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SEEN FROM SIENA

WIDZIANE ZE SIENY

Abstract

The article discusses a series of paintings, on a vision of a modern city, inspired by the author's recent visit to Siena, Italy. It describes an importance of architectural visions and its complementary role in relation to an architectural practice. The article presents the author's experiences with the process of painting. It highlights the role of a quick sketch in the process of selecting and analysing a subject. Finally, it showsthe unique importance of traditional painting techniques in a realization of the subject, impossible to be replaced by a digital visualization.

Keywords: *painting*, *freehand drawin*g, *architectural vision*

Streszczenie

W artykule omówiono cykl prac malarskich poświęconych wizjom współczesnego miasta, inspirowanych wizytą w Sienie. Opisano znaczenie fantazji architektonicznych, ich roli uzupełniającej w stosunku do praktyki architektonicznej. Pokazano własne doświadczenia związane z procesem powstawania prac. Podkreślono rolę szybkiego szkicu odręcznego w procesie wyboru i analizy tematu, a także unikalne znaczenie tradycyjnych technik malarskich w realizacji tematu, niemożliwych do zastąpienia przez wizualizacje komputerowe.

Słowa kluczowe: *malarstwo*, *rysunek odręczny*, *fantazja architektoniczna*

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The matte, black and white marble of the Sienese cathedral, the dirty reds of bricks of the surrounding palaces,the gold tympanum and city towers, the hypnotic flooring of Sienese *Campo* and the narrow gorges of streets aroused in my mind a dream of putting on paper my own city. On the way to searching for beauty, one must start from big shapes, from a certain hierarchy and scale. First there must be a beautiful city, then a palace in it, a room in the palace, and finally inside the room – a beautiful painting or a piece of furniture.

It need not be a logical and a rational city, meeting real needs of its inhabitants. I wanted to paint some postcards from the city, not necessarily connected together, they would not show the whole view but rather a suggestion of an urban space. I thought I would use medieval Sienese buildings, and then I would put them by myself in a modern space, maintaining the Italian, bricked and striped look.

I did not have an ambition to resolve any urban problems, I just wanted to use architecture as a motive. I thought it would be great after 20 years to go back for a while to the times of my youth and in the spirit of these carefree days (and not loaded with excess of knowledge, theories and biases), paint a city for myself – the city which I would like to live in or visit.

Architecture as an independent motive in paintings occurs in different epochs. For me the most beautiful was presented in three Renaissance paintings under the same title *Citta Ideale* painted by Fra Carnevale, Francesco di Giorgio Martini and Piero della Francesca. Particularly the painting by Fra Carnavale[1] fell deeply into my memory. I have an emotional approach towards it – to put it simply, I want to step into this painting and live in this wonderful *piazza*. Luminosity of this place, its proportions and mathematical symmetry arouses an extraordinary feeling of calmness.

In later epochs I would foremost distinguish Roman architectural visions of Giovanni Battista Piranesi and melancholic urban landscapes of Giorgio de Chirico. In the case of Piranesi, who was an artist and an architect, a ratio of architectural drawings (and visions) to realized buildings is: 2000 etchings to barely 2 realized buildings in Rome. Therefore, architectural practice and realized buildings alone are not necessary for a man to exert influence on a certain epoch. Piranesi drew everything that a good city should have – big perspective openings, wide squares and small alleys, dominants, urban details or an awesome accumulation of architectural plans. For me the most original thread in his art are ruins, weeds, sprawling out of small wooden houses just near monumental classic shapes – in brief, a true life of *metropolis*, where luxury is interwoven with misery. This is exactly how big cities are, and all urban fantasies that came later (especially those from the twentieth century, either done by architects or by set designers for science fiction movies), have the origin in these strong contrasts used so freely by Piranesi.

The use of architecture in de Chirico paintings is interesting. Architectural forms, sometimes without proportions, too long or too squat, are mostly used to introduce the viewer to a reflective mood. The viewer is, so to speak, emotionally manipulated by an architectural composition. None of the earlier discussed artists used it to such an extent. It is interesting

[1] http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fra_Carnevale_-_The_Ideal_City_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg (access 05.02.2015).

to note repeated perspective errors in de Chirico's paintings, e.g. four different horizons in one picture[2].

In all examples mentioned above, a complete impracticality of these visions of the cities is essential. They were painted for their own sake, as an intellectual and visual discourse about an urban scene. They are totally different from classic design drawings made for an actual realization of a building. These examples emphasize the significance of architectural visions as an important contribution to general progress and to the development of urban structures and buildings.

From this point it is just one step towards the significance of an architectural drawing as an art for art's sake, as the work of the same magnitude as a realized building, and the significance of an architectural painting (this is how I would name paintings with a strong architectural theme). This field, mostly entirely unpractical and made only on paper or on canvas, complements or sometimes replaces an architectural practice.

By painting my Sienese project, I continued an old tradition of painting architectural visions, created for their own sake. Created not to achieve anything, but because architecture is another subject of a painting similar to a portrait or a still life[3].

My paintings are a result of many factors, including impulses, and associations which I do not have a full control of – this is a mystery of the creative process, where each artwork is a surprise even for the author himself.

What worked, worked for me with black and white stripes, which is good, as each city should have its color character. An American architectural illustrator and teacher, Chris Choate gave the following advice for painting architecture: *Don't be subtle, say it*[4], and I tried to listen to his advice.

In what follows next, I would like to focus on freehand drawings in the process of making the sketches for paintings and also on the advantages of the traditional technique of gouache and watercolor in which I painted the final pictures.

While I was imaging compositions for my paintings, I worked in two different ways. The first process and only occasionally used in my work – when a vision of a painting suddenly appears in my mind, I put it down on paper in the shape of a quick sketch. The second process and mostly used in my work – I create my compositions more laboriously, by gradually adding and removing something, thickening, checking directions, mixing different elements and so on.

A quick architectural sketch, sometimes looks awkward, but it must follow fast moving thoughts, and it has to be as concise as possible. I never judge the correctness of its perspective, its graphic quality, or in general how I feel about it. It is simply a spontaneous and the fastest record of my thoughts. The result could be naive, or even illegible for a casual viewer. When it is impossible to draw a detail, I simply write a brief description on the margins. This sketch is only for me and I am its only recipient.

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[2] P. Baldacci, *De Chirico. The Metaphysical Period 1880-1919*, Boston–New York–Toronto–London 1997, p. 118.

[3] Paintings can be seen at http://www.marcinbaranski.com/seen-from-siena.html (access 06.02.2015).

[4] C. Choate, *Architectural Presentation in Opaque Watercolor. Theory and Technique*, New York 1961, p. 158.

A few words about my technique of sketches. I draw with a pencil on ordinary paper, I do not use a sketchbook, I prefer loose sheets of paper, I often change their order, and reshuffle them like a deck of cards. This spontaneous process leads to new connections and ideas. For example, sketches made months apart may find themselves side by side, creating an unexpected composition.

This is an advantage of a traditional freehand drawing over a digital visualization. Many artists these days only create drawings using a computer. Although their results are often excellent, they are unable to physically arrange, side by side, 100–200 sketches on a table and look at them as a whole, rearrange them to change their way of thinking and conceive a new idea. Old and rugged pencil drawing on a piece of paper, a lost sketch found in a studio among a pile of papers – this unexpected finding can lead to new ideas. A review of sketches by means of a computer is too organized and ordered.

A serendipity, a lack of logic, a surprise, a fresh look- all of these lead off the beaten track. Therefore, traditional techniques of sketching (in my case on loose sheets of paper – unchronological, and mixed and matched) have an advantage over digital techniques of sketching, which are more orderly and described. I look at digital sketches administratively, not creatively.

My final works of the Sienese cycle were made using watercolor and gouache paints. Watercolor and gouache (sometimes named as tempera) are techniques more suitable for presenting architectural visions than techniques such as oil or acrylics. A contemporary American architect and an architectural illustrator Richard C. Baehr named tempera as "the best medium for a literal, dramatic representation of architecture"[5]. With oil paintings it is also easy to obtain a smooth transition of colors, but water based techniques are quicker. Unlike waterproof acrylics, watercolors are great for washing out pigments with clear water and blotting them with the tissue which gives an effect of a soft light.

Watercolor and gouache techniques demand careful planning and patience, which does not work for everybody. A good watercolor is also very expensive and requires some years of practice. This is why it is not surprising that this technique has practically disappeared from a repertoire of architectural visualizations.

Digital paintings are enjoying an enormous success and indeed they are getting better and better. They are created very skillfully even by beginner students of architecture. I occasionally look at both student and professional digital renderings and recently I have observed an interesting progress in their presentation.

First of all they have a much better light now- usually morning or afternoon light which gives the best lighting for architecture. This type of light is selected by professional photographers. They typically start their work before sunrise, waiting for the first, warm rays of light to fall on the walls of a building, and they have only a few moments for shooting the best picture[6]. At midday they photograph interiors, and at night they photograph the silhouette of a building illuminated by its own light.

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[5] R.C. Baehr, *Architectural Rendering In Tempera*, New York 1995, p. 3.

[6] A video about a professional architectural photographer Paweł Ulatowski can be seen at http://pawelulatowski.pl/o-mnie (access 5.02.2015).

Digital renderings use well this effect of morning and afternoon light. There is no more than just a plain blue sky with white clouds but there is a mood and emotions, coming from good lighting and this is what sells a project. Another thing that is more efficiently used is the effect of a blur or in focus and out of focus areas. In digital renderings from about ten years ago, we can see in the foreground a clichéd blonde with a puppy, and now we can see a blurred silhouette of a pedestrian or blurred lights of a passing car, only indicating a movement around a building or the scale of a human form. The entire attention is focused on the architecture or the design, which gives a welcoming effect between a sharp area of rendering (architecture) and partially blurred surroundings (people, cars, branch of tree at the foreground) – leading the viewer to the main subject. Here digital renderings have an advantage over traditional techniques. These effects of depth of field are technically very difficult to paint, especially when painting from imagination, rather than painting a specific project at a given location. Perhaps the use of an airbrush, or an experience of working with watercolor on wet paper (which gives soft edges) facilitates this process, but ultimately digital techniques work better here.

There are a few key-points which appeal better to human imagination when traditional painting techniques for architecture are used.

Firstly, there is a deeply rooted psychological effect in human nature of an admiration for handmade things. An enchantment with secrets of an artist's craft is deeply rooted in human psyche. I experience it myself when I look with interest at an original artwork that puzzles me technically. I do not have the same admiration in front of a digital work.

Secondly, traditional techniques have a character, they are not artificial (or "plastic-like") as numerous digital visualizations. They are like a letter handwritten with a fountain pen versus a page out of a printer.

Thirdly, an effect of a chance, an awkwardness, even a small perspective fault or a roughness of handmade work, gives a sense of communion with the artwork – here and now, one of its kind, impossible to repeat, and completely different from a digital reproduction.

Last but not least, traditional techniques have a visible and clear continuity of knowledge and human experience. When I paint with real paints, rather than with digital tools, I feel a part of the bigger whole, I feel a personal bond with old generations of artists.

When presenting images of architecture, these four key-points give a definite advantage of traditional painting techniques over digital renderings. Of course, I have in mind, technical skills at least on an intermediate level.

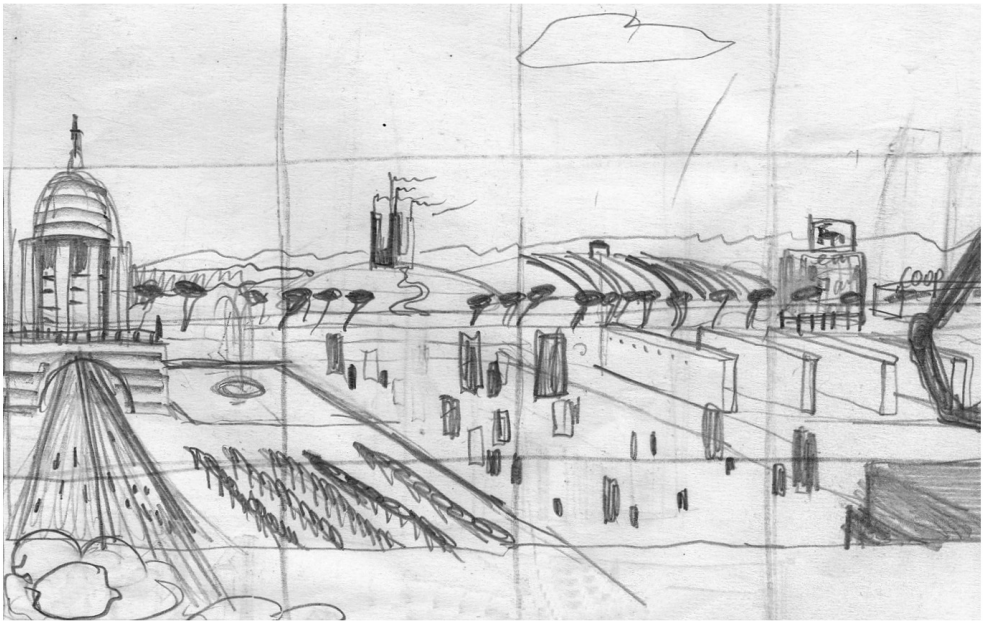
In conclusion I would like to quote a legendary fashion illustrator Rene Gruau who said: "a poor photo is better than a poor drawing, but a good drawing will always win out against a good photo"[7].

As the esthetic character of a digital rendering is similar to photography, simply replace the word "photography" for "digital rendering" and the sentence will read: "A poor digital rendering is better than a poor architectural drawing, but a good architectural drawing will always win out against a good digital rendering".

As for the question, "To draw, to paint or to use a computer" – my answer is "To paint!".

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[7] S. Nissen, V. Leret, *Rene Gruau's first century*, Paris 2009, p. 238.





Ill. 1. First sketch and final painting. This and other paintings from the Sienese cycle can be seen in color at http://www.marcinbaranski.com/seen-from-siena.html

References

[1] Baldacci P., *De Chirico. The Metaphysical Period 1880–1919*, Boston–New York–Toronto–London 1997.
[2] Choate C., *Architectural Presentation in Opaque Watercolor. Theory and Technique*, New York 1961.
[3] Baehr R.C., *Architectural Rendering In Tempera*, New York 1995.
[4] Nissen S., Leret V., *Rene Gruau's first century*, Paris 2009.