Architecture, Environment and Emotion
Quatremère de Quincy and the Concept of Character

Vittoria Di Palma

In 1788, when Antoine-Chrysostôme Quatremère de Quincy published the first of his volumes on architecture for the *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, 'character' was by no means a new concept. In fact, as Quatremère himself acknowledged in his entry on the subject, the meaning of the term had, by this time, become far more complex than its original etymology might have suggested. From 'a mark or figure traced on stone, metal, paper, or any other material, with a chisel, burn, paint brush, quill or any other instrument, serving as the distinctive sign of a thing', character had come to have a broader signification, encompassing 'that which constituates the nature of beings in a manner that is distinctive and specific to each'. Thus, although the term retained an original connotation of an element of written language, in a more metaphorical sense it now implied an additional relationship between essential meaning and visual appearance.

The uses of 'character' in this wider sense were legion. The model for Quatremère's article, contained in volume 2.2 of Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers, par une société de gens de lettres of 1751, had devoted the majority of its pages to a discussion of character in terms of printing and typesetting, but had also mentioned character in the sense of an inscribed mark in mathematics, astronomy, chemistry and alchemy, pharmacology, medicine, commerce, music, and ancient funerary inscriptions; and, in a more abstract and figurative sense, in studies of moral and national character, theology, the theatre, botany, and painting. Despite the length of this list, architecture was not among the subjects included. Thus, in 1788, Quatremère's task was to show, first, where character in architecture stood in relation to these other fields, and second — and even more importantly — to define in what way the concept of character might be of specific relevance to architecture. This was no simple task. 'Caractère', numbering 41 double-column folio pages, stands as one of the longest, most sustained and most intellectually ambitious of all of Quatremère's encyclopaedia entries. Indeed, he uses the term to expound a comprehensive theory about the influence of nature on artistic expression, the place of architecture in the public sphere and the potential of architecture to articulate a universal language of emotional effects.

One of the aspirations of Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* was the creation of a universal catalogue of human...
knowledge. The philosophical inspiration for this project was Francis Bacon’s fragmentary *Instauratio Magna*. Bacon’s division of human knowledge in *The Advancement of Learning* was the acknowledged basis for the *Encyclopédie*’s tree of knowledge, while its focus on the *arts et métiers* was clearly related to Bacon’s ‘Catalogue of Particular Histories by Titles’ in the *Novum Organum*. But Bacon’s influence can also be seen in another respect: in the *Encyclopédie*’s approach to order.

In his famous ‘Discours préliminaire’, D’Alembert explicitly addressed the differences between an encyclopaedia and a dictionary. An encyclopaedia, he explained, must show both the order of and interconnections between the various fields of human knowledge. A dictionary, on the other hand, must focus on each term to the exclusion of all others, describing the basic principles and essential parts of each subject. In other words, an encyclopaedia links; a dictionary divides. The *Encyclopédie*’s use of an alphabetical arrangement was proper to the nature of a dictionary, while its elaborate cross-referencing system ensured that it was possible to jump from one related entry to another. However, the alphabetical ordering and the cross-referencing network made it unlikely that the *Encyclopédie* would ever be read sequentially. Instead, both systems of organization encouraged a staccato and fragmentary mode of reading; the reader was provided with multiple points at which to break off from the subject of departure, switch course and swerve into other areas. Consequently, the resulting paths through this vast forest of text would be entirely individualized, demanding initiative, and promising new itineraries, connections and references at every step. In effect, each reader created the *Encyclopédie* anew.

The *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, on the other hand, presented itself as an important corrective to the *Encyclopédie*’s great intermingling of materials. The initial prospectus, published by Charles-Joseph Panckoucke in the *Mercure de France* on December 1, 1781, stipulated that this new, improved encyclopaedia, divided by subject matter, would ‘correct all the errors in the Diderot original… treat those arts and sciences which had been previously neglected, as well as the discoveries posterior to the first printing… supply the deficiencies in the nomenclature of the various sciences and arts… effect a rigorous relationship between the text and the plates, suppress the useless and replace them by more useful ones… [and] make it far easier for the reader to find the desired data’. Among the 26 subjects to be given individual sections were mathematics, physics, medicine, surgery, chemistry, agriculture, natural history, botany, mineralogy, geography, history, theology, philosophy, grammar and literature, law, finances, political economy, commerce, marine, military science, fine arts, and arts and handicrafts. Panckoucke stipulated that the new encyclopaedia would contain at least 30,000 more articles than the *Encyclopédie*, that it would be published in two formats – 49 quarto volumes with three columns of text and 92 octavo volumes with two columns; and estimated that all the volumes would be ready by December 1787. These proved to be wildly unrealistic promises. When the final volume of the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* appeared in 1832 – 34 years after Panckoucke’s death – the encyclopaedia comprised 337 parts (166 1/2 volumes) of text, and 51 parts of plates (6,439 individual plates in all). A number of divisions had never been published.

The guiding philosophical principle of the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* was order. Where the *Encyclopédie*’s Baconian inspiration had meant that any overarching system was explicitly shunned – the alphabet was used precisely in order to avoid the errors inherent in any kind of a priori intellectual or didactic system – the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* explicitly aimed at providing a defined, circumscribed, and intelligible reading experience. Criticizing the *Encyclopédie*’s reliance on the alphabet, Panckoucke’s prospectus condemned the confusion of the former in vivid terms: ‘the most disparate objects touch, collide and follow headlong after one another. The parts of this collection are fragmented and cast to far-flung distances. In it the connecting chain is continually broken’. According to Panckoucke, the dreaded consequence of this disordered system was that it created confusion in the mind of the reader, abandoning her within the vast labyrinth of the *Encyclopédie*’s innumerable volumes without a guiding thread. The *Encyclopédie Méthodique* would replace this arbitrary and meandering voyage of discovery with an efficient and direct route to the original goal.

Definitions

The ordering and classifying spirit driving the publication of the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* imbues the individual entries as well. In fact, one might see the broader purpose of Quatremère’s article on character to be that of imposing order on a term whose manifold metaphors had created a bewildering array of meanings and applications. In keeping with this, he begins by establishing a complex taxonomy of the various interpretations of the term and their interconnections. First, character is divided into two distinct types: physical or visible, and moral or intellectual. The former, related to the question of exterior appearance, is defined as ‘the apparent and sensible indication of the nature, the distinctive qualities, and the properties associated with the final purpose of objects’. The latter, related to behavior, is defined as ‘the energetic and pronounced indication of habits which each
species has received from the beginning, the modifications specific to each individual, and the qualities corresponding to the use or end to which they are destined.\textsuperscript{41} Each of these general categories is then further divided into three subcategories: essential character, distinctive character and relative character.

Essential character, in the physical sense, is 'the type by which nature makes her objects known: it is that indication composed of the great traits that form, above all, the general categories of the three reigns of nature [animal, vegetable, and mineral], the more particular distinctions of the different classes of beings, the nuances specific to species, ages, sexes – in sum all those marks externally apparent and vast large which prevent the confusion of one species with another'.\textsuperscript{17} In the moral sense, essential character is defined as a consistency in the 'general habits which form the particular instincts of each species and which indicate in a constant and unchanging manner the inclinations, the dominant tastes, and the propensities that define the very nature of their organization'.\textsuperscript{13} Essential character is unchanging; whether in the physical or moral sense, it can never be affected by exterior or 'accidental' causes.

Distinctive character is a particularization of essential character, although, in contrast, it is entirely a result of environmental influences. In the physical sense, it depends on 'all the particular accidents, all the varieties of development, that a multitude of visible and invisible causes imprint on the same species according to differences in location, or on the individuals of the same species according to the different elements that modify their forms and to the influences that have some effect on them'.\textsuperscript{14} In the moral sense, distinctive character exists when 'particular accidents of organization, circumstances, social institutions and all the exceptions which exist in nature's own order affect one individual or another, or one part of a single species or another; it is nothing other than a local or temporary modification of the essential character'.\textsuperscript{15}

Relative character pertains to the manifestation of function in an object's or a being's outward appearance. In the physical sense, it consists in the way particular strengths or abilities are 'associated with those different kinds of features which nature has granted to certain species or individuals, and which make clear the use for which they are more specifically destined'.\textsuperscript{16} In the moral sense, it is 'the imprint or the particular development of certain qualities corresponding to one function or another or to one manner of being or another, and which indicate for what one thing or another is appropriate; it designates a correlation between how something looks and what it is good for'.\textsuperscript{17}

In speech, a different term denotes each of these three types of character. If someone says something has 'character' (du caractère), it is the essential character they are speaking of – in other words, those pronounced traits that express the essence of the thing. If someone says something has 'a character' (un caractère), it is the distinctive character they imply, or the individuality of a thing. Lastly, if someone says something has 'its own character' (son caractère), what is meant is the relative character of the thing, or that which makes manifest a purpose, station, or moral proclivity through an outward configuration. In conclusion, Quatremère relates each of these three subsets of character to a term with unmistakable architectural overtones: essential character is synonymous with force and grandeur, distinctive character with physiognomy or originality, and relative character with propriety or convenance.

Quatremère does not use the broad divisions of physical and moral character, but rather the three subcategories of essential, distinctive, and relative character to give his article its structure. This tripartite scheme can be linked broadly to the English empirical tradition, and in particular to John Locke's division of human knowledge into natural philosophy, ethics and logic.\textsuperscript{18} Natural philosophy, or the study of nature, corresponds to Quatremère's essential character; ethics, or the study of the passions, to his distinctive character; and logic, or the study of words, to relative character. However, although Quatremère's essay has deep intellectual roots, his concentration on issues of community and communication locates his discussion in an emerging genre of historical and anthropological writing; rather than searching for origins, Quatremère analyzes change.

Nature and Society

The role of nature and its impact on cultural development was a question that had taken center stage in the years following the publication of John Locke's \textit{An Essay Concerning Human Understanding} in 1690. According to Locke, ideas in the mind were produced either by sensation – the interaction between the body and the objects in its surrounding environment – or by reflection – the mind's contemplation of its own operations. The resulting close correlation between environment and intellectual development explained the similarities between individuals from the same locality as well as the differences between individuals from distant places. In doing this, it established a philosophical and physiological basis for national identity and international diversity. But most importantly, it positioned nature, in terms of the natural environment, as the fundamental issue to be considered when discussing culture and cultural productions.

In the opening passages of his 'Discours préliminaire', D'Alembert had offered a distilled version of Locke's
epistemology. But it was the abbé Du Bos, in his Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture of 1719, who was the first French author to apply Locke's environmental determinism systematically to the question of artistic production. His goal was twofold: first, to explain why some societies, in certain periods, produce a concentration of artistic geniuses; and second, to explain the origin of aesthetic pleasure by defining a new theory of the effects of art based on the aesthetic experience of the spectator. His discussion, which locates and limits the flowering of artistic genius between the 52nd and 35th degrees of north latitude — to Europe, that is, with Holland as the northernmost limit — provides a cogent articulation of the fundamental influence of geography and climate on artistic creation and reception in different societies. Lengthy discussions of the effects of air, water, soil, and climate on the temperaments of human societies not only forged a link between nature and culture, but also made environmental factors central to the process by which the spectator understands and derives pleasure from works of art.

Taking Du Bos's environmental determinism as his starting point, Quatremère too begins with nature. Nature influences culture, not the other way around. And as essential character is the most beholden to the forces of nature and the least subject to human intervention or modification, Quatremère's discussion of character in nature focuses on the manifestation of essential character in landscapes and climates. He identifies landscapes that are infinite, immense, or enormous, those that are full of variety, surprise, and vivid contrasts, as the ones marked by essential character. Likewise, climates that are either frigid or torrid have essential character — medium and changeable climates do not. Quatremère's correlation between a sensation of strength and grandeur and those landscapes exhibiting striking contrasts, those whose sheer rocky heights, dark valleys, and barren wastelands make them inimical to life, and those whose enormity and extent suggest ideas of infinity, betrays the real subject of his discussion of essential character: the sublime.

The classical rhetorical category of the sublime, traditionally attributed to Longinus, was reintroduced into French literary criticism in the seventeenth century by the académican Nicolas Boileau. Although initially limited to poetry and rhetoric, the sublime became an aesthetic quality applicable to all the arts — music, painting, sculpture and architecture — and subsequently, through a neat reversal of the doctrine of imitation, to nature itself. Rogier de Piles was one of the earliest writers in France to apply this literary term to visual phenomena — in his case to the representation of nature in painting. In his Cours de peinture par principes of 1708, de Piles expounded the methods by which a painter could evoke a mood through his representation of natural forms in painting. His principle of the 'tour assemblée', which stipulated that each element of a painting should reinforce the basic character or mood, implied that particular elements of nature — as imitated in a landscape painting — could strongly influence the passions. But it was Edmund Burke's A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful of 1757 that most vividly articulated a series of images of sublime nature, and most consistently linked these images with corresponding emotional states. His association of obscurity, vaularity, silence, vastness, and infinity with painful sensations and thus the sublime, and smallness, smoothness, delicacy and lightness of hue with pleasure and thus beauty, was fundamental to the development of theories linking landscape and emotion. In the 1770s, a flurry of works on garden design — the French translation of Thomas Whately's Observations on Modern Gardening of 1771, Claude-Henri Wattelet’s Essai sur les jardins of 1774, Jean-Marie Morel's Théorie des jardins of 1776 and René de Girardin's De La Composition des paysagé of 1777 — laid the theoretical foundations in France for the practice of designing emotion by describing the process whereby the evocative qualities of natural landscapes could be imitated in the artificial landscape of the garden. Thus, by the time Quatremère was writing his article on character, the influence of nature on society and culture was a well-founded assumption. Even more importantly, the idea that this relationship involved the passions and that design could imitate not merely the natural forms but also the effects of natural forms, was a firmly established corollary.

Although nature was the primary and most powerful formative influence on the arts, society followed close behind. Thus, after discussing the manifestation of character in nature, Quatremère turns to 'Caractère considéré dans les Peuples'. Du Bos had established the importance of both physical (environmental) and moral (societal) influences on the arts, but his ideas about geographical and climactic agency had been developed, expanded, and disseminated by Montesquieu's De l'Esprit des lois of 1748. This discussion of the relationship between climate and government had been paraphrased by D'Alembert in his section on 'Caractère des Nations' for the entry on character in the 1751 Encyclopédie, and it is clear that Quatremère's section on 'Caractère considéré dans les Peuples' owes much to this earlier piece.

According to Quatremère, societies and individuals have both physical and moral character. Because humans have come to inhabit the entire globe, they have been modified more than other species by particular geographical situations. The physical character of a people, which consists of a common height,
colouring and intellectual faculties, depends on both the essential and distinctive characters of their natural surroundings. The essential character, as we have seen above, has to do with general environmental tendencies — whether the climate is torrid or frigid, the land mountainous or flat, the soil swampy or arid — while the distinctive character depends on local modifications to the essential character such as particular prevailing winds, exposure to the sun, or native crops. The moral character of a people, on the other hand, consists of a shared temperament, habits and moral proclivities, and is a product of both natural and social causes. In other words, it results from the influence of the climate on the governmental, religious, and social institutions. The confluence of a people’s physical and moral character is what is commonly called a national character: ‘a certain habitual disposition of the soul, which is more common among [the people of] one nation than another’.29 Although some individuals may diverge from the norm, most members of a given society will be indelibly marked by its national character.

The Arts and Architecture

The argument behind Quatemère’s prolonged discussion of character in nature and in nations becomes clear when he turns to character as manifested in the fine arts. Since, as he has already established, nature has an influence on nations, nations have an influence on individuals and individuals have an influence on the arts, the arts cannot help but receive a more or less direct influence from the natural environment in which they are situated.30 Poetry, painting and sculpture are imitative arts. Whether they imitate general principles or particular details, whether they copy the outward forms or the inner meanings of things, Quatemère asserts that ‘the arts are nothing more than mirrors in which the physical and moral qualities of a country’s societies and individuals are reflected’. Because of this, ‘before one judges the imitation, clearly one must judge the model; before knowing what the character in the arts consists of, one ought to know on what the character of the natural environment depends’.31

Architecture, however, is not an art of imitation in the same sense as poetry or painting. For Quatemère, ‘architecture... imitates nature only in the sense that it transposes the qualities of its model to its works. This art imitates no form, but rather the spirit of those surrounding it. It is in this way, and in this metaphorical sense, that the character of the nature in each country comes to imprint itself on the character of the architecture’.32 Although architecture thus reflects — however abstractly — the influence of the environment, its eventual form depends to an even greater extent on the configuration of society. As Quatemère explains, this art, ‘more ideal than the others, and thus more dependent on the imaginative qualities of peoples, will be even more particularly subject to all the forces which exert such a strong influence on the creative genius of men’.33

Thus, in ‘Caractère considéré dans l’art de bâtir des différens peuples’, Quatemère analyzes the interaction between nature and society in the buildings of different peoples. Developing the argument of his earlier entry ‘Architecture’, Quatemère tackles the question that so preoccupied eighteenth-century thinkers: that of the origins of architectural form. In contrast to Laugier’s single primitive man who builds a basic hut that is simply a wooden precursor of the Greek temple, Quatemère begins with three primitive types of societies which, in turn, originate three essentially different forms of architecture. In a discussion echoing Rousseau, Quatemère argues that the original architecture of hunters and fishers, who find their shelter where they can, is the cave, whose character is heaviness. Herders, because of their nomadic lifestyle, prefer tents, characterized by their lightness; and farmers, who settle permanently in a place in order to cultivate the land, create the wooden hut, characterized by its Vitruvian virtue of firmness.34 Thus the economic basis of each society, not the isolated reason of the individual, is the starting point for an architecture whose character is predetermined from the start.

However, these three basic types are subject to stylistic development and geographical modification. The tents of a nomadic people living on the Siberian steppe will differ in size, shape and material from those in a more temperate climate. The character resulting from the materials of a building links architecture to the physical characteristics of its environment, particularly in the case of settled, agricultural peoples, who are most dependent on materials from a limited geographic range: ‘there, enormous rocky masses wait only for the chisel to become columns; here, the forest trees will lend their rounded trunks to the support of buildings; in other places, prepared earth hardened by fire will form the artificial stones that cement will indissolubly bind together’.35 These materials are involved, too, in a hierarchy of their own. Stone gives architecture the most grand of characters because its hardness suggests difficulty of workmanship, Quatemère argues, borrowing directly from Burke’s discussion of the artificial sublime. Architectural form thus depends both on nature and society: ‘the character of the architecture of different peoples consists in a way of being, in a configuration determined by physical needs and moral habits, and in which the climates, the ideas, the customs, the tastes, the pleasures and the character itself of each people is depicted’.36
However, following, and indeed paraphrasing Winckelmann – whose writings appeared in French in 1766 as *Histoire de l'art chez les anciens* – Quatremère argues that it is in the temperate climates, where nature has the most variety, where the human spirit achieves a balance between reason and imagination, that the art produced is pleasing to the greatest number of men. This is because in those countries, he explains – falling into an ecstatic reverie – ‘the forms of nature are great and gracious in equal measure, it is because there her strength is tempered by sweetness, it is because there all the scenes of nature seem to appear one after the other in order to embellish the imaginations of men with all possible pleasures; it is because all extremes seem to unite in order to reach a state of equilibrium’. In other words, he concludes, ‘it is the climate and soil of Greece of which I wish to speak’. For Quatremère, art (as Winckelmann had maintained some years earlier) is necessarily imitative. Dependent on a natural model, it can never exceed the virtues present in its surrounding environment. Thus, the more perfect the natural model, the closer the imitation – or the work of art – can approach perfection. Consequently, despite Quatremère’s inclusion and prolonged discussion of the architecture of other countries, it is only Greek architecture that merits the name of ‘l’architecture, proprement dite’, and it is with this model in mind that the remainder of his discussion of character is elaborated.

Character had been discussed by other theorists with reference to classical architecture earlier in the century. German Boffrand’s *Livre d’architecture* of 1745 was perhaps the first sustained treatment of the concept, understood as the power of architectural elements to communicate the purpose of a building and to convey a particular mood to the viewer. In the section ‘Principes tirés de l’art poétique d’Horace’, Boffrand defines different genres of architecture – each tied to a particular building type and mood – by recasting Horace’s literary precepts in architectural terms. By utilizing the classical orders as a poet uses different genres of poetry – from the rusticity of the Tuscan to the sublimity of the Corinthian – the architect can make a salon convey a feeling of gayety, or a mausoleum one of seriousness and gloom. According to Boffrand, ‘different buildings, by their layout, by their structure, by the manner in which they are decorated, must announce to the spectator their purpose; and if they do not, they sin against expression and are not what they should be’. Boffrand’s use of the idea of character to provide a theory of architectural effects illuminates one of the fundamental interpretations of the term. By turning to classical rhetoric, Boffrand is making explicit his interest in the art of persuasion, in the ability of architecture to speak to the viewer. Not only must a building belong to a certain genre but, much more importantly, it must be capable of expressing its purpose to the spectator. It does this by affecting the viewer’s emotions; it casts a mood using the universal, nonverbal language of the passions, and thus allows no possibility of being misunderstood.

In 1771 Jacques-François Blondel published his *Cours d’architecture*, a text synthesizing his years of teaching. The section ‘Analyse de l’Art, ou moyen de parvenir à distinguer la bonne architecture, d’avec l’architecture médiocre’ applies the theory of architectural character to the design of specific building types. A building should be able to ‘sweep the spectator off his feet, move him to tears, and, so to speak, lift up his soul to a state of contemplative admiration’, Blondel modestly declares. This is best to be effected by bestowing buildings with a particular character; Blondel lists ‘male’, ‘light’, ‘pastoral’, ‘naïve’, ‘feminine’, ‘mysterious’, ‘grandiose’, ‘courageous’, ‘terrible’, ‘dwarf-like’, ‘trivoulo’, ‘dissembling’, ‘ambiguous’ and ‘vague’ as possibilities. For Blondel, the communication of one of these characters to the viewer is primarily to be accomplished through the architectural principle of *convenance*, defined as the quality a building possesses when every aspect, from the overall composition down to the smallest detail, visually reinforces the building’s purpose or use. Expanding upon de Piles’s concept of the *toute ensemble*, Blondel revises the earlier meaning of convenance – that a private house should demonstrate the rank of its owner – to one that encompasses a broader, more public and urban sense, emphasizing the necessity of communicating to a wide audience. A temple, for example, should express decency; a palace, magnificence. Grandeur should be exhibited in public buildings; sumptuousness in monuments; elegance in promenades; solidity in defensive buildings; lightness in buildings of pleasure; beauty in the private houses of rich individuals; convenience in more modest homes; variety in interiors. A careful study of character in architecture will ensure that a building is able to communicate its function precisely. Architecture should be a language whose expression is so clear and universal that even a foreigner can understand it, Blondel affirms: ‘a building must, at first glance, announce itself for what it is’.

Quatremère was, of course, aware of these earlier treatments. His aim, however, in keeping with the spirit of the *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, was to impose a greater specificity on the discussion of character in architecture. In addition to binding architecture to the climate and social structures particular to a given culture, he sought to knit his discussion of classical architecture together with the classificatory system he had established in his general theoretical discussion. Thus, the final section of his essay focuses on each of the categories of character – essential, relative and distinctive – with respect to the design of buildings.
Essential Character

Essential character, as we have seen above, is for Quatremère the sub-category most bound to the influence of nature. In a building, it is manifested by those qualities which immediately strike the spectator and which are associated with ideas of power and strength, such as towering height, massiveness, or difficulty of workmanship. Essential character is not something that can be applied to a building, but instead it is indelibly impressed into its aspect through the essential character of the culture that produced it. Following the argument that societies deemed less developed by Europeans – whether owing to their antiquity or simply because they had failed to follow a similar path of development – were closer to the state of nature and thus more subject to the influence of nature itself, Quatremère asserts that the more primitive a society, the more strongly articulated the essential character of its buildings: “in general, one finds that it is above all in the infancy of societies and among those peoples who are thought of as having formed the childhood of the world that this character is manifested in the most striking ways.” These peoples, supposedly less altered by the growth of civilization, receive nature’s impressions more strongly and, spurred to rival nature in their artistic productions, imbue their art with the qualities of the nature surrounding them. This primitive or ‘heroic’ style is recognizable by its massive dimensions and use of precious materials.

Modern buildings that in some way recall this primitive style have essential character by association. Because character is perceived immediately and visually, rather than sequentially and intellectually, essential character has less to do with the plan than with the elevation. The more symmetrical, regular and unified the elevation, the fewer or smaller the openings, the narrower the distance between columns, the larger and plainer the expanses of wall, and the darker the stone, the greater the essential character of a building.

Quatremère’s discussion of essential character in architecture is clearly related both to Burke’s discussion of the artificial sublime and to Etienne-Louis Boullée’s projects of the 1780s. Burke’s transposition of the qualities productive of the sublime in nature to architecture, his identification of such attributes as magnitude, contrast of light and dark, succession, uniformity, difficulty, magnificence and somberness of hue as hallmarks of the architectural sublime were interpreted by painters and architects on both sides of the Channel, but perhaps none with as great success as Boullée. Both in his projects and in his discussion of character in his unpublished ‘Architecture, Essai sur l’art’, Boullée expanded and made visible Burke’s sublime, creating an architecture of vastness, perfect symmetry, and striking contrast of light and deepest shadow. Although Quatremère never mentions Burke or Boullée by name, his vivid description of an architecture of essential character and his insistence that essential character be perceived through sensation rather than reason links his discussion firmly to the sensationalist line of architectural discourse inspired by Burke’s articulation of the artificial sublime.

Distinctive Character

Quatremère’s interest in the relationship between sensation, emotion and the visual arts surfaces again in his discussion of distinctive character in architecture. Distinctive character is to architecture ‘what physiognomy is to the human face, which, in order to be fixed and given, does not prevent all the passions, all the sensations, all the movements of the soul from depicting themselves there in a very varied manner; but just as there are
certain physiognomies where the play of the passions unfolds more easily, there are also certain architectures where the distinctive character is so pronounced that the other genres of character have difficulty manifesting themselves.48

Discussions of physiognomy in literary and artistic circles received new impetus in the seventeenth century with the publication of Jean de la Bruyère's Les Caractères de Théophraste traduits du grec avec les Caractères ou les Mœurs de ce Siécle in 1688 and Charles LeBrun's roughly contemporary investigations of the visual expression of character in the human face.49 Le Brun was interested both in physiognomy, or the meaning of the face at rest, and pathognomics, or the meaning of a face in movement as it expresses an emotion. Physiognomy in art had been studied by Giovanni Baptista della Porta in his Della fisionomia dell'uomo, written at the end of the sixteenth century but only translated into French in 1655, and although Le Brun's interest in della Porta's theories is amply illustrated by his many drawings of animal–human resemblance, it was his research into how one face can register and express a particular fleeting emotion that was of greater and more lasting importance. In 1668 Le Brun gave a lecture at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture on the depiction of expression in the human face. Founded on his interpretation of Descartes, who maintained in Les passions de l'âme that the soul receives the impression of the passions in the pineal gland, located in the exact center of the brain, Le Brun's theory identified the eyebrows — the part of the face closest to the pineal gland — as the most expressive facial feature.50 When the soul is attracted towards something outside itself, the pineal gland is stimulated and the eyebrows rise; when the soul is repulsed, the eyebrows lose contact with the pineal and begin to descend.51 The movements of facial features correspond to the degree of intensity of the emotion, from esteem to capture on the positive side; from scorn to terror on the negative. The text of Le Brun's lecture was not published until 1698, but his drawings of faces contorted by various emotions were widely circulated in manuscript.52 At the time that Quatremère was writing his entry on character, more than 100 years after Le Brun's lecture, the study of the passions in art was undergoing a revival following the institution of an Academic prize for a the d'expression.53 Likewise, in architectural theory, writers such as Boffrand, Blondel, and Le Camus de Mézières had discussed the potential of architecture to express and to elicit particular emotions.54 However, Quatremère's application of physiognomy to architecture differed from the interests of his predecessors in an important respect. In keeping with his emphasis throughout, Quatremère was interested not so much in the individual as in the collective: specifically, in how the emotional proclivities of a nation are manifested in its built works. The national temperament of a particular place is discernible in all of its cultural productions, Quatremère argues, from the most sumptuous architectural monuments to the humblest potter's vase.55 The artist, however, will only be able to express this national character in proportion to his degree of originality. However, although expression of character is an important issue for Quatremère, even more important is its communication, a problem he addresses in his section on relative character.

Relative Character

Relative character, synonymous with propriety and convenance, is the category of character most susceptible to cultural influence. A building will have relative character if it succeeds in expressing — in its elevation and other visible aspects — the function it fulfills. Giving relative character to a building is, in other words, the art of characterizing, or of using material forms to render sensible the intellectual qualities and the moral ideas which can be expressed in buildings, or to convey, by the harmony and convenance of all its constituent parts, a building's nature, its appropriateness, its use, its purpose.56 This important quality is further divisible into two distinct types: relative character of the ideal type (caractère relatif du genre idéal), and relative character of the imitative type (caractère relatif du genre imitatif). The first, being more concerned with the discipline of architecture in general, is superior to the second. It is related to the expression of intellectual or theoretical qualities. The second, in contrast, is associated with particular buildings. It relates to the expression of function and use, and is concerned with the more practical aspects of design.

The relative character of the ideal type is not a quality found in every building, nor would that be desirable. It is, says Quatremère, to architecture as poetry is to language, and just as not all subjects are conducive to poetry, so not all buildings are fit vessels of this kind of character. Furthermore, just as poetry is an elevated, elite language understood by an enlightened few, so this kind of expression does not have a universal audience. Quatremère's focus in this section is on the means of communication at architecture's disposal. For a building to communicate, for an intangible idea to be expressed in the most tangible of forms, a certain sympathy or harmony needs to exist between the architect and the public. The architect must be willing to use a language comprehensible to the public, and the public must be willing to attempt to decipher the visual language of the architectural form. It is only in a culture capable of sustaining this mutual sympathy between artist and public, where a transparency of architectural communication is fostered, that the arts can flourish.
Relative character of the imitative kind, on the other hand, aspires to communicate the use and purpose of a building. Although inferior to relative ideal character, relative imitative character is applicable to all buildings in all countries, since every building is destined for some particular use. It can be expressed through the gradation of richness and grandeur of a building in proportion to its nature, and to the norms of social customs; through an indication of the moral qualities inherent to the building; through general and particular forms of architecture; through the type of construction; through ornament; and through allegorical sculpture. Quatremère’s discussion of this quality, the most applicable of all to design, sheds light on his ideas about architecture in general. ‘By thinking of architecture as a sort of manner of expressing or painting’, he asserts, relative character of the imitative type ‘can attempt to render sensible either intellectual ideas, by those sensations which it has the power to arouse in us, or the conditiones particular to each building, by the agreement of all its forms with the nature of its uses’.

Architecture and the art of characterization are languages. As languages, they use a vocabulary of sensation that is understood principally by our senses rather than by our intellect. Character in architecture speaks to our emotions; because of this and because it is the expression of the norms of a culture which have given shape to our interior emotional landscapes, buildings, through their character, achieve a degree of transparency. Stressing the interdependence of architectural and social legibility, Quatremère establishes a hierarchy of expression extending from the humble farmer’s hut to the most sumptuous temple. Discussing such public buildings as an arsenal, a water tower, a stock exchange, an educational building, a hospice, a granary, a customs house, a theatre, a museum, an odeum, a concert hall, a courthouse, and a city hall, Quatremère indicates how an architect can manipulate the elevation, the materials and the ornament in order to communicate the character peculiar to each. Each building has its own character, and just as a poet or painter can express the difference between a young man and a grown one, a soldier and a merchant, the master and the servant, so should the architect convey the use, destination, and mood appropriate to each building. In the same way that we are able to sensually apprehend the abstract language of nature, so too can we read the objects created by human hands. Character encapsulates the essence of an object, it differentiates one object from another, and it allows both this essence and this difference to be discerned and communicated. Characterization makes manifest the relationship between inside and outside, between an invisible and abstract quality and its visible physical expression. It is the medium between sensation and reflection; it is at the heart of the act of representation.

The Dictionnaire Historique

In the same year that the Encyclopédie Méthodique finally finished publication, Quatremère completed a new treatment of the issues he had first tackled for Paucouque before the Revolution. His two-volume Dictionnaire Historique d’Architecture, contenant dans son plan les notions historiques, descriptives, archéologiques, biographiques, théoriques, didactiques et pratiques de cet art was published in 1832. The new dictionary is a very different work from his earlier volume and his views had changed considerably during the intervening years. Quatremère’s article on ‘caractère’ for the Dictionnaire is a much shorter and less ambitious undertaking; although it recycles certain passages from the Encyclopédie Méthodique, the omissions are even more numerous. Quatremère had been Secretary perpetual of the Académie des Beaux-Arts since 1816, and his involvement with the official educational system and his years as chief arbiter of architectural taste leave their marks on what he chooses to emphasize in this later version of his essay on character. The entry is stripped to a bare minimum; gone is his long theoretical treatment of character in nature, society and the arts; and even his first two kinds of character receive short shrift, since essential and relative character
are qualities which, 'depend, in works of architecture, on certain causes upon which neither the power of men nor that of education can have any effect.' Furthermore, the study of essential character, associated with the primitive, can only be historical, for 'nothing, I say, can make societies, as they change or age, regress back to the simplicity of the earliest era and to the sentiments which put the works of the art of building in harmony with the state of the physical and moral needs of that backward epoch.' The aspirations of Rousseau are no longer applicable to a culture obsessed with ideas of progress and Quatremère can find no didactic use for the history of early human society. Distinctive character is likewise of little relevance, for originality (physiognomy has altogether disappeared) cannot be taught, but is bestowed on men of genius in an uncontrollable and unpredictable way: the age of the heroic genius has triumphed.

The article thus focuses on relative character, as it is the category of character most open to human intervention: it can be taught, illustrated and regulated.

Thus, Quatremère turns what was a theoretical discussion of character in architecture into a practical lesson on how to make buildings communicate their purpose. Repeating his earlier discussion of relative character, Quatremère describes how this can be done through the plan and the elevation; through the type of construction and choice of materials; and through ornament and decoration. Interspersed with his concrete discussion of these elements, however, is a more thorough attempt to define precisely what constitutes the language of architecture. He calls for an economical use of architectural elements, since using them too easily weakens their expressive power: 'it is only by applying [these signs] with great judgment and restraint, and in a precise ratio to the moral sense of each building, that [architecture] can retain the property of being a language comprehensible to all.'
Ornament too must be used intelligently and with restraint. As a language whose forms correspond quite directly to a limited number of ideas, ornament must communicate with precision. If it does not, it becomes 'no more than a dead language, a hieroglyphic writing whose meaning is lost, and which, thus made mute to the spirit, can be nothing more than a sterile amusement for the eyes'. By this time, many of Quatremère's views had changed. But his conviction that architecture was in essence and should be in practice a language, one of society's most important means of communication, remained unshaken.

Notes

This article originated as an essay written in 1996 for a graduate seminar taught by Robin Middleton at Columbia University in New York. I am deeply indebted to him for his assistance, perseverance and encouragement.

3. Quatremère de Quincy 'Caractère', op. cit. (see footnote 1): 1, p. 477. All translations are my own.
8. Ibid., pp. 349-50. The set would also include a Vocabulaire universel containing an index, d'Alembert's 'Discours préliminaire' from the Encyclopédie, the Baconian 'Arbre encyclopédique', all the prefaces of the Encyclopédie and a history of its publication.
9. Ibid., p. 359. Quatremère's volumes on architecture suffered a similar fate. Although the first volume of Quatremère's Encyclopédie Méthodique: Architecture was published in 1788, encompassing the letters A to C, the two subsequent volumes were not published until 1825 and the projected volume of plates was ultimately abandoned altogether.
12. Ibid. 13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. This is a triumvirate that would reappear, in shifting guises, in French intellectual discourse throughout the eighteenth century and up to Destutt de Tracy's curricular reform under Napoleon.
20. Distinctive character exists only in those landscapes or works of nature exhibiting a marked difference from the prevailing essential character, and relative character, so subject to variable influences and particular accidents, is rarely to be found in nature at all. Quatremère de Quincy, 'Caractère', op. cit. (see note 1) p. 482.
21. Ibid., p. 481.
22. Ibid.
24. It also was the name of an alchemical (and later chemical) process.
25. Roger de Piles, Cours de peinture par principes (Paris, 1708).
27. The importance of garden design to this discussion is reinforced by Quatremère's inclusion of a separate entry on character in gardening immediately following his main essay. Quatremère de Quincy,
29. Quatremère de Quincy, ‘Caractère’, op. cit. (see note 1) p. 484.
30. Ibid., p. 485.
31. Ibid., p. 495.
32. Ibid., p. 496.
33. Ibid., p. 497.
36. Ibid., p. 492.
37. Winckelmann is the only author Quatremère mentions by name in the whole of the article on character (Ibid., p. 486). According to Anthony Vidler, Quatremère knew of Winckelmann through Canova, see ‘From the Hut to the Temple’, op. cit. (see note 1), p. 150. Quatremère had befriended the sculptor during his extended stay in Rome in 1780–2.
39. Ibid., p. 497.
41. Ibid., p. 16.
43. Ibid., pp. 411–34.
44. Ibid., pp. 389–90.
46. Ibid., p. 502.
49. De La Bruyère’s treatise, as its title implies, combined a translation of Theophrastus with additional sketches of well-known contemporary Frenchmen. See Theophrastus, *Characters*, ed. and trans. J. Rusden, I.C. Cunningham and A.D. Knox (Cambridge, Mass., 1993). The revival of the character sketch in a specifically Theophrastan vein can be traced to Isaac Casaubon’s edition of the *Characters* of 1592. De La Bruyère’s *Caractères* was particularly popular, running to nine editions by 1696 and Inspiring many imitators through the course of the eighteenth century. In England, collections such as Sir Thomas Overbury’s of 1619 and John Earle’s *Microcosmography* of 1628 were so widely read that by the middle of the seventeenth century the character sketch became a standard writing exercise. For example, Ralph Johnson’s *The Scholar’s Guide of 1665* gave rules for the composition of characters as follows: a character

*rules for making it*

1. Choose a subject viz. such a sort of man as will admit a variety of observation, such be, drunkards, usurers, liars, tailors, excise men, travellers, peddlers, merchants, usurers, lawyers, an upstart gentleman, a young justice, a constable, an Alderman, and the like.
2. Express their natures, qualities, conditions, practices, tools, aims or ends, by witty Allegories, or Allusions, to things and terms in nature or art, of like nature and resemblance, still striving for wit and pleasantness, together with tight nipping jibes about their vices or miscarriages.
3. Conclude with some witty or neat passage, leaving them to the effect of their follies or studies.

In the eighteenth century, periodicals like the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* published character sketches by Addison and Steele, while Pope composed verse epistles in the genre.
52. Montagu, op. cit. (see footnote 51) p. 90.
53. This initiative was promulgated by the Comte de Caylus.
56. Ibid., p. 502.
57. Ibid., p. 501.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., p. 306.
63. Ibid.