The Aquarelle of the Sveti Ioan Predtecha Church in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, 1911.

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In Munich he meets William Ritter, a Swiss traveler and writer, who points his attention to the Balkans and the Orient. The influence that the popular arts, craftwork, folklore have to the work of Ritter are transmitted to Jeanneret. In their correspondence some important topics can be found, such as the exotic, the curiosity, the differences, the voyage and the transmissions from one culture to another. In Vienna he meets his friend August Klipstein, an art historian and collector, and together they continue towards the Orient.

1. JEANNERET IN GABROVO.

In the early morning of Monday, 26 June 1911, Jeanneret and Klipstein leave the town of Turnovo, the ancient capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, and proceed forward on their Voyage d'Orient (fig.1). On their way, they pass through the village of Drianovo and at noon arrive in Gabrovo (fig.2-4).

They enter the city from the north, pass along the street along the river and arrive at the first bridge over the Jantra River (fig.5). The two proceed on the left into the Mijkia Pazar (Men's Market) where Jeanneret takes the first picture of the square (fig.6-7) with the Chasovnikovata Kula (The Clock Tower, fig.10). In some shop around the market, he buys a postcard of the nearby village of Etura. Then he takes another photograph of the tower from the south corner of the square (fig.9-10), in which from the shadows of the buildings, projected straight to the north almost perpendicular to the ground, it is possible to determine that the picture is taken at noon. In this same view, on the left from the tower and above the houses, it is visible the bell tower of the Sveti Ioan Predtecha church (Saint John Baptist) that calls his attention, so soon after he goes to visit it, acquires eight icons, and paints an aquarelle of it.

2. THE AQUARELLE.

Monday is not a market day in Gabrovo, so when Jeanneret heads towards the Sveti Ioan Predtecha church (fig. 14), which he saw behind the tower, he finds the central market almost empty. From the market square he takes one of the small and inclined streets, leading to the church yard. The first sight that he gets to the temple, when he reaches it, is the place where Jeanneret makes the first aquarelle on his Voyage d'Orient (fig.15-17). Probably the watercolor painting is made just after his visit to the church, because it shows a good understanding of the building and also because the light in it comes from the south-west, some hours later than the photographs from the Mijkia Pazar square.

The watercolor paintings, the articles and the trade with objects bought from the Orient were supposed to be the main source for Jeanneret to rise funding for his voyage. From the text of the "Voyage d'Orient", mentioned before, and from the letter to his brother, the musician Albert Jeanneret, written in Kazanluk on the 28 June 1911, it is possible to determine that Jeanneret bought 8 icons from Gabrovo. There are no
1 Jeanneret promenade through the Balkans.
2 Gabrovo, 1900, general view.
3 Gabrovo, 1900, Sveti Ioan Predtech in the background.
4 Gabrovo, end of XIX Century.
notes showing a visit the other two churches in the town, so it is likely that the icons are from the Sveti Ioan Predtecha church. These icons, dating from the beginning of the IX century, as most of the icons in the church, could have inspired Jeanneret to start using aquarelle colors instead if the pencil sketches, which he does until that moment in his Carnets.

...et tout à l’heure dans une église nous espérons faire une rafle d’icônes byzantines. Déjà j’en ai acheté 8 l’autre jour. Il y aura pour toi quelqu’une et aussi un des exquis vases qu’ici et là glanés. Je me félicite de ce voyage qui est splendide. Demain nous serons à Andrinople et bientôt à Stamboul.

Plain reading of the aquarelle

The watercolor by Jeanneret in Gabrovo is the FLC 2853, with dimensions 39,5x30,7cm, made with pencils and watercolors on a thick paper, signed and dated “Gabrovo Ch E Jt 1911”, with a writing on the bottom “made in Gabrovo, Bulgaria”. It is part of the cycle Langage des pierres, initially 16 aquarelles exposed for the first time in the exhibition in Neuchâtel in 1912. This is the first occasion in which Jeanneret exposes himself to the public as a painter. Afterwards these aquarelles, reduced to 11, are shown in the 1913 Salon d’Automne in Paris.

The first and biggest watercolor from the cycle Langage des pierres is the one of the Sveti Ioan Predtecha church in Gabrovo. It is also the only painting of a whole building. The other aquarelles represent four landscapes in Istanbul, a cemetery in Eyüp, four views of the Pantheon columns at the Acropolis, five ones in the Athos Mountain, an interior in Pompei and the Forum seen from the Zeus Temple.

The watercolor is made from the same viewpoint as the first and the last sight that Jeanneret has to the church Sveti Ioan Predtecha when he visited it. It shows the church in the upper part of the aquarelle, a staircase in the front, and a wall of a house on the right. In this same viewpoint, but outside of the aquarelle perimeter, remain the preacher’s house on the left, two houses on the right and the iron gate underneath. The reason to choose that viewpoint is that most of the church and especially the main façade can be seen. Also the distance to the church is sufficient in order to see it from a good sight-angle. From this precise view the front corner of the church, which is the closest part to Jeanneret, coincides with the axes of the front dome.

The overlapping of the volumes of the church and their axes creates the loss of spatial perspective effect. The stairs, the church walls and the domes seem to have inverted spatial relation, as the parts that stay further are the most detailed ones. Probably the reason is that Jeanneret was myopic and had a good sight with only one eye, which provokes a plain view and incapacity to see three-dimensionally. This effect can be found in all the sketches and paintings by Le Corbusier.

Process of the drawing

In the beginning Jeanneret marks, with a light pencil, the traces that organize the composition and define the proportion between the parts. The sequence of the regulating traces starts with the line that divides the foreground of the staircase from the background of the church, then the two vertical lines that define the position of the two domes. He divides the left vertical lines into two parts and so defines the point where the church front and side facade crosses with the roof. Then he sketches the curve perimeter of the roof and the two domes and all the details, such as windows, columns and relieves.

Later he starts coloring the volumes with aquarelle tones. In the beginning he takes yellow color and tries the brush in the right bottom corner of the paper and on the stairs. The first part to color is the front dome, then the central dome and the facade walls. Then he takes a blue color on his brush and paints the outlines and the windows frameworks. He takes
some black color and mixes it with the blue that he had on his brush and makes the stairs in the front, the house wall to the right and the sky on the back. Then he comes back to the stairs and adds the shadows, produced by the house, which is on the left outside of the view perimeter. The sky remains too clear in respect to the foreground, so he adds a dark blue color to the upper part and between the two domes.

Jeanneret makes the final touches with a darker color, applied with a tiny brush. He draws the handrail on the left and the first three steps in the foreground, then the outlines of the church roof and domes, and glass part of the windows. He signs the aquarelle “made in Gabrovo, Bulgaria” in the lower part. Later, probably after the Voyage when preparing for the exhibition of the cycle *Langage des pierres*, he wrote “Gabrovo Ch E Jt 1911” in the bottom left corner.
Critical reading of the aquarelle

The composition of the drawing is a result of a system of vertical and horizontal axes, which create proportioned areas in the sheet. The vertical axes of the two domes have the same distance from the sides of the aquarelle. The painting can be divided horizontally in six equal parts (fig.26). These are defined by the top of the central dome; the edge between the south and west facades and the roof; the horizontal middle line on the façade; the end of the staircase; the intersection between the roof of the house on the right and the staircase. This same division of the canvas can be found in some of the later paintings by Le Corbusier.

In this early work from Gabrovo, Jeanneret draws an aquarelle of a church. In his way of seeing and representing in the watercolor of the Sveti Joan Predtecha church can be found the totality of his way of seeing and doing. The same principles and methods he implies for this aquarelle he later uses to paint and design houses, palaces, temples and cities.

3. THE CHURCH

It would not be difficult to establish a certain relation between the churches Sveti Joan Predtecha and Notre Dame du Haut. There are no signs found until now in the plans and notes of the Ronchamp project, showing a direct reference to the church in Gabrovo, but it is certain that the memory of the Sveti Joan Predtecha church remained in the mind of Le Corbusier, as he showed the watercolor in various occasions afterwards.

History

The temple of Sveti Joan Predtecha, represented by Jeanneret in the aquarelle FLC 2853, and the second of the two plant sketches on page 36 in Carnet 2 (fig. 18), is an orthodox church, completed in 1544 on the site of a roman temple. Since then it has been demolished twice, the last time on the 28th of December 1798, when the village of Gabrovo is robbed and burned down by the turkish army and afterwards rebuilt by the local people.

A later work by Le Corbusier the chapel of Notre Dame du Haut (fig.19) in Ronchamp, France presents similar characteristics to the church in Gabrovo. It is a catholic temple bombarded and damaged during the World War II and rebuilt by Le Corbusier in 1950-54.

Site

The site of the church Sveti Joan Predtecha is on a hill, above the houses with dark, stone roofs that together with the trees on the background, appear as a natural landscape (fig.22). The Notre Dame du Haut chapel is also situated on the top of a hill, the sides of which are covered with trees (fig.23).

In both temples the visitor arrives to a square, then heads northwest on a narrow and inclined path, where he surpasses the guardians house on the left and the house on the right and then reaches the temple. The curve stone wall in the south-east part of the church yard in Gabrovo is similar to the concrete curve wall, initially designed in the same position in Ronchamp (fig.21).

Dimensions

The Sveti Joan Predtecha church (fig.25) has a rectangular base, 25m long and 12m wide, with a curve apse on the east side. The type of building is a three naves temple with east-west axis, two domes and 19 windows. The roof that covers the naves is 5m high in the lowest part and 8m in the highest, middle part. The 15 meter high central dome, built in 1883 during a restoration, brings zenith light into the interior. The 18 meter dome, in correspondence to the west façade, is built in 1889.

The Ronchamp chapel (fig.26) has an irregular base with 25m by 13m and a single nave oriented east-west. The ceiling is around 10m high, 4,78m in the lowest point. The tower on the west side is 22m high and the two semi-dome towers in the north façade are 15m high. These capture light from tree
directions: north, east and west. The bells in both churches are situated north-west from the temples in separate towers.

Characteristics

The main façade and access to the church in Gabrovo are in a square on the west side, as for the orthodox tradition (fig.27). There are three more entrances. One on the north side connecting to the stairs that leads to the second floor (fig.29). Two on the south side, the first is symmetrically disposed according to the main axis and the other, built in 1806, is oriented towards the village and the direction from where the visitors arrive.

Behind the main façade and under the tower in the west part there are two floors. On the basement level is the reception, and on the second floor is the choir, accessible via a staircase in the interior, in correspondence to the north façade. The church has 19 windows and 53 fixed and other mobile, different size icons. There are three thrones: a central one and two in the south and north sides, and also three lamps, the biggest one under the central dome. The altar, finished in 1814 by a local artist, is two steps higher than the wooden floor.

The altar of the Ronchamp chapel (fig.28) is also two steps higher than the audience’s part. The first step is signed with a concrete curve step, and the second one is the base of the altar itself. The main access is on the south, where the visitors arrive. There are two other entrances on the north, one is on the ground floor and the other leads to the second floor by the stairs (fig.30). Another entrance is connecting the inside and outside altars on the east. The windows are as the icons in the orthodox church.

Materials, textures and structure

Both churches are built with stone walls, covered with rough mortar surface and painted white. At the time Jeanneret visited Gabrovo, the outlines of the church windows and the ornaments in the facades were sky blue color, today these are white and the outside church walls are grey. The ceiling is made of stone vaults, held by eight white marble columns (fig.31). The roof has wooden beams structure, covered with flat, grey, overlapping stones that form a continuous, curve surface.

In Ronchamp the roof is made of concrete, which texture and grey color are seen from above and underneath (fig.32). The wooden frameworks of the windows at the guest and guardian houses are the same sky blue color that he uses in Gabrovo aquarelle, and describes for a church in Turnovo:

Nous entrâmes vers le soir, dans l’une des petites églises précédées d’un porche bleu tendre. Sur l’iconostase, sertie chacune dans une niche d’or qu’aurait pu sculpter un Hindou ou un Chinois, vingt-neuf icônes luisaient dans le ruisselement de leurs ciels d’or et des nimbres de leurs saints. Elles étaient du plus beau style, plus italiennes que byzantines, et elles reliaient bien Cimabue à Duccio. On se sent très ému devant un tel ensemble, dans le calme d’un sanctuaire, à l’heure bienfaisante. Et je fus ici autant grisé que tant de fois en la petite galerie des Primitifs italiens du Louvre, où la Grande Madone est un credo, et où Saint-François foudroyé d’extase reçoit les stigmates après avoir préché aux oiseaux et aux petites bêtes des bois.

Apses and domes

Originally a church building starts from the model of a roman temple, which naves are oriented according to an axis. In the Byzantine Empire the typology of a church starts precisely as a temple that has a cross in which all the parts are equally distanced from the centre. The apotheosis of this greek-cross plant church is the Santa Sofia in Istanbul.

In the chapter “The Lesson of Rome” in Vers un Architecture, Le Corbusier gives some important references, as the greek church Santa Maria in Cosmedin and the Michelangelo project for San Pietro Apses. Actually the original project of the new Church by Barmante starts from a greek-cross plan, which means an equal relation in the plan of the parts to the central point where the three-dimensional spatial axes cross and where the tomb of San Pietro is situated.
15 Sveti Ioan Predtech, today.
16 The place where Jeanneret painted the aquarelle.
17 Sveti Ioan Predtech, aquarelle by Jeanneret.
18 Sveti Ioan Predtech, sketch by Jeanneret (from Carnet 2).
19 Notre Dame du Haut, sketch by Le Corbusier.
20 Site of the church in Gabrovo, early XX Century.
21 Site of the chapel in Ronchamp.
22 Sveti Ioan Predtech in Gabrovo.
23 Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp.
24 Purist painting by Jeanneret, 1922 (FLC 140).
25 Sveti Ioan Predtech, south façade, today.
26 Notre Dame du Haut, south facade.
27 Sveti Ioan Predtecha, west façade, today.
28 Notre Dame du Haut, west facade.
29 Sveti Ioan Predtecha, west façade, today.
30 Notre Dame du Haut, west facade.
31 Sveti Ioan Predtecha, view to the entrance, today.
32 Notre Dame du Haut, view to the entrance.
33 Sveti Ioan Predtecha, view to the altar, today.
34 Notre Dame du Haut, view to the altar.
35 The dome of Sveti Ioan Predtecha, today.
36 The dome of Notre Dame du Haut.
In the orthodox tradition a temple is built to be seen and walked around from the outside. The religious celebrations often begin in the outside, in front of the main façade of the temple, and finish inside in front of the main altar (fig.33). In a wedding ceremony rings are exchanged and put in front of the church door; Easter’s ceremony begins at midnight with three turns around the temple of the preacher and all the participants. Ronchamp chapel has a similar situation: there are both inside and outside altar, separated by a curve, stone wall (fig.34).

In both projects the light comes from the windows at the sides and from the domes. In Gabrovo the two domes bring light into the inferior (fig.35). The front dome is substituted with the existing bell tower in 1949, but at the time when Jeanneret visited it, it was ending with white semi-spheres. The three domes in Ronchamp are made with half cylinders that finish with quarter-spheres. The higher one is in the south-west part (fig.36) and the two lower equal domes on the central north side are as the central dome in Gabrovo, but cut in the middle and the two parts turned 180° in order to capture the light from different sides and let it into the temple.

4. LE CORBUSIER AND THE BALKANS.

In the afternoon Jeanneret and Klipstein leave the town of Gabrovo and head south towards the Balkan crossing. During the night they arrive in Shipka, a small village on the south of the mountain in the Valley of the Roses. On the next day they proceed forward trough the Tracia Valley, home of Orpheus, Spartacus, Svet, Kotis, and close to the place where Alexander the Great lived as a child.

Later, back to the occident, Jeanneret reflects on his voyage and compares it to his previous trip to Italy in 1907:

De la mort j’en ai plein tout moi. Tout s’est écroulé en Italie. L’Italie m’est un cimetière où les dogmes qui furent de ma religion, pourrisson sur le sol. Etait-ce croyable, une telle hécatombe ? En quatre ans, j’ai fait une poissée terrible. Je me suis gavé en Orient, d’unité et de puissance. Mon regard est horizontal et il ne voit pas les bestioles du chemin.

The memory of the voyage accompanies Le Corbusier during his whole life. Le revises the book *Voyage d’Orient* and approves it for publishing a few months before his death. It is shown that many of his architectural projects have their reference on things and buildings he saw on the voyage. One of them is the relationship between the watercolor of Sveti Ioan Predtecha in Gabrovo and Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, two places that come close in his mind of a creator. An intense look can discover how a church in the Balkans inspired one of the most important buildings by Le Corbusier: the Ronchamp cahpel. There is still a lot to explore on the influence that the “folklore” of the Balkans has on Le Corbusier, his work and the architecture of his time.

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