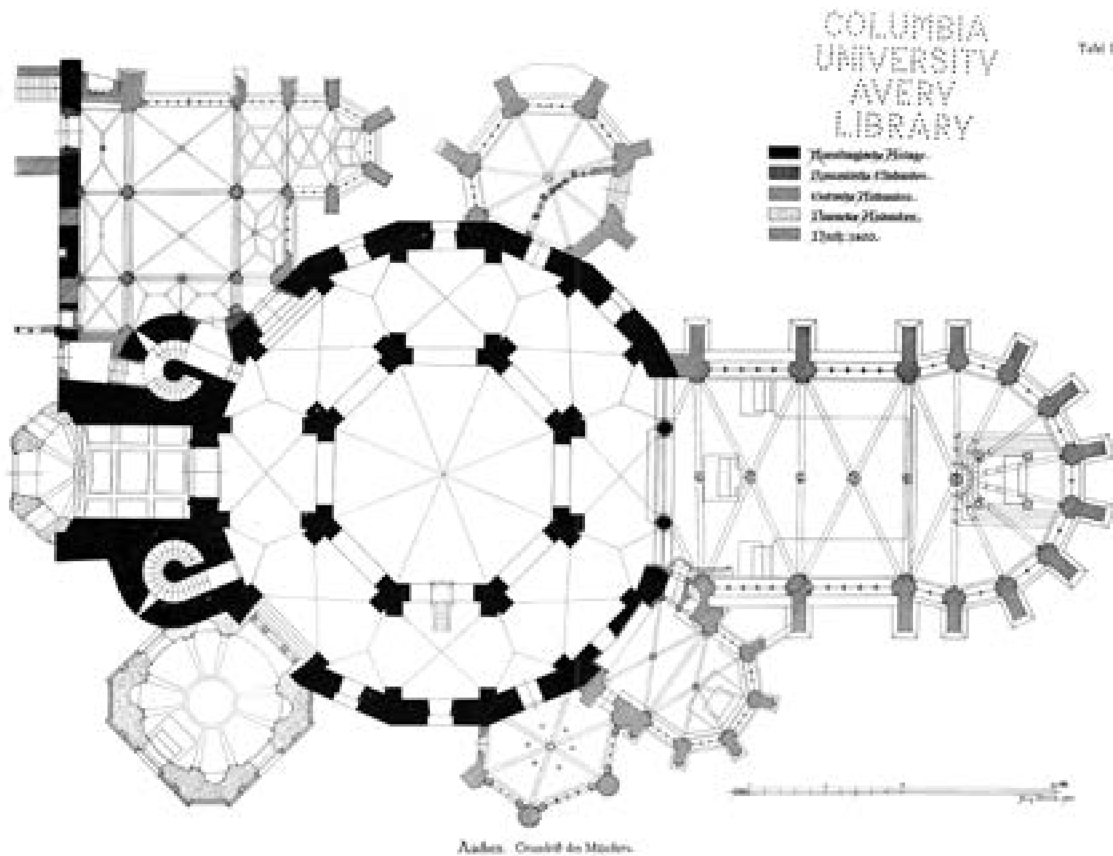
This glimpse into an exhilarating optimistic world of scholarly discovery highlights ways in which art's history spoke to contemporary questions and hard realities in post-Napoleonic Europe, while also bringing into focus how this new overarching framework – an attempt to gather up and bring order to often obscure, fragmentary, and concealed architectural vestiges – effectively supplanted what had come to be obsolete, irrelevant, and shattered frameworks for understanding buildings. Structures designated as copies were not necessarily unknown nor their similarities to Aachen never before noted; rather, these works were considered anew within a changing scholarly and cultural context that foregrounded a long marginalized Middle Ages and saw, in this newly recognized constellation of buildings, evidence of past – and, thus, present and, perhaps, future – power structures. Ottmarsheim, which had enjoyed a long life in the Alsatian antiquarian consciousness as a Late Antique temple, and Essen's *Westbau,* a much-altered fragment within a collegiate structure in use until the early nineteenth century, emerged, then, as prime Aachen copies, complete with column screens and demonstrable German pedigrees. Other designated followers which resembled Aachen formally but lacked screens – most notably the chapel at Nijmegen – were added to the corpus, but left to others to explore in depth. Indeed, just as Aachen was seen as incomplete without its screens, followers without screens were seen as secondary: as lacking Aachen's signature feature.

This reshuffling of the past was energized by the empirical, ostensibly objective underpinnings of developing art historical methodology. Direct encounters with buildings, enabled by the cessation of war and the relative accessibility of distant works through modern modes of travel, allowed for discoveries that the close examination of building fabric can bring. No longer dependent on a handful of rare antiquarian publications and the unverifiable pre-photographic images that might accompany such works – which, valuable though they were, did not provide the type of information, written or visual, that scholars sought – these men looked directly at buildings, relying primarily on visual evidence to identify Aachen followers, but with exacting formal and stylistic expectations that highlight contemporary assumptions about likeness, chronology, and value.[6]

Now buried – and no longer remembered – beneath mountains of later scholarship that they inspired, these scholarly explorations remain central to how we see and understand these structures. Moreover, not only was Aachen famously altered, beginning with the reinsertion of its column screens, from the mid-nineteenth century into the opening decades of the twentieth to embody changing images, first, of identity in the Rhineland and Prussia, and, then, of German ambition, Ottmarsheim and Essen, too, were altered to embody their roles as copies by an ascendant German nation-state. Yet while the confluence of interest in Aachen's followers and the preoccupation with column screens answered pressing questions for mid-century German-speaking scholars, the corpus of Aachen progeny has since grown to include buildings added for any number of reasons beyond, and even conflicting with, formal likeness. Yet Ottmarsheim, Essen, and Aachen – whatever their relationships in the Middle Ages – are now intertwined and interdependent: the way we see and understand them seemingly as unalterable as the ways in which they were seen and understood before they were plucked from the contexts in which they then were enmeshed and inserted into an emerging history of art.

I. The Present, Past, and Future of Charlemagne's Aachen around 1840

In 1842 and 1843, Franz Kugler and Karl Schnaase presented scholarship's nascent notion of Aachen's copies to a broad German-speaking audience in their pioneering and hugely successful art history surveys, in which they ambitiously gathered and organized the world's artistic production in an all-encompassing temporal and geographic format still familiar today.[7] Despite differences in their sprawling histories, both men gave ample attention and similar significance to Aachen.[8] They fixed the centrally planned structure, discussed in terms of its form, at the time of its origin under Charlemagne, and designated the chapel as a great imperial, Christian, and German work: the high point of its age. Both characterized Aachen as drawing, obviously and appropriately, on a great, imperial, centrally planned church of the past: San Vitale in Ravenna. Aachen's importance and role in art's history was then further supported through a brief enumeration of followers, also ascertained formally. Kugler cited the "sixteen-sided baptistery" in Nijmegen, and then "a second copy" at Ottmarsheim, while Schnaase named Ottmarsheim "a true copy" and St. John the Evangelist in Liège as "after the model" of Aachen.[9] Neither scholar provided justification for this category or explicated his inclusions in detail; the idea that Charlemagne's chapel would generate progeny appeared as self-evident within these developmental histories, the followers offered as an index of the model's importance.



6 Aachen Cathedral, plan, from: Karl Faymonville, Die Kunstdenkmäler der Stadt Aachen. Das Münster zu Aachen, Düsseldorf 1916, Plate 1

7 Aachen Cathedral, interior in 1861

In their analyses, Kugler and Schnaase presented a distillation of recent scholarship on Aachen and the path it had set for future inquiry. Their discussions were anchored by Franz Mertens' watershed article of 1840, 'Ueber die Karolingische Kaiser-Kapelle zu Aachen.'[10] Mertens – an architect and architectural historian who, despite an impressive bibliography, remained an outsider in Berlin's scholarly circles[11] – provided a meticulous reconstruction of Charlemagne's chapel, which had been altered significantly since it was built, most noticeably in plan, through encircling chapels and a Gothic choir, and, in the interior, through overpowering Baroque decoration (figs. 6 and 7). With his verbal description, accompanied by scale drawings in plan, elevation, and details, Mertens made visible this reconstructed, early medieval reality in an exacting way it had not been before, his work rooted in his examination of the actual building (fig. 8).[12] He thus established Carolingian Aachen as a centrally planned building entered through a multi-storied towered west end and terminated to the east by a small two-story apse. Sixteen-sided on the exterior, the chapel revolved around a domed octagonal core, marked out by piers supporting large round arches, this central space ringed by an ambulatory. The vaulted ambulatory supported a second floor, which opened into the central space, again through large round arches, these filled with two-story column screens. Mertens' remarkable analysis provided an authoritative and still familiar scholarly reconstruction of the Carolingian building and its decoration: one that lies at the heart of subsequent Aachen scholarship.

Yet, despite his scholarly objectivity, Mertens was motivated to retrieve Charlemagne's chapel in part as a response to the present and, to him, distressing circumstances of the building – its column screens in particular – his study imbued with an image of Aachen as a great, if fractured, imperial, Christian, and German work. Not simply obscured by changes over the centuries, the chapel bore marks of the recent French occupation of the town, which stretched from the late eighteenth century until the defeat of Napoleon, and its messy aftermath. Most glaringly, the second-story interior arches were empty: beginning in 1794, the French had pried out the screens and transported the columns and capitals to Paris.[13] In 1815, in the wake of Napoleon, the town of Aachen, poised on the western periphery of the German-speaking Rhineland, was made part of the Prussian Kingdom with the Congress of Vienna, and most – though not all – of the pieces were returned. As the town struggled to find its place within the new European order, the dilapidated chapel became a focus for various groups, all of which saw in it evidence of a glorious past. Mertens expressed what was, in the Rhineland and Prussia, a widespread outrage at the French for their "crude plundering," heightened by the fact that, despite the peace, the screens had not been reinstalled, but remained in pieces, lying around the chapel precinct.[14] Kugler and Schnaase echoed this indignation, the latter noting that the columns had been "taken out during the French revolution" while the former railed against the "great art theft" in which the columns "were pulled out during the French occupation,"