

GOTTFRIED SEMPER  
AND THE PROBLEM OF  
HISTORICISM



MARI HVATTUM

*Oslo School of Architecture, Norway*



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## 1 : THE CULT OF ORIGINS



*"Any discourse should first go back to the simple origin of the subject under review, trace its gradual development, and explain exceptions and variations by comparing them with the original state."*

GOTTFRIED SEMPER<sup>1</sup>

Semper's emphasis on the origins of architecture linked him to a long tradition of architectural thinking. In fact, his origin tale, encountered in the Introduction, bears an unmistakable affinity to Vitruvius's description of the first gathering of men:

The men of old were born like the wild beasts, in woods, caves, and groves, and lived on savage fare. As time went on, the thickly crowded trees in a certain place . . . caught fire . . . and the inhabitants of the place were put to flight . . . After it subsided, they drew near and . . . brought up other people to it, showing them by signs how much comfort they got from it. In that gathering of men, at a time when utterance of sound was purely individual, from daily habits they fixed upon articulate words just as these had happen to come; then, from indicating by name things in common use, the result was that . . . they began to talk, and thus originate conversation with one another.<sup>2</sup>

It is suggested here that the origin of architecture is part and parcel of the origin of society. For Vitruvius, as for Semper, language and architecture were two primordially civilising institutions, preconditions for as well as expressions of human culture. Man's need to communicate – and his urge to impress a mark of human order onto the world around him – is the foundation of architecture as it is of culture as such. The origin of language and the origin of architecture are intrinsically linked, as two primary moments in the formation of a human world.

Despite this affinity, Semper systematically rejected the Vitruvian tradition. He mocked Vitruvius's 'strange and fruitless consideration' of the primitive hut as a model for the Greek temple, and judged later discussions concerning the primitive hut a 'pointless dispute'.<sup>3</sup> For Semper, the primitive dwelling served as a "mystical-poetic, even artistic motif, **not** the material model and schema of the temple".<sup>4</sup> Rejecting the Vitruvian hut as well as its eighteenth-century interpretations, Semper presented a very different origin theory than those of his predecessors; Hermann Bauer even grants him the dubious honour of having abolished the Vitruvian construct once and for all.<sup>5</sup> I believe, however, that Semper rebuilt rather than demolished the primitive hut. In this chapter, I will outline the intellectual framework within which this refurbishment took place.

#### UNIVERSAL ORIGINS: LAUGIER AND THE PRIMITIVE HUT

The eighteenth century can be characterised in part by the growing interest for first causes and the near obsession with origins, pursued in every discipline.<sup>6</sup> At a time when traditional values and beliefs were increasingly questioned, and when religious and political hegemonies were under radical transformation, the 'quest for certainty', as Stephen Toulmin has coined it, became acute.<sup>7</sup> In the spirit of René Descartes, one searched for the single unquestionably certain thing: the secure foundations on which to base judgement and action.<sup>8</sup> This search was pursued by philosophers and scientists alike, concerned with regaining the epistemological legitimacy of their disciplines in the

face of a faltering tradition.<sup>9</sup> So whereas Hutcheson inquired into the “Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue”, Hume sought the origins of religious faith, and Condillac those of sensation. Rousseau tried to identify the *Homme naturel* as he had appeared “from the hands of nature”, Herder sought the origin of language, and Goethe the original plant.<sup>10</sup> Enlightenment scholars engaged in a passionate search for the origin of any and every phenomenon. The world was to be reexplained in terms of its foundational causes, architecture included.

A contemporary of Rousseau and Condillac, and fully sharing their obsession with foundational causes, the Jesuit priest and later Benedictine Abbot Marc-Antoine Laugier (1713–69) duly sought for architecture a secure ground on which to base judgements and practice. He started his famous *Essai* with a declaration about the affinity between nature and art: “It is the same in architecture as in all other arts; its principles are founded on simple nature, and nature’s process clearly indicates its rules.” This ‘simple nature’ must be sought in man’s uncorrupted and authentic condition: “his primitive state without any aid or guidance other than his natural instinct.”<sup>11</sup> Laugier presented his primitive hut in a lyrical description of natural man in his pastoral driftings (Figure 7). Embodying three basic elements of architecture – the post, the lintel, and the gabled roof – the hut represented the natural origin of architecture. It is “the rough sketch that nature offers us”, Laugier explained, elevated from crude necessity to a work of art.<sup>12</sup>

Such is the course of simple nature; by imitating the natural process, art was born. All the splendours of architecture ever conceived have been modelled on the little rustic hut I have just described. It is by approaching the simplicity of the first model that fundamental mistakes are avoided and true perfection is achieved.<sup>13</sup>

A joint product of need and ingenuity, the primitive hut was conceived as a ‘natural’ architectural form, embodying a universal relationship between form and necessity.

Laugier’s primitive hut seems at first glance to fit seamlessly into the Vitruvian tradition in which the origin of architecture is identical





FIGURE 7. “Allegory of Architecture Returning to its Natural Model”. Charles Eisen, frontispiece to M.-A. Laugier, *Essai sur l'architecture* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1755). By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

with man's first building: a primitive building type from which all architecture originates. This monogenetic origin theory fitted well the scriptural account of the genesis of man, making 'Adam's house in paradise' as well as Solomon's temple legitimate ideals for emulation.<sup>14</sup>

These paradigmatic ‘buildings’ were seen to embody transcendental laws of beauty, giving architecture a divine warrant. Laugier retained the structure of this argument, yet he transformed Adam’s house into a very different abode.

In the introduction to the *Essai*, Laugier declared that although there were several treatises on architecture which “explain measures and proportions with reasonable accuracy”, there was no work that “firmly establishes the principles of architecture, explains its true spirit, and proposes rules for guiding talents and defining taste.”<sup>15</sup> This, needless to say, was the ambition of Laugier himself. Taking the side of the ‘moderns’ in the seventeenth-century *Querelle*, Laugier rejected the traditional emphasis on proportion, seeing it as relative and arbitrary.<sup>16</sup> He sympathised with the ‘ancients’, however, in their worries over lack of absolute standards, agreeing with Blondel that “the human intellect would be terribly affected if it could not find stable and invariable principles.”<sup>17</sup> Only on the basis of such principles – the ‘fixed and unchangeable law’ of architecture itself – would it be possible to elevate architecture from ‘the lesser arts’ to a position ‘among the more profound sciences.’<sup>18</sup> It was Laugier’s determined resolve to fight for this cause “with no other weapons than those of strict reasoning”.<sup>19</sup>

Laugier carefully set out the method he had adopted for his ambitious pursuit:

I asked myself how to account for my own feelings and wanted to know why one thing delighted me and another only pleased me, why I found one disagreeable, another unbearable. At first this search led only to obscurity and uncertainty. Yet I was not discouraged; I sounded the abyss until I thought I had discovered the bottom and did not cease to ask my soul until it had given me a satisfactory answer. Suddenly a bright light appeared before my eyes. I saw objects distinctly where before I had only caught a glimpse of haze and clouds.<sup>20</sup>

If this statement sounds familiar, it is because an equally lonely search for ‘clear and distinct’ truths had been described by Descartes

more than 100 years before.<sup>21</sup> The affinity is more than a matter of rhetorical style; Laugier wanted to formulate an axiom for architecture akin to that which Descartes had formulated for human knowledge at large.<sup>22</sup> The domain of architecture, obscured by the relativity of taste and sensation, was now to be brought into the daylight of reason. In the same way that Baumgarten had tried to rescue the legitimacy of art by confining it within the framework of Cartesian epistemology, Laugier attempted to fit architecture into the mould of rationalist aesthetics.<sup>23</sup> In this way, he envisioned “to save architecture from eccentric opinions by disclosing its fixed and unchangeable laws.”<sup>24</sup>

Laugier’s attempt to find for architecture a natural origin which could serve as its scientific axiom exemplifies a common theme of enlightenment thinking. The new bourgeois society of the eighteenth century sought in nature a clear and distinct idea which could ground an increasingly fragmented discourse.<sup>25</sup> Architecture was a vehicle for this project, as Boullée’s and Ledoux’s return to ‘natural’ geometric form indicates.<sup>26</sup> The German historian Wilfried Lipp remarks that when Boullée and Ledoux took classicism back to its ‘origins’, what lay behind was a general return to nature as a source of historical legitimacy.<sup>27</sup> The genetic retracing of origins to a fictitious point of identity between nature and architecture was a crucial step towards a complete re-creation of cultural and social order.<sup>28</sup> When Boullée sought “those basic principles of architecture and what is their source”, he was no longer after a paradigmatic *model*, but rather a *theoretical principle* for architecture, as clear and distinct as a Cartesian axiom.<sup>29</sup> In this way, Boullée completed the epistemological position initiated by Laugier. Although still applying the Vitruvian metaphor, Laugier’s primitive hut “is not a curious illustration of a distant past or factor of an evolutionary theory of architecture, but the great principle from which it now becomes possible to deduce immutable laws.”<sup>30</sup>

Laugier’s ‘origin’, then, is a highly abstract idea, dressed up in the metaphorical guise of the primitive hut. Although seeming to operate within a Vitruvian tradition, Laugier transformed the notion of architectural origins into a Cartesian axiom. By postulating a rational nature as the origin of architecture, Laugier was able to introduce a novel conception of architectural meaning. Opposed to Vitruvius’s concern

to relate the orders to human proportion, Laugier's origin theory evoked an architecture that represented nothing but its own structural principle. Perhaps for the first time, the history of architecture could be presented devoid of mythical or religious overtones, working according to its own well-defined laws. As Caroline van Eck points out: "The novelty in Laugier's approach . . . lies in his attempt to break with the Renaissance tradition of *mimesis*, and define architecture not as a civic art, whose meaning lies in the decorous representation of social, religious, or philosophical values, but as the material art of construction."<sup>31</sup>

**HISTORICAL ORIGINS: QUATREMÈRE DE QUINCY  
AND THE *CARACTÈRE RELATIF***

*"How falls it, that the nations of the world, coming all of one father,  
Noe, doe varie so much from one another, both in bodie and mind?"*

DU BARTAS<sup>32</sup>

Semper fully shared Laugier's dream of finding a secure principle upon which to base a science of architecture. Yet, he repeatedly criticised the Abbé for his naive proposal that the origin of architecture could be found in one prototypical building.<sup>33</sup> Semper's 'principle' was no longer the timeless and universal axiom of Laugier. Rather, the origin and principle of architecture was to be found in the historical particularity of its inception. Part of a generation which endeavoured to explain cultural phenomena in historical and anthropological terms, Semper sought the roots of architecture in empirical facts. The primitive hut for him was neither Adam's house in paradise nor the secular axiom of enlightenment theory. It was an empirical phenomenon, revealing not a timeless principle, but rather the particular historical conditions from which it originated.

Semper's favourite example of such an empirical origin type was a 'Caraib hut' that he had encountered at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London (Figure 8). The hut embodied in an exemplary way the four elements of architecture, and demonstrated the interrelationship between architecture and the motifs of practical art. Moreover, it was not

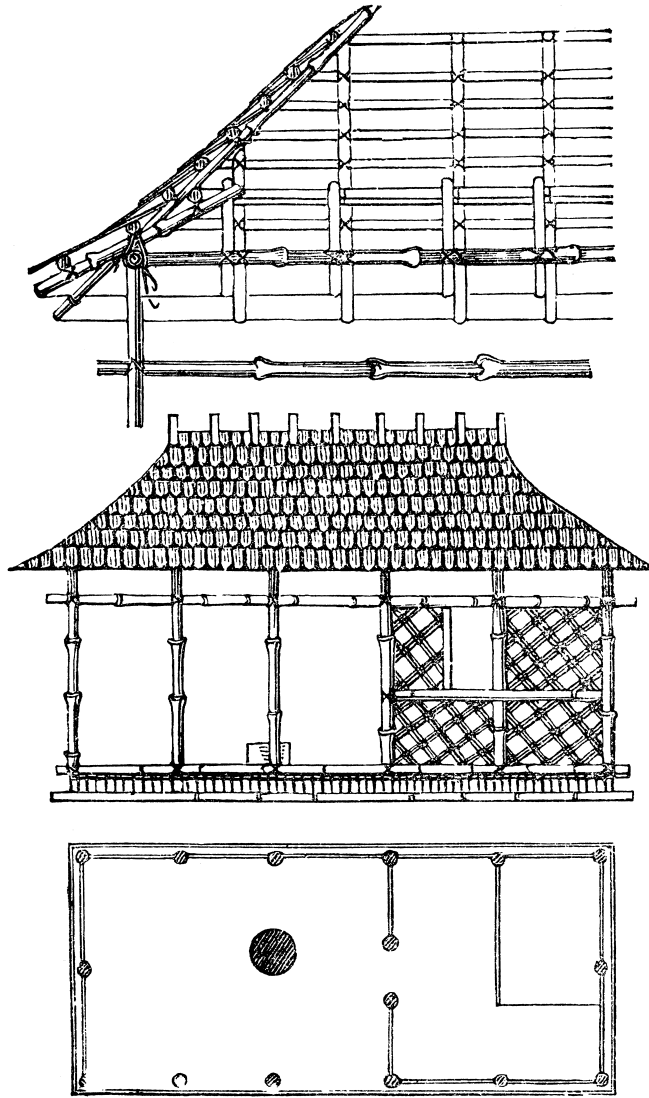


FIGURE 8. "The Caraib Hut". Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1878), vol. 2, p. 263. Edinburgh University Library.

an abstract product of speculation, but a real building. For Semper, this last point was crucial. He wanted to present to his readers "no phantom of the imagination, but a highly realistic exemplar of wooden construction, borrowed from ethnology".<sup>34</sup> Rather than searching for a

universal principle of architecture, Semper and his generation searched for geographically and historically specific conditions influencing architectural form. Their ambition was to map the correspondence between a nation and its artistic expression, grasped in its historic, geographic, and spiritual particularity.<sup>35</sup> This conflict between ‘natural’ and ‘historical’ origins of architecture – the ‘dual quest for origins’, as Barry Bergdoll has called it – informed architectural discourse in the latter half of the eighteenth century and prepared the ground for nineteenth-century historicism.<sup>36</sup>

One factor that contributed to the undermining of the enlightenment dream of a single and universal principle of architecture was the rapidly expanding genre of travel literature.<sup>37</sup> Accounts from missionaries and adventurers of ‘primitive’ peoples in the New World had brought to light a hitherto unknown diversity in humankind. These accounts, far from revealing a timeless and natural rationality of man, seemed to reveal the exact opposite: the relative nature of human culture and the influence of climatic, geographic, and historical factors.<sup>38</sup> This debate was often formulated as a conflict between a *monogenetic* and a *polygenetic* theory of human origins<sup>39</sup> – a question, in Lord Kames’s words, of whether “all men be of one lineage, descended from a single pair, or whether there be different races originally distinct”.<sup>40</sup> If man had originated from the Edenic couple or descended from the survivors of the Ark, how could the extraordinary diversity of peoples be accounted for? Despite its scriptural authority, it became increasingly more difficult to square the monogenetic theory with empirical observation.

An early attempt to solve this problem was that of Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755). *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) was to account for the differences in morals, customs, and taste of various nations by way of scientific explanation.<sup>41</sup> That such diversity existed was beyond doubt; indeed, Montesquieu observed, laws accepted as just in one society may violate the most fundamental principles of justice in another.<sup>42</sup> Customs and laws cannot be universal, he concluded, but must be relative to each nation. Moreover, this variation does not derive from error and lack of taste, but rather from a real and ‘natural’ diversity among peoples and their conditions of existence.

To account for this diversity without lapsing into arbitrariness and relativism was the task Montesquieu set for himself. He firmly believed there were laws governing human affairs, but that these laws were to be found neither in the monogenetic view of the Christian tradition nor in the static ‘uniformitarianism’ of the early Enlightenment.<sup>43</sup> Only through a careful observation and analysis of the particular conditions governing a nation – its climate, topography, and geology – could a ‘natural’ explanation of its character be reached.<sup>44</sup>

Montesquieu’s project had clear affinities with that of Laugier, whose *Essai* is roughly contemporary with *l’Esprit*. They both rejected the scriptural origin tale, seeking a natural and rational starting point for a theory of human culture. There is, however, an important difference between the two. Whereas Laugier still conceived of nature as a uniform axiom – a stable and universal order – Montesquieu saw nature as the lawfulness governing change. Whereas for Laugier, nature was a principle of uniformity, Montesquieu saw it as a set of relative factors. These factors, he explained, condition the customs and manners of a people, affect their judicial and political constitution, and form, ultimately, their ‘spirit’ or character. As he wrote: “If it be true that the temper of the mind and the passions of the heart are extremely different in different climates, the laws ought to be in relation both to the variety of those passions and to the variety of those tempers.”<sup>45</sup> Montesquieu’s theoretical turn implies an interesting reformulation of enlightenment ‘uniformitarianism.’ Now, ‘nature’ and ‘natural principles’ had come to be seen as a *particularising* principle, capable of explaining not everything’s uniformity, but rather everything’s *difference*.

By countering historical relativism with geographical determinism, Montesquieu anticipated the notion of *Volksgeist*: the ‘spirit’ of the nation, born out of its particularity in time and place. This idea would form an important conceptual underpinning for German idealism and romanticism, allowing someone like Herder to write that man “forms nothing which time, climate, necessity, world, destiny does not allow for.”<sup>46</sup> Rather than coining as ‘natural’ that which makes all people the same, it could now be claimed equally ‘naturally’ that every nation has its own fingerprint, which stamps a unique mark on all its expressions. By far, the most distinct of these expressions is constituted by art and

architecture.<sup>47</sup> Thus, Montesquieu's line of argument heralded a new way of thinking about art. No longer an a-historical manifestation of a universal canon, art could for the first time be seen as a historical document of civilisation.

An architectural thinker trying to square the dogmas of classicism with the new influx of empirical knowledge was Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy (1755–1849). Profoundly influenced by Laugier, Quatremère described his life work as an effort to formulate a “theory of the originating principle from which art is born”.<sup>48</sup> The notion of ‘originating principles’, however, no longer had the same meaning as it had for Laugier and his generation. Rather than the universalising principle of the primitive hut, Quatremère – like Montesquieu – presented the origin of architecture as a historically and geographically differentiating principle.<sup>49</sup>

Quatremère distinguished between three types of human communities: hunters and gatherers, nomadic herdsman, and, finally, agricultural peoples. Whereas the first group knew little or no building, using caves and other natural formations as shelter (Figure 9), the nomadic societies developed tents and other transportable structures. Only the agricultural community, however, could be said to have developed architecture proper, in the guise of the wooden hut.<sup>50</sup> These three primordial manifestations of architecture – the cave, the tent, and the hut – constituted three distinct origin types, each corresponding to a particular social organisation and a particular architectural tradition.<sup>51</sup> “Everything in their architecture retraces this first origin”, Quatremère proclaimed.<sup>52</sup> As the character of the tent is retained in the hipped roofs of Chinese architecture, so can the cave still be discerned in the massive constructions of the Egyptians, and the Greek temple continues to echo its origin in the wooden hut (Figure 10).

Rejecting Laugier's axiom, Quatremère substituted enlightenment ‘uniformitarianism’ for the geographical determinism of Montesquieu. For Quatremère, architectural form was a product – not of a universal principle, but rather of the particular conditions from which it originated. Every nation had its unique origin type that continued to condition its architectural expression throughout history. Quatremère labelled this expression *caractère relatif*, by which he





FIGURE 9. The cave. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 1761–2, *Campus Martinus antiqua Urbis*, Rome 1762, detail. Glasgow University Library, Department of Special Collections.

understood the particular capacity of architecture to reflect the geography and climate of its setting, as well as the beliefs of the people who created it.<sup>53</sup> With this tripartite origin theory, Quatremère radicalised Laugier's dream of an autonomous and secular theory of architecture. The origin of architecture, from his point of view, is found in

# THE CULT OF ORIGINS

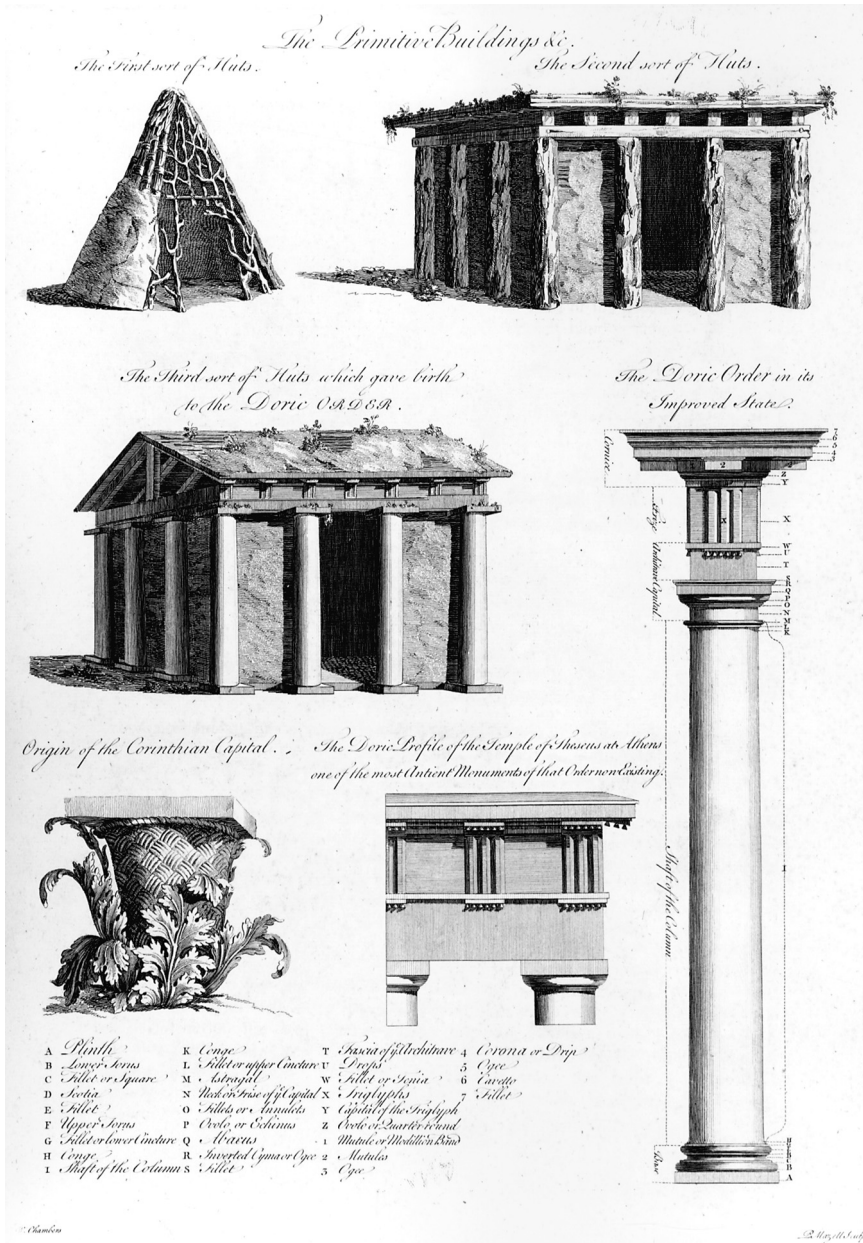


FIGURE 10. "The Primitive Buildings". William Chambers, *A Treatise of Civil Architecture*, 1759. Glasgow University Library, Department of Special Collections.

neither transcendental order nor universal law, but rather in the ‘natural’ but particular condition of every nation. As Lavin has observed: “From now on, any architecture – whether good or poor – could be seen as revelatory of human civilisation and thus as a profoundly social phenomenon.”<sup>54</sup>

Quatremère’s reformulation would have interesting and radical implications for the architectural discourse of the nineteenth century. Struggling to uphold the authority of classicism, Quatremère’s line of argument also made it possible to view historical styles (or ‘characters’) as relative phenomena, potentially available to choice. By turning Laugier’s origin principle into a conventional type, Quatremère unwittingly paved the way for the radical historicism that he had spent his whole career trying to hold at bay. This relativism would be eagerly grasped by the generation that revolted against him at the *École de Beaux-Arts* in the 1820s and 1830s, for whom architectural history was, as Bergdoll writes, “nothing more than a lesson . . . in architecture’s specificity to time and place.”<sup>55</sup> Architecture now could be treated as a conventional entity, based on “l’empire de la nécessité ou celui de l’habitude”.<sup>56</sup> Semper, a student in Paris at the time, was profoundly influenced by this idea.<sup>57</sup>

#### RITUAL ORIGINS: GUSTAV KLEMM AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ART

Semper shared Quatremère’s emphasis on the historical specificity of architecture, and continued to cultivate the dream of framing an autonomous architectural science. In this sense, Quatremère’s origin theory formed an important starting point for Semper’s own thinking.<sup>58</sup> Semper, however, did not accept Quatremère’s threefold origin type. In his usual sarcastic manner, he declared his contempt for “scholars who tired themselves out in making ingenious deductions to prove that Chinese architecture had derived from the tent”,<sup>59</sup> and refuted categorically any speculations on the architectural significance of the cave.<sup>60</sup> Rejecting both the universal origins of Laugier and the threefold type of Quatremère, Semper sought another notion of origin upon

which to base his reflections of architecture. Insisting that the origin of architecture was a poetic ideal rather than a concrete model, he tried to give his reflections on origins an anthropological basis.

One early and influential source that guided this reformulation was the anthropologist Gustav Klemm (1802–67), a contemporary of Semper in Dresden. A royal librarian to the Saxon court, Klemm spent most of his life absorbed by one ambitious project: to provide “a picture of the development of Mankind in its entirety”.<sup>61</sup> Like so many nineteenth-century scholars, Klemm struggled to reconcile the explosive growth of empirical facts with an enlightenment ideal of universal knowledge. Semper fully shared the frustration of such an attempt, dreaming as he did of establishing a ‘Complete and Universal Collection’ of artefacts.<sup>62</sup> Unlike Semper, however, whose project remained unfinished, Klemm actually published his nine-volume *Allgemeine Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit* between 1843 and 1851. He is celebrated as one of the fathers of modern anthropology, introducing the term *culture* in an approximately modern sense.<sup>63</sup>

Despite his pioneering role in the field of anthropology, Klemm’s thinking followed a rather traditional pattern. He explained cultural diversity with the theory that different peoples had reached different stages on the evolutionary line that extended from wildness to tameness, a common position in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century anthropology.<sup>64</sup> In a similar vein, he envisioned world history in terms of a constant strife between active and passive races, a theory echoing Montesquieu’s musing on the relationship between climate and temper. The same conventional approach seems at first glance to mark his ideas on architecture, and Klemm has been accused of perpetuating a conservative neoclassicism.<sup>65</sup> Upon closer examination, however, Klemm’s original contribution becomes clear. Although he did refer to Quatremère’s threefold origin types – the cave, the tent, and the hut – he did not see them as the origins of architecture. For Klemm, this ‘origin’ lies beyond any building type, in an anthropological category located at the heart of a common human condition. All art, he argued, is born out of the human need for representation: “We find the beginnings of art in the lowest stages of culture, where we also encounter the beginning of nations, because man has the urge to manifest