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A SCULPTOR'S  
ARCHITECTURE

(Duchamp - Villon, Raymond)

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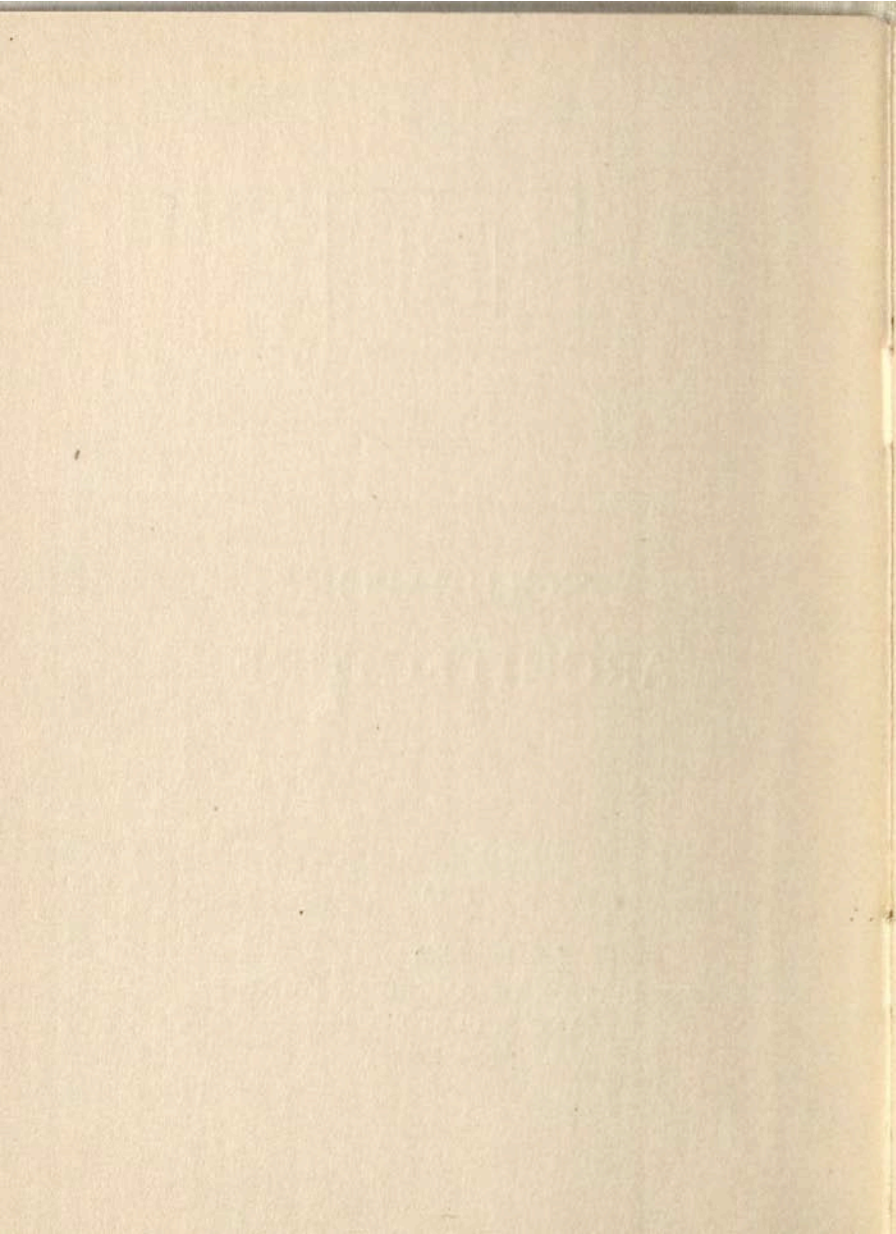
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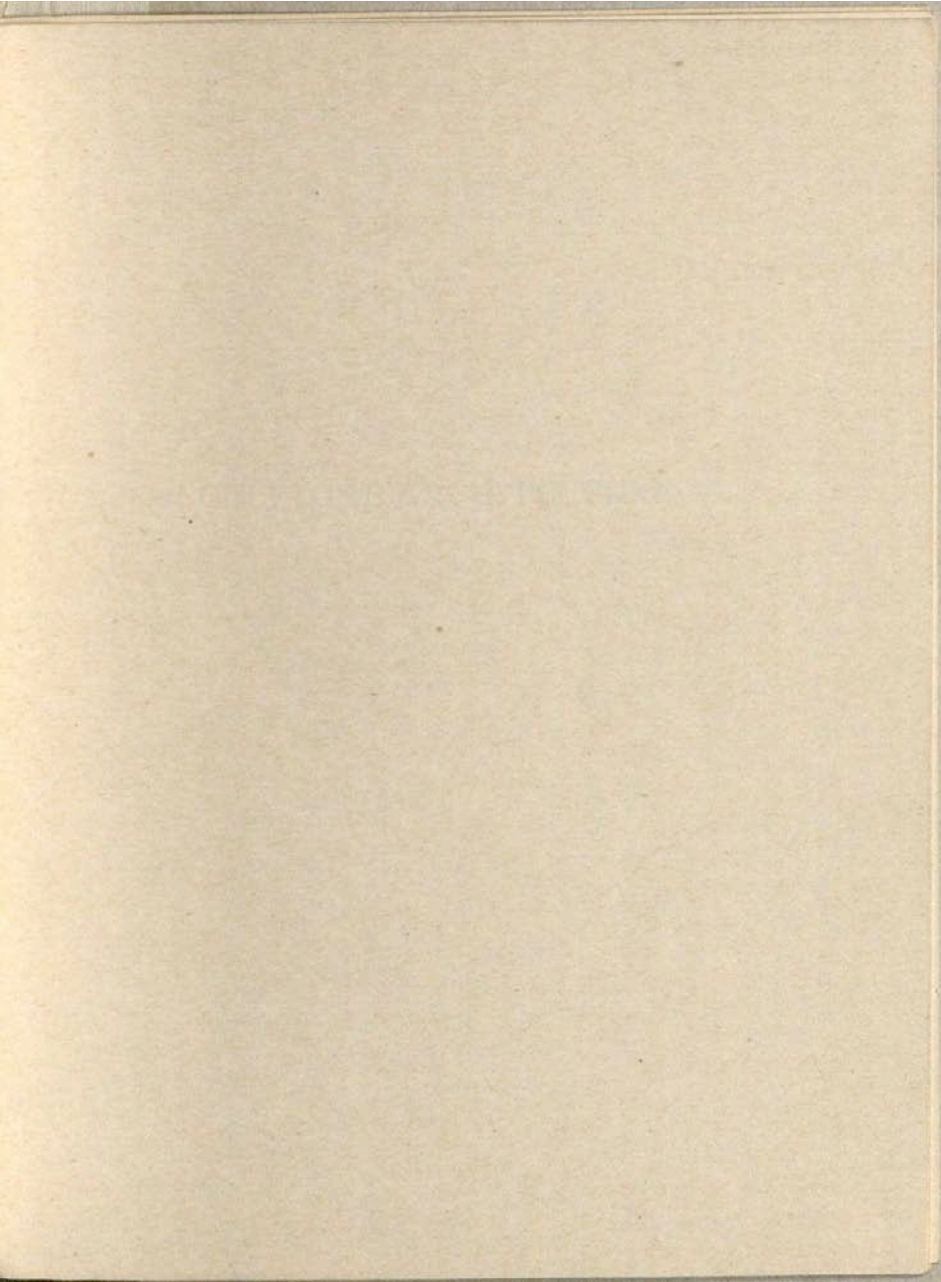
BY

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A SCULPTOR'S ARCHITECTURE

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The time has come, when a new answer can be given to a certain challenge of Russel Sturgis'. He used to say "Show me a modern building that is at once good architecture and no copy of the past." With the French activity of the last hundred years, (the French Renaissance as many of us consider it) an architectural idea which should meet the two requirements of our distinguished critic was certainly to be looked for, and until now it had not appeared.



The trouble with modern architecture has been its failure to meet the demand for a new style of decoration which our new methods of building impose. In the classic periods the decoration grew out of the needs and character of the construction. With the Greeks, it was the column, lintel and tympanum. On the column, the fluting gave added vertical lines contributing to the sense of support, and the beautiful capital and base have their explanation from the constructive standpoint in the need for broader surfaces at the juncture of the column with the other masses. So also the metopes and other sculptures were considered with regard to their effect on the mass and use of the whole quite as much as for their intrinsic beauty. In the other great style of architecture, the Gothic, we see almost more clearly the closeness with which the decorative elements followed the constructive. "But" many a modern architect has objected—"today we don't build that way. We first put up a frame work of steel and then

we just cover it one way or another with a sheathing of stone. How can we compete with the ancient styles when we do all our construction on the inside, none on the outside?" And the only answer that could be given was— Find the style that shall balance the two things.

It is this that M. Raymond Duchamp-Villon has indicated to us in his "project" for a facade shown full size (at least the first story of it) at the Paris Salon d'Automne of 1912 and now more completely at the exhibition of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors.

When my friend, Mr. Michael Stein, the art-collector, first called my attention to M. Duchamp-Villon's work, he remarked that it would be admirably suited to the needs of building with concrete. I agreed and still think so. But a talk with the sculptor (for Raymond Duchamp-Villon is primarily that)

not only convinced me that this style of decoration has its first application to building with stone, but that it sprang from an appreciation and solution of the new problems of steel and stone.

There is none of the disguising of new methods under old forms that gives a feeling of falsity to almost all modern building. However much taste be displayed in the use of columns, pilasters, arches, etc., we feel that they are only the figments of once-useful things. And the architect feels it even more. He is deprived of the joy of creation by being obliged to handle forms whose *raison d'être* has disappeared. For him they are of the past, and, as always happens where convention has replaced invention, the result lacks stimulus,—life. I think a proof of the healthiness of the scheme that M. Duchamp-Villon offers us is the quantity of new problems of detail that it affords. I shall try to show in what way it harmonizes construction and decoration, and if that be admitted, the healthy out-

look for men of talent to develop with a live and growing art-form must be evident.

An architect once said, "Architecture was killed by the iron beam." That is heresy in the worst sense of the word, unless he meant that the possibilities for architecture like that of the past were killed. The future will continue to use the iron beam—and very cheerfully. In fact there is every reason to believe that with this part of the work once done by the engineer, the architect will have more freedom than he ever had before. The qualities that made the old buildings great works of art will go on appearing as long as we have men who feel the need of those qualities. What has caused the halt has been the search for a new form in which to apply them. Raymond Duchamp-Villon proposes that it be through the very sheathing of stone that the men of these latter years have found their stumbling block. The questions of mass and scale once decided, the effective position of the steel construction is evidently

decided. But this is, as we know, the mere skeleton which, however finely conceived, can never ensure the success of the whole. A certain New York residence—perhaps the most adversely criticized building we have—is acknowledged to be excellent from the standpoint of the internal construction. It is the exterior which must create the effect of beauty or of ugliness, and it is here that M. Duchamp-Villon has made the advance that seems to us so all important. Once and for all, the conventionalized Greek and Renaissance orders are abolished and in their place are given forms appropriate to the slabs of marble or other stone that sheathe the modern building. These build up in masses according to the space they occupy, according to the use and needs of each detail of the work. Over doors and windows for example, the cornices demand extra support, and the eye is satisfied by the buttress-effect of the triangular blocks which carry off the thrust at the same angle at which they receive it. A

balcony on the second floor would occupy the space over the main entrance, and its form is taken up and accentuated by the more-than-decorative masses beneath it. Of these I shall have more to say later, for the present let it suffice to state that details like these must be considered with reference to the mass of the whole building, which, of course, could not be set up in a corridor of the Salon. With this once in mind we lose any feeling of heaviness in the masses over the door as well as the disadvantages resulting from the too-close approach to the building. One can, in fact, from this standpoint, judge better from the model, in which the whole first story may be seen at once.

The two points especially to be emphasized in the appreciation of this architecture are, first, the clearness with which one is made to feel that the exposed surface depends on a sustaining structure within, and second that the decorative elements are derived not merely from the

"taste and fancy" of the designer, but from the character of the edifice, whose needs inhere alike in the properties of stone—its demand for support and balance, and in the property of our sight—its demand for harmony of proportion.

Of the first quality of this facade it seems that I have said nearly enough: its flat masses of stone are as evidently intended for application to a building with a frame of steel as the Greek column is intended to be itself the supporting element. To use the column as a mere ornament is as anomalous as to retain its entasis—which—when silhouetted against the Greek sky meant beauty, against a modern gray wall means ugliness.

I have mentioned some of the ways in which the surface of this facade gives the sense of construction. It would be pleasant to point out in detail such admirable *trouvailles* as the double curve over the windows and doors, but

it is more important to pass at once to a consideration of the way in which M. Duchamp-Villon arrives at his effect. The second quality of this order—that it is not merely a matter of taste but one of reason and system, in no way prevents the individual architect from working out an original solution of each problem. The single illustration I have chosen of the inventive good taste which pervades this work of M. Duchamp-Villon's is an example of what possibilities are contained in a style like the present one whose philosophy is a base, not a limitation.

Before attempting an analysis of this philosophy it would be well to follow out some of the influences that have made it possible. It is safe to assume that a new art will derive from the strongest one preceding it, whether one in its own form of expression, or allied to it. Thus in the Renaissance we find painting strongly influenced by sculpture, and sculpture begin-



ning as a mere embellishment of architecture. In our time the sequence has been reversed. It was the painters of the nineteenth century who kept alive the feeling for art. Meier-Graefe points out with very apt illustrations from the work of Renoir how that painter's realization of the fullness of form has been of importance to sculptors, indeed that some of the admirable figures by Maillol might have been modelled from those in pictures by Renoir. The other great master of these latter years, Cézanne, has been even richer in influence. The one phase of it that concerns us here is the great realm of possibilities he opens up for succeeding artists by his organization of a work into a structure. It was of course not the first time it was done—since Cézanne pointed the matter out through his pictures we have seen it more and more strongly in the work of the greatest of the old masters. But in none of them is it purer than in Cézanne and perhaps in none so visible. The best men of the present generation, painters

and sculptors, have accepted it as the first necessity of their work and have found in it a means of expression whose richness is by no means lessened by its austerity. One phase of the development has been a complete turning aside from representing the appearance of nature, and the popular outcry against art of this kind has been loud.

The men of fifty years ago gave us the proof that a complete art can be attained through mere representation when directed by a certain spirit. We remember Zola's famous "nature through a temperament." That was the death-blow of the anecdote that was formerly thought necessary. With this new system of using simply the volumes, lines and colors of nature, the men called "cubists" are showing that, somewhat as in music, important facts about nature and sensations derived from it can be registered in a work of art without giving the physical appearance of nature.

It must be clear even from this short description—unaided by reproductions from the works of these artists, that a very probable fruition of their tendencies would be architecture. When we consider that the Greek temple has spoken such a word as "serenity" to all the after time, and the Gothic cathedral such a word as "aspiration," we realize at once that these buildings are no more 'abstract', than they are utilitarian. They are expressions, as much as music, literature or the graphic arts. And ultimately the need of architecture in our time is one that lies deeper than the harmonizing of decoration and construction that I first dwelt on. That might be called the external side of the matter: the vital issue is the restoration of architecture to its dignity as an exposition of life.

If the ideas contained in the foregoing seem new and difficult to grasp at first, perhaps I can

further explain the matter by some account of M. Duchamp-Villon's sculpture. Six years ago, he was doing a strong and thoughtful kind of work which was just beginning to emerge from the all-pervading influence of Rodin. He was never one of the men enslaved by that artist, but like most of the sculptors of his time he felt the power of Rodin's mind and was attracted by his masterful way of applying a system of modelling to the expression of his sensibility. Very wisely however he saw that this art must be left to Rodin himself and he made for a development of the idea which I have stated to be one of the striking lessons of Cézanne; namely the organization of the masses into structure. The process of change necessarily required a considerable length of time. Three years passed before he could point to a result even moderately free from details of which one could say, "That is there not as a factor in the whole scheme but because you had a certain sensation from that part."

His latest works leave no room for such a reproach, and the problems he is already engaged on are of bringing into finer and finer relation the elements of the pure structure he has mastered, and at the same time bringing them to a closer, intenser expression of his ideas.

His work in architecture is by no means a turning aside from his sculpture, but a furthering of it. In the present facade he has simply a "subject" whose organization was to be developed from the forms suggested by a building instead of those suggested by a man or woman. He told me that the general scheme for this architecture came to him one and whole at the beginning. Its development was a long fascinating series of experiments,—adjusting form to form and mass to mass. In the lower sections, broad, simple relations were sufficient. As he approached the climax of forms over the door he felt the need of a more complex fabric as an expression of this encounter of a number of

tendencies of direction,—which support one another by their very oppositions. The fitness of the two big prisms can now be better appreciated: they carry on the principal directions and above all reassert what the sculptor called a "living line," the vertical that runs through from their lowest to highest points.

The final word I would speak about this architecture is its quality of response to the needs of America. We have yet enormous areas that will be built up into cities, we are going to tear down and rebuild most of the edifices, that already exist. With the freedom that this order gives to individual development and with its possibilities of expansion to make it suit the largest building as well as the smallest, it seems to clearly fix the type of our ideal. Before a photograph of the sky-scrapers of Manhattan Island, Raymond Duchamp-Villon said that he saw the possibilities of the modern cathedral.

