

The Critical Reception of Inigo Jones

by

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Inigo Jones's work on the restoration of old St Paul's Cathedral was criticized by some for not being in keeping with the older parts—the English version of the Gothic versus Classic arguments at San Petronio in Bologna.¹ This criticism was repeated by Horace Walpole in the eighteenth century,² but, leaving aside the barbed remarks of Ben Jonson and the 5th Earl of Pembroke,³ Jones nevertheless has had the most remarkably untrammelled of critical receptions. His genius recognized in his own day, sustained through the championship of Colen Campbell, Lord Burlington, William Kent and Sir William Chambers in the eighteenth century, when his authority 'became such as, perhaps, only he, with his enormous egotism and unbounded assurance could fail to find astonishing',⁴ and now, following the splendid exhibition of drawings at the Royal Academy, and the publication of the scholarly catalogue by John Harris and Gordon Higgott, placed alongside our greatest writer on a pedestal which almost defies critical assault.⁵

The first scholarly biography of Jones, published by Peter Cunningham in 1848–9, was printed for the Shakespeare Society, the object of which was 'to print and distribute to the Subscribers books illustrative of Shakespeare and of the literature of his time'.⁶ John Harris, in a biographical essay, has drawn a clear analogy between the playwright and the architect: 'In the sense of mystery about lost years and upbringing there is a definite parallel to Shakespeare, whom Jones would certainly have known in the years up to about 1610, and like Shakespeare, Jones was a genius . . . a man unique in his time, of an intellect rare even in Europe'.⁷ The drawing of this parallel, which helps us to situate Jones in his culture, is a high-risk venture. Recently, Professor Gary Taylor has courted disapproval by having the temerity to suggest that our uncritical response to Shakespeare, our unconditional recognition of his genius, has hampered understanding and impeded critical progress.⁸ Jones, Shakespeare's approximate contemporary, seems to be suffering a similar fate; that of sentimental, comfortable, approbation.

It was Jones's great good fortune, from the point of view of patronage and opportunity, that he was able to be briefly Surveyor of Works to the 'sad and brilliant' Henry, Prince of Wales,⁹ and later to work for the doomed court of Charles I. It

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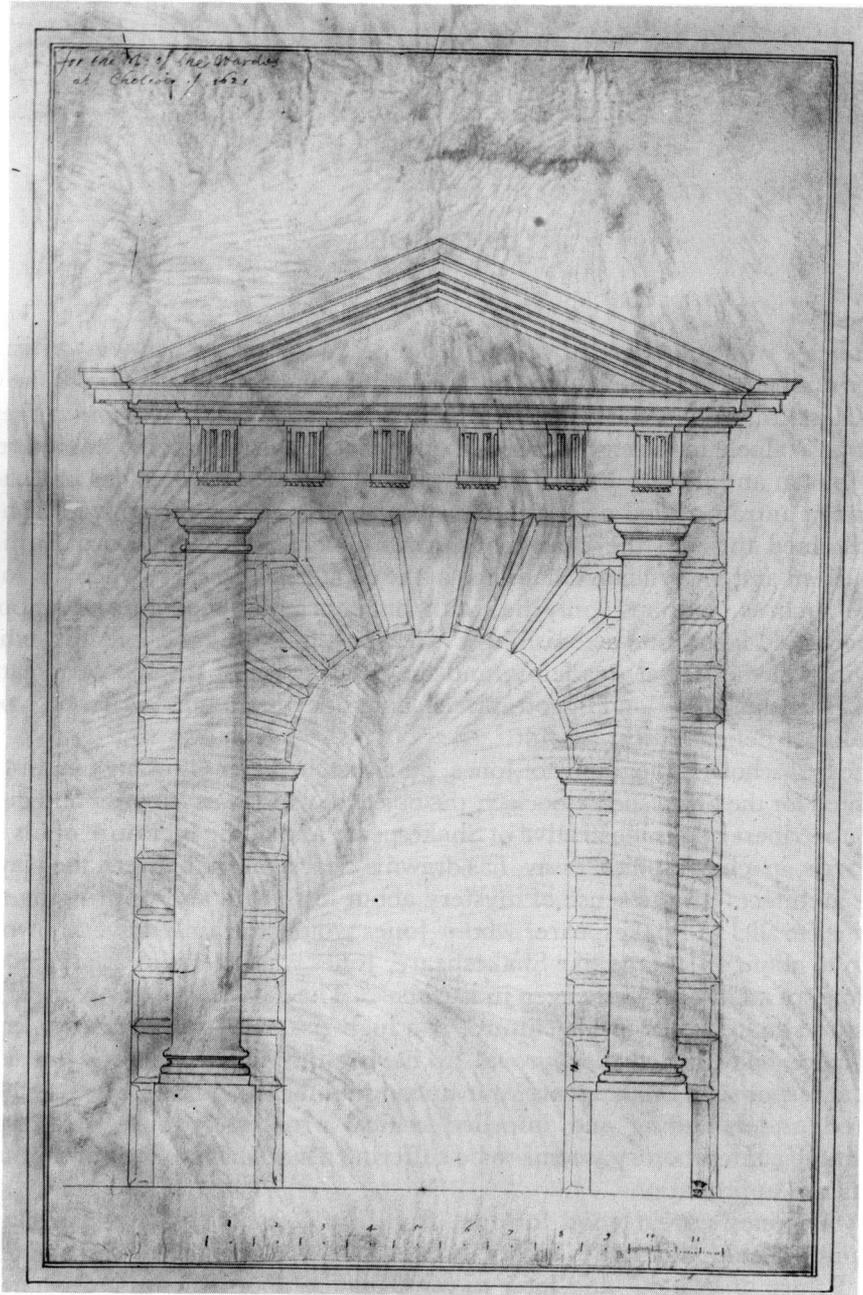


Fig. 1

Inigo Jones, elevation for a Doric gateway at Beaufort House, Chelsea, 1621
(British Architectural Library, R.I.B.A.)
Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art



Fig. 2

Beaufort House gateway, resited at Chiswick House in 1738
Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England; The Warburg Institute

is not only his achievements in masque and architectural design which inform our view of him today. The early death of Henry and the loss of Charles's head have endowed this period with that aura of romance which can only be achieved in circumstances where men die young and brilliant promise remains unfulfilled or is violently cut short. Historical accuracy notwithstanding, Francesco Milizia has best expressed the heady romance of achievement in adversity, tragically curtailed. An England 'sunk in slavery and barbarism' was 'after an almost overwhelming tempest' made to shine forth, 'a brilliant model to all Europe'. Jones 'acquired so pure a taste, that from that time none has appeared superior to him: Palladio alone was his equal'. But, 'the martyrdom of the king affected him greatly, and so injured his health, that when replaced in office by Charles II, his debilitated frame would not allow him fully to satisfy the magnificent ideas of that voluptuous monarch'.¹⁰

Such uncritical approval is very far from Gordon Higgott's intention in his outstanding, detailed analysis of Jones's drawings, in which he reveals to us a man of genius certainly, but no Athena: Jones did not spring forth fully-formed; still less was he in full armour, giving a great war-shout.¹¹ Higgott shows us a man who worked hard to achieve greatness—not getting everything right first time, counter to romantic myth; a man who tested alternatives, refined and improved, and did not achieve artistic maturity until the later 1620s and early 1630s, that is, not until he was well over fifty years old. He shows us also a man who relied on others: Matthew Goodrich, Thomas de Critz, Edward Carter, Isaac de Caus and John Webb. As J.A. Gotch observed in his biography of 1928, 'it should not be taken for granted that Inigo Jones was a solitary and commanding figure, compared with whom . . . all his contemporaries were of secondary importance'.¹²

Furthermore, it should be noted, Jones was not working in an entirely barren landscape. Mark Girouard has referred to a 'false dawn' of Renaissance architecture in England in the mid-sixteenth century, and more recently, Richard Hewlings, in likening the court architecture of Henry VIII to the work of the School of Fontainebleau, has noted that 'foreigners from most corners of the Continent would have been unlikely to regard England as either backward or insular in the later sixteenth century'.¹³

Jones's achievement lay in his application of the principles of classical architecture to English building, drawing on Palladio, Scamozzi, Sansovino and Vignola, becoming 'the most skillful Tramontani that ever was',¹⁴ and arriving at a formulation both thorough and appropriate, some way beyond the merely decorative. This new dispensation, a marriage of form and function, achieved by the application of a critically adapted, classical vocabulary, was Jones's greatest legacy. This is why the Banqueting House would have impressed the viewer in 1622; this is why it continues to exercise its sway today. This is also why it was hijacked by the eighteenth-century neo-Palladians as an exemplar for a cool, rational style. But to look at it in this way is to look at it through the eyes of hope and to misunderstand its function. It was a building designed for fantasy and ritual—the celebration through the court masques of a 'vision of nature controlled by the human intellect'.¹⁵ The presence in the room of the reigning monarch, enthroned and surrounded by the rhetoric of absolute power, was central to the realization of this High Baroque *tableau vivant*. This was an inspiration rather than a model.

The Banqueting House is a building of great sophistication, a work of considerable beauty, but nevertheless a building of its time. There is vigour in the advance and recession of its planes, and exuberance in its detailing. Jones has confused us all with his well-known dictum contrasting exterior gravity with interior licence. Colen Campbell took him at his own estimation. His representation of the Banqueting House in *Vitruvius Britannicus* suppresses all those elements which do not conform with his predetermined view of Jones as the bringer of regularity to a naughty world.

Campbell, in a riot of misattribution, gave fifteen designs to Jones, of which only three definitely, and two possibly, were by him. Of this same fifteen, five were by John Webb. Roger North offered a more accurate picture of Jones's place in architectural history. Although one of the first to discuss him in the highly laudatory manner which was to become commonplace, he did at least give credit elsewhere, demonstrating as he did so that it is not necessary to derogate the ability of some in order to show the achievement of others in a better light:

few ages can brag of a good surveyor of building, or such as wee call architects. Inigo Jones was one, who did all things well and great. But since there has bin Pratt for Clarendon hous, Webb for Greenwich gallery, and Gonnorsbury, and at present Sir Christopher Wren; dexterous men, especially the latter, as to accounts and computation, but have not the grand maniere of Jones. His plainness, seen in the repair of Pauls, Convent Garden, and the Banqueting House, hath more majesty than anything done since. There must be a peculiar soul to inspire a good builder; it is not daubing on of ornament which graceth, but a good disposition or profile.¹⁶

'A good disposition or profile' is a suggestive phrase. Jones was a master of the profile, but we know little of disposition, or internal layout: 'the due arrangement of the several parts of a building' (*O.E.D.*). One of the delights of the Jones exhibition was the group of majestic drawings for arches and gateways, set pieces of commanding size and scale (Figs 1 and 2). It was the creation of this kind of discrete unit, together with such details as chimneypieces and ceilings, which most engaged Jones (Figs 3 and 4). Gordon Higgott has rightly drawn attention to the painterly vision of a man who endowed his two dimensional drawings with a three dimensional quality,¹⁷ but these skills are not brought to bear on the representation of buildings in the round. It cannot be just by one of the accidents of history and the building site that the surviving drawings are predominantly of façades and details rather than of plans and sections. Of Jones as a planner we know little and it is likely that this fundamental aspect of architectural creation was one which held few charms for him, and one for which he tended to turn to others.

A concentration on Jones's genius at the expense of his assistants, collaborators and successors impedes the proper evaluation of seventeenth-century architecture as a whole. For this was one of the great periods of English architectural development. Great certainly because of Jones's inspired adaptation of Italian classicism, but great also because of the remarkable achievements in house-planning by John Webb (at Gunnersbury and Amesbury), Sir Roger Pratt (at Coleshill and Horseheath), and to a lesser extent by Hugh May (at Eltham), William Samwell (at Eaton Hall and The Grange) and, at Tring, Sir Christopher Wren. These men, over a thirty-year period of experiment and adaptation, achieved the delicate balance between public and private spaces which was to characterize the English house for the next two hundred years. It may be that Jones had a part to play in the genesis of this process, in

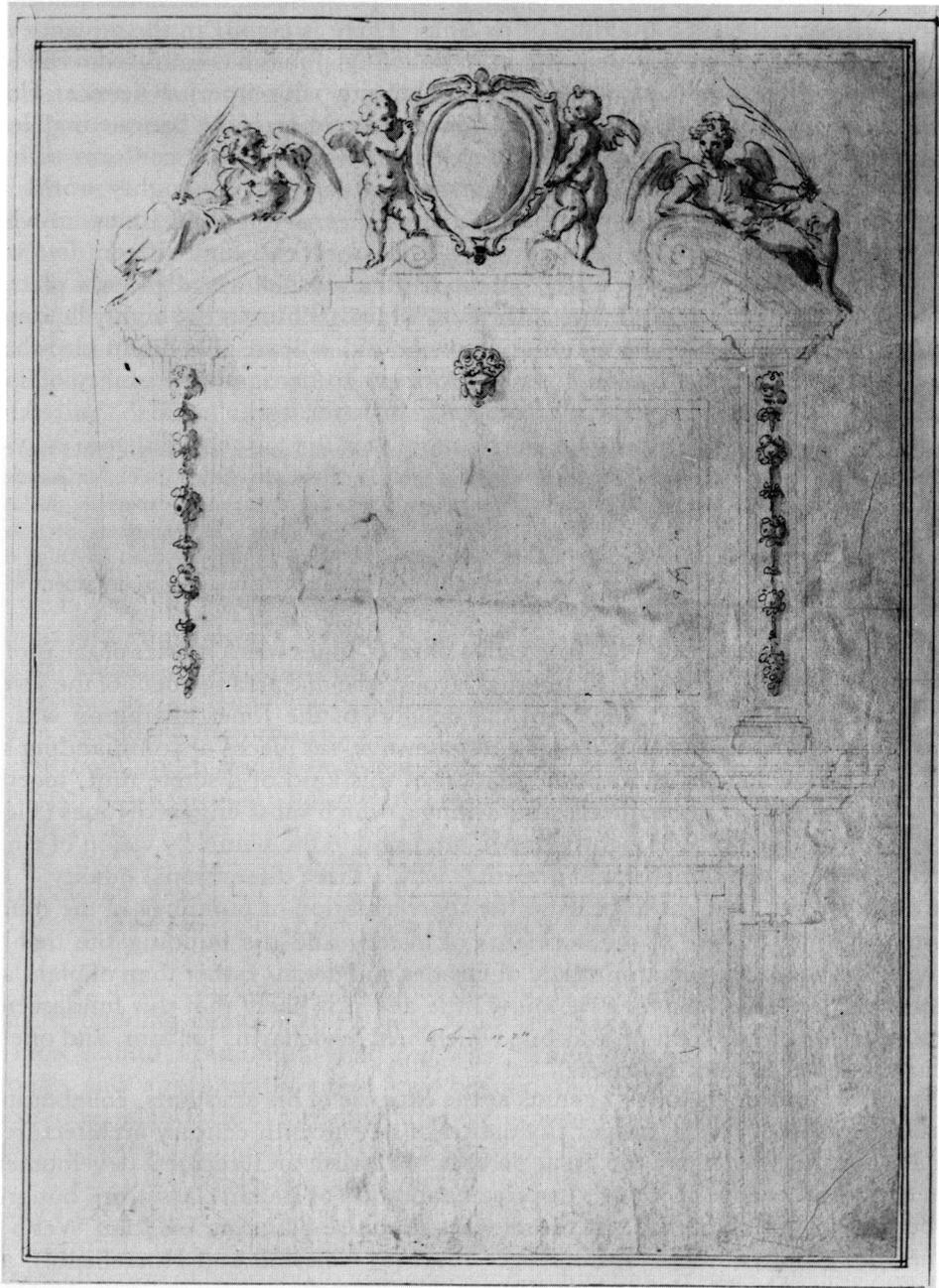


Fig. 3

Inigo Jones, elevation for the chimneypiece and overmantel at the Queen's Chapel,
St James's Palace, c. 1624-5 (British Architectural Library, R.I.B.A.)
Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art



Fig. 4
Chimneypiece and overmantel, Queen's Chapel, St James's Palace
Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

developing a vocabulary of forms, but the evidence for their synthesis is provided by others. Margaret Whinney suggested that Jones probably did not relish the task of making strictly architectural drawings, training and employing John Webb largely for this purpose.¹⁸ Since the making of drawings may be regarded as fundamental to the process of formulating and realizing architectural shapes, volumes and relationships, this would be a striking deficiency in a great architect.

Webb worked for Jones at St Paul's Cathedral and at Somerset House during the 1630s, copying designs and mouldings, and drawing out his employer's ideas, as well as branching out into his own domestic practice. This was an area of activity which appeared to hold little appeal for Jones who, preoccupied with his work for the court, is unlikely to have had the time for it, even if he had the inclination. Webb was responsible for disseminating Jones's court style in the pragmatic and adaptable manner most likely to bring success. This is demonstrated most clearly in the correspondence relating to the building of Lamport Hall, where he was able to add a compact, Italianate, villa to an older house, which must have appeared surprising and innovative in its context, whilst maintaining a flexible and accommodating attitude towards the suggestions of the client and contractor.¹⁹

Webb did not invent new forms, but drew on precedents from antiquity, the Renaissance and Jones and adapted them to wider English usage. The key elements in his mature designs, particularly the cube rooms and the first-floor loggias with porticoes, are all features of Jones's own work, but Webb developed them in a manner both imaginative and practical, fitting suites of rooms for convenience around the major architectural set-pieces. The unbuilt schemes for Whitehall Palace are particularly revealing in illustrating the difference of approach.²⁰ The Jonesian 'Preliminary' scheme, of the later 1630s, is made up of an accumulation of discrete units, most of which reappear, transformed, in the grand sequence of state rooms, hierarchically disposed, which flow from one to another in Webb's mature 'Taken' scheme, prepared a decade later. Such state rooms appear, scaled down, in Webb's domestic architecture from this period until the end of his career. A further feature, favoured by Webb in his domestic practice, the Imperial staircase of three open flights, may also be read as a development of Jones's proposal for Whitehall in which two vaulted flights lead to a mezzanine, and an open flight returns.

As Jones's executor and the keeper of his reputation, as well as of his library, prints and drawings, Webb was in an honoured, privileged, but burdened position. In his finished drawings of buildings by Jones, in his published accounts of the life of 'the Vitruvius of his age', in two books on the origins of Stonehenge,²¹ and in the monument which he erected at St Benet's, Pauls Wharf, he seems to have seen himself as John Evelyn did, as '*Inigo Jones's* man', and history has tended to take him at his own evaluation.²² Jones certainly had chosen wisely a pupil whose championship more than repaid the debt which was owed to the teacher.

In looking for reasons for Webb's self-effacement, we might with profit look at the age in which he lived, a transitional period in politics, religion and philosophy; one perhaps imbued by nostalgia for great days past, for those who felt themselves condemned to live in a less spectacular present.²³ Anita Brookner has written of Baudelaire, an unexpectedly analogous case, as of one of a generation 'dominated by the past, irritated by the present and consequently unwilling to come to terms

with it . . . transfiguring . . . idealism into theories, seeking in aesthetic practice or experience sensations which will illuminate and justify their lives'.²⁴ It may be suggested that Webb also, an architectural theorist *manqué*, was a man at odds with his times who sought remedies for contemporary ills through the contemplation of the remote, finding consolation in the examination of vanished civilizations and distant lands. For architectural precedent he looked beyond Jones and the Renaissance to ancient Rome, and for an ideal society he looked in his *Historical Essay* on China to a land equally inaccessible and equally irreproachable. Such a dedicated, apparently nostalgic professional, drawing out, refining and perfecting ideas provides less exciting copy than the charismatic and inventive genius working for a glittering court, particularly when that genius is perceived, incorrectly, as a man for whom second and third thoughts were unnecessary.

Inigo Jones was one of the most important men in the history of art and architecture in England, but we must see him in context and before we start to make European claims for him, we must look also at the work of such rather more fertile, inventive and prolific architects as Palladio, with whom he is consistently compared,²⁵ and at 'that rare Italian master',²⁶ Giulio Romano. We must take care also to ensure that the proper appreciation of Jones's genius does not cause us to suspend our critical disbelief, for to do so does him a disservice and misrepresents his contribution. It may also misrepresent the role of the architect, who may be either an inventor or an exponent,²⁷ by giving undue weight to one over the other, when both are necessary. At a time of change and re-evaluation in contemporary British architecture, it is important, where possible, to draw lessons from the architecture of the past and note this distinction. Good designs are deeply considered and arrived at through meditating on alternatives and refining ideas until a solution marrying all required elements is achieved. They involve an assessment of the past as well as a consideration of the present. Architecture is also, more than any other art, fundamentally collaborative, and Inigo Jones, more than most, as a leading officer of the crown, needed collaborators and unsung clerks of works to realize his designs and to make his sophisticated and learned architecture accessible and adaptable to a larger audience than the Caroline court. To perpetuate the myth of the solitary genius dashing off inspired ideas, which are then somehow miraculously realized, is to play into the hands of those who would wilfully misunderstand the social, historical and artistic impulses which lie behind architectural expectations, and the fundamental processes which lie behind their achievement.

Jones's most judicious biographer best sums him up:

His was not the spirit of revolution; but such was the force of his example that, sustained through two generations of eclectic experiment and Baroque adventure, it showed the way, in a new age, to a new enlightenment.²⁸

No more, no less.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

The title of this paper is chosen in memory of an excellent teacher, Peter Fitzgerald, of the University of Reading, who died in 1990. A version of the paper was given at a conference organized by Dr Edward Chaney for the University of Oxford Department for External Studies: 'Inigo Jones 1573-1652', February 1990.

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10. Milizia, F., *The Lives of Celebrated Architects, Ancient and Modern* (1768), translated by Mrs Edward Cressy, ii (London, 1826), 160-61.
11. Cf. H. Walpole, who attributes an element of the instantaneous to Jones who, when in Rome, 'felt that nature had not formed him to decorate cabinets, but design palaces. He dropped the pencil, and conceived Whitehall'; op. cit., 143.
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18. Whinney, M. and Millar O., *English Art 1625-1714* (Oxford, 1957) 33.
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22. de Beer, E.S., ed., *The Diary of John Evelyn* (London, 1959), 430.
23. Webb, who seems never to have visited Italy, nevertheless appears to share Lord Arundel's regret, expressed in a letter to Inigo Jones in the 1640s, 'that Italy was no more Italy', there being 'such Decay of Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, and all that was good and vertuous . . .'; Webb, J., *A Vindication*, 182.
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25. Campbell C., *Vitruvius Britannicus*, i (1715), writes, in his Introduction, of Palladio, who 'seems to have arrived to a Ne plus ultra of his Art', yet if we compare Jones's works we shall 'doubt not but an impartial Judge will find in them all the Regularity of the former, with an Addition of Beauty and Majesty, in which our Architect is esteemed to have out-done all that went before'.
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