

## THE LIFE AND WORK OF SEBASTIANO SERLIO

### *Biography*

Sebastiano Serlio was born in Bologna, Italy in 1475, or within the decade after, and died in Fontainebleau, France in 1554.<sup>1</sup> He spent his life living and working in multiple cities, including Pesaro, Rome, Bologna, Venice, Paris, Fontainebleau and Lyon. Working in these cities exposed Sebastiano to different political conditions and cultures, animated by a variety of architects, artists and humanists who together shaped his thinking on architecture. Serlio's fame does not depend upon his built architecture but on his literary production – seven influential books plus one, the subject of this digital project, which never made to the printed edition<sup>2</sup>.

Little is known about his education in Bologna, the second largest city of the Papal state, from where he fled to Pesaro, around 1510, after the fall of the leading family Bentivoglio. Very likely the influence of the *Studium*, the prestigious local University, played an important role in Serlio's writing based on a clear exposition and use of many examples to elucidate his points.<sup>3</sup> Whereas in Pesaro he must have met Girolamo Genga (c. 1476-1551), mentioned in the introduction of [Book IV](#), it is in Rome where he directly experienced the most advanced and active European architectural scene starting with Bramante (1444-1514) in 1500, who he might have previously met in Bologna with Julius II (1503-1513). It's unclear when Serlio moved to the eternal city, sometime between 1515 and 1522, but in 1525 he is documented again in Bologna. However, because of the depth and accuracy of his knowledge of Roman architecture – ancient and modern – and of Vitruvius's treatise it would be reasonable to shift the arrival toward the earlier date. The Roman years were crucial for his intellectual formation due to his exposure to the mighty Roman ruins, the most modern buildings, and for his acquaintance with the leading architects of the time including Raphael (1483-1520), Giulio Romano (c.1499-1546), Antonio da Sangallo the Younger (1484-1546), Jacopo Sansovino (1486-1570) and especially Baldassarre Peruzzi (1481-1536), acknowledged by Sebastiano as his master and mentor. Peruzzi, a Siennese architect, divided his life between the practice of architecture and painting and the study of antiquity through the comparison of the ruins, carefully measured and drafted, with Vitruvius' *De Architectura*. Peruzzi was himself occupied in writing an edition of the Roman architectural treatise. Serlio was certainly influenced by this comparative method, which he eventually exploited in his [Book III](#) on Roman antiquities<sup>4</sup>. The two could have met in Bologna where Peruzzi probably visited in 1515 and lived between July 1521 and May 1523. In 1525 Serlio is documented again in his hometown defining himself *pictor et architectus* and in touch with the prestigious Accademia del Viridario, where influential humanists including Cornelio Lambertini (birth and death dates unknown), Giulio Camillo Delminio (c.1480-1544) and Achille Bocchi (1488-1562) were members.

Serlio decided to leave Bologna, most likely in response to the threat posed by Charles V's imperial troops passing the city on their march to Rome. He is documented in Venice on April 1, 1528 when he signed his last will wit-

nessed by painter Lorenzo Lotto (c.1480-c.1557) and Alessandro Cittolini (c.1500-c.1582), appointing as his universal heir the prominent humanist Giulio Camillo Delminio.<sup>5</sup> The latter must have introduced Serlio to the leading artists, poets and humanists of Venice, including the aforementioned Jacopo Sansovino and Lorenzo Lotto, Titian (c.1485/90-1576), Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), Pietro Bembo (1470-1547), Marcantonio Michiel (1484-1552), Marco Grimani (1494-1544), Alvise Cornaro (c.1464-1566) and Palladio's mentor Giangiorgio Trissino (1478-1550). Whereas in Rome Serlio played a minor role within the leading circle of humanists and artists, in Venice he was able to achieve enough social recognition to marry Francesca Palladia, a beautiful, young upper-class Venetian woman and to make his house a place where all his peers regularly gathered. However, despite this new social status, Serlio was not able to obtain major architectural appointments, even if at the same time he achieved fame as "professor d'architettura" involved mostly either in woodworks and refurbishing or in theoretical questions including signing a *memorandum* for the proportions of Jacopo Sansovino's project for the church of San Francesco della Vigna.<sup>6</sup>

He also became acquainted with Gian Giacomo Leonardi (1498-1562), minister of Duke Francesco Maria della Rovere I (1490-1538) who appointed him for an unbuilt fountain in his suburban Villa Imperiale near Pesaro designed by Gerolamo Genga. At the same time Serlio developed a friendship and intellectual exchange with French ambassador and humanist Lazare de Baif (1496-1547), a dilettante in architecture very likely responsible for facilitating a connection with the French kingdom.

1537 is the year when his first book (*Quarto Libro*, the fourth of his planned sequence of volumes), on architectural orders was published.<sup>7</sup> It is probably related to the wide success of this book that in 1539 he was invited to Vicenza where he designed a wooden theater at Palazzo da Porto, a set for a play, and was also asked to propose a project for the city basilica, a job that eventually was assigned to Andrea Palladio (1508-1580), who he must have met on that occasion.<sup>8</sup> His increasing frustration about the lack of significant appointments, which also affected his finances, is definitely one of the reasons behind his move to France, an idea that Serlio might have entertained for some time. With some delays and difficulties in late summer or fall 1541, after the publication of his second book (*Terzo Libro*, December 1540, the third in the planned sequence) on Roman antiquities dedicated to the King of France François I (1494-1547), Serlio along with his large family left Venice for France, where he relied on a regular annual salary of 100 gold crowns and a house granted by his patroness Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549), the King's sister.

On December 27<sup>th</sup> in Fontainebleau he was officially appointed as *peintre et architecteur ordinaire du roy*, which brought substantial benefits and provided financial security and social prestige.<sup>9</sup> However, just as in Venice and despite his new leading role Sebastiano sidelined from the King's main architectural endeavors and his prestige slowly started to decrease to the point that the mediocre artist Gilles Le Breton (?-1553) was appointed as *architecteur du roy*. This decline, probably due to the skepticism of his court peers and his too-advanced conception of architecture in a still rather gothic culture, pushed Serlio out of the King's inner circle into increasing isolation. His first major architectural appointment came, not by chance, from an Italian patron, the powerful Cardinal Ippolito d'Este (1479-1520) who in 1544 hired the Bolognese architect for the project

of the Grand Ferrare, a suburban residence now destroyed, close to the King's Chateau de Fontainebleau.<sup>10</sup> Through Ippolito, Serlio was probably able to get in touch with Antoine de Clermont-Tallard (1498-1578), lord of Chateau d'Ancy-le-Franc, and be assumed responsibility for the project of his castle, Serlio's most important architectural project other than Ippolito's villa.<sup>11</sup> The fifth decade of the century was also fruitful in terms of publications: The French translation of *Quarto libro* came out in 1542, while the [Italian-French edition](#) of the book on geometry and perspective (*Primo and Secondo Libri*) was published in 1545 and [another on churches](#) in 1547 (*Quinto Libro*). All together they cast a new light on Serlio whose fame rapidly spread throughout European courts.

However with the death of Françoise I in 1547 Serlio's success was halted. The successor to the throne, Henry II (1519-1559), turned from his predecessor's appreciation for the "modern" Italian art, redirecting attention back toward the French tradition. The outcome of this new tendency was the appointment in 1548 of Philibert de l'Orme (1514-1570) as his new royal architect, whose skills and taste were considered more suitable to the needs of the king: a French architect exposed directly to Italian ancient and modern architecture through a period of time spent in Rome from 1533 to 1536.<sup>12</sup> The late '40s are years during which Serlio survived on less important, scarcely documented, architectural appointments. He struggled particularly after the death of his patroness Marguerite de Navarre in 1549. These circumstances led him to move to Lyon around 1549-50, where in the meantime Ippolito d'Este was nominated archbishop of the city, an important center for commerce and finance but also for book printing and with an influential Italian community, including in those years Jacopo Strada (1507-1588), a leading antiquarian and art dealer with whom Serlio would become acquainted.

Even in Lyon Serlio's architectural production was limited and remained largely on paper. Regardless, he managed to complete all the manuscripts of his planned series of seven books on architecture including the [Extraordinario libro](#), published in 1551, which is not included in the list originally planned. Jacopo Strada acquired all the manuscripts and eventually would publish what was still handwritten. Serlio's dramatically deteriorating financial and physical health forced him to return to Fontainebleau in 1553 where he could count on the support of old friends. Despite the praise of Philibert de l'Orme, he was unable to find work and died between 1553 and 1557.

### *The Avery Manuscript (Book VI) and Serlio's Literary Production*

Before Serlio's writings, the literature on architecture was still rather limited and mostly came from the common source of Vitruvius's *De Architectura*, written in the first century BC and published in the first printed edition around 1486. This treatise was published several times throughout the sixteenth century and beyond, and was the starting point for other seminal theoretical works, beginning with Leon Battista Alberti's *De Re Aedificatoria* (completed in 1452, published in 1485), Antonio Averulino AKA Filarete's *Trattato di Architettura* (Milan, 1450s, left unpublished) and Francesco di Giorgio Martini's *Trattato di Architettura civile e militare* (late fifteenth century, left unpublished).<sup>13</sup> In Serlio's literary production, although Vitruvius still played an important role in the way he analyzed ruins, the final result is quite different and innovative, mostly for the abundance of illustrations and the use of few other ancient literary sources.

Book VI, *On domestic architecture*, is the only book written by Serlio

that was never published, though it came close. Of this work two manuscripts survived: the [Avery manuscript](#), the [Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich manuscript](#), as well as an early set of [woodcuts now at the Nationalbibliothek in Vienna](#).<sup>14</sup> This book was meant to be part of a series of seven volumes on architecture (eventually expanded to nine volumes) written in Italian, that Serlio announced in the *Proemio* of [Book IV](#) on the five styles of buildings, the first one of the collection published in Venice in 1537, and the very first book ever fully dedicated to the architectural orders. Furthermore this book layout would be highly influential for Vignola's and Palladio's treatises. The sequence in which the volumes have been published differs from the one initially planned: after the publication of [Book IV](#) in 1537, [Book III](#) was next published in 1540. Focused on ancient Roman monuments, Book III was the first illustrated book ever written on the subject. Both books were published in Venice. [Books I and II](#), on geometry and perspective, were published in Italian and French in Paris in 1545. [Book V](#), published also bilingually in Paris in 1547, dealt with the architecture of churches. In 1551, the *Libro extraordinario* on doors came out in Lyon even if was not part of the number of planned volumes and was the last book published during Serlio's life. [Book VII](#) deals with an unusual topic – accidents that might occur during the design process, including projects of buildings erected over pre-existing structures on irregular lots. The book was published in Frankfurt by Jacopo Strada in 1575. Other than these aforementioned works, Serlio produced a manuscript, also at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, focusing on fortifications based on Polybius' text.

All together Serlio's books bring to the architectural literature important novelties which affect future publications. First of all, the text is written in vernacular and no longer in Latin, opening up the contents to a much larger variety of readers, especially architects. Also, for the first time, the books include a large number of illustrations which make the text even clearer and provide the far away reader with a visual notion of what an ancient Roman structure looks like. The importance of [Book VI](#), the subject of this digital project, will be explained by the essays that follow.

## Endnotes

- 1 For Serlio's biography see in particular: M.N. Rosenfeld, *Sebastiano Serlio. On domestic Architecture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1978), pp. 17-27; R. Tuttle, *Sebastiano Serlio Bolognese*, in *Sebastiano Serlio*, ed. By C. Thoenes (Milan: Electa 1989), pp. 22-29, now in *Id.*, *Piazza Maggiore* (Venice: Marsilio 2001), pp. 89-106; F.P. Fiore, *Introduzione*, in *S. Serlio, Architettura civile*, ed. by F.P. Fiore (Milan: Edizioni il Polifilo 1994), pp. XI-LI; V. Hart, P. Hicks, *Introduction*, in *S. Serlio, On Architecture*, ed. by V. Hart, P. Hicks (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 1996), vol. I, pp. XI-XVI; S. Frommel, *Sebastiano Serlio architetto* (Milan: Electa 1998), pp. 13-42 (English translation Milan: Electa 1998); M; F.P. Fiore, *Introduzione*, in *S. Serlio, L'Architettura*, ed. by F.P. Fiore (Milan: Edizioni il Polifilo 2001), pp. 11-45; V. Hart, P. Hicks, *Introduction*, in *S. Serlio, On Architecture*, ed. by V. Hart, P. Hicks (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2001), vol. II, pp. IX-XVII.
- 2 For a brief and clear timeline of the sequence of Serlio's books publication: H.W. Kruft, *Storia delle teorie architettoniche* (Roma, Bari: Editori Laterza 1999), pp. 79-88; for the contextualization of Serlio's treatises within the Renaissance literature on architecture: M. Carpo, *La maschera e il modello* (Milan: Jaca Book 1993); A. Payne, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge UK, New York: Cambridge University Press 1999), pp. 113-169; J. Jobst, *Sebastiano Serlio*, in *Teoria dell'Architettura*, foreword by B. Evers, introduction by C. Thoenes (Köln: Taschen 2003), pp. 76-85; F.P. Fiore, *Trattati e teorie d'architettura del primo Cinquecento*, in *Storia dell'architettura italiana. Il primo Cinquecento*, ed. by A. Bruschi (Milan: Electa 2002), pp. 504-521.
- 3 A.M. Matteucci, *Per una preistoria di Sebastiano Serlio*, in *Sebastiano Serlio*, pp. 19-21.
- 4 P.N. Pagliara, *Vitruvio da testo a canone*, in *Memoria dell'antico nell'arte italiana, III. Dalla tradizione all'archeologia*, ed. By S. Settis (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1986), III, pp. 5-85, in particular pp. 58-66; H. Burns, *Baldassarre Peruzzi and sixteenth-century architectural theory*, in *Les Traités d'architecture de la Renaissance*, ed. By Jean Guillaume (Paris: Université de Tours; Centres d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance 1988), pp. 207-226; A. Huppert, *Becoming an Architect in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 56-57.
- 5 L. Olivato, *Per il Serlio a Venezia: documenti nuovi e documenti rivisitati*, in "Arte Veneta", 25, 1971, pp. 281-291; *Id.*, *Dal teatro della memoria al grande teatro dell'architettura: Giulio Camillo Delminio e Sebastiano Serlio*, in "Bollettino CISA Andrea Palladio", 21, 1979, pp. 284-291; *Id.*, *Ancora per Serlio a Venezia: la cronologia dell'arrivo ed i suoi rapporti con i 'dilettanti d'architettura'*, in "Museum Patavinum, 3, 1985, pp. 143-154.
- 6 R. Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London: Random House 1962), pp. 102, 155-157; A. Foscarini, M. Tafuri, *L'armonia e i conflitti: la Chiesa di San Francesco della Vigna nella Venezia del '500* (Turin: Einaudi 1983), p. 48.
- 7 *Quarto Libro di Sebastiano Serlio Bolognese, nel quale si tratta in disegno delle maniere de' cinque ordini, cioè Toscano, Dorico, Ionico, Corinthio & Composito*, Venezia, Francesco Marcolini, 1537.
- 8 Frommel, *Sebastiano Serlio architect*, p. 20.
- 9 Frommel, *Sebastiano Serlio architect*, p. 26.
- 10 E. Faisant, *Sebastiano Serlio à l'oeuvre: les conséquences d'une révision de la chronologie du Grand Ferrare*, in "Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura" n.s., 63, 2014-2015, pp. 19-30.
- 11 Frommel, *Sebastiano Serlio architect*, pp. 83-90.
- 12 Y. Pauwels, *Philibert De l'Orme et les ruines antiques*, in "Revue de l'Art," 170 (2010), 4, pp. 17-22.
- 13 *For Vitruvius in the Renaissance is still seminal P.N. Pagliara, Vitruvio da testo a canone*, pp. 5-85.
- 14 Rosenfeld, *Sebastiano Serlio. On Domestic Architecture*, pp. 27-34. Hart, Hicks, *Sebastiano Serlio on Architecture*, vol. I, XXV.