
GOSLING

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CLASSIC DESIGN FOR CONTEMPORARY INTERIORS

With contributions
by Stephen Calloway, Jean Gomm, Tim Gosling and Jürgen Huber

Foreword by Tim Knox,
Director, Sir John Soane's Museum, London

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Foreword

A direct link between today's designers and craftsmen and their counterparts in the past is an important one. The great buildings, interiors and furnishings that delight us today only do so because of the exceptional vision and skill of many extraordinary people – patrons, arbiters of taste, artists and craftsmen. It is heartening to see how many of the ideas of the past still resonate in the architecture and design of today.

Gosling as a company still aspires to the level of detail and quality that characterises the masters of the past. It maintains that vital dialogue, reviving in the luxurious houses, offices and hotels that feature in this beautiful book the spirit, stylishness and attention to detail that so distinguishes the work of William Kent, Robert Adam and Thomas Hope.

Tim Gosling has created a living museum at his design studio and home, enabling his discriminating clients to see and understand why historical rules, materials and proportions matter – very much continuing the dialogue that Sir John Soane had with his clients, and which governed the creation of the world-renowned museum I now curate in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

TIM KNOX, *Director, Sir John Soane's Museum, London*

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The Classical Tradition

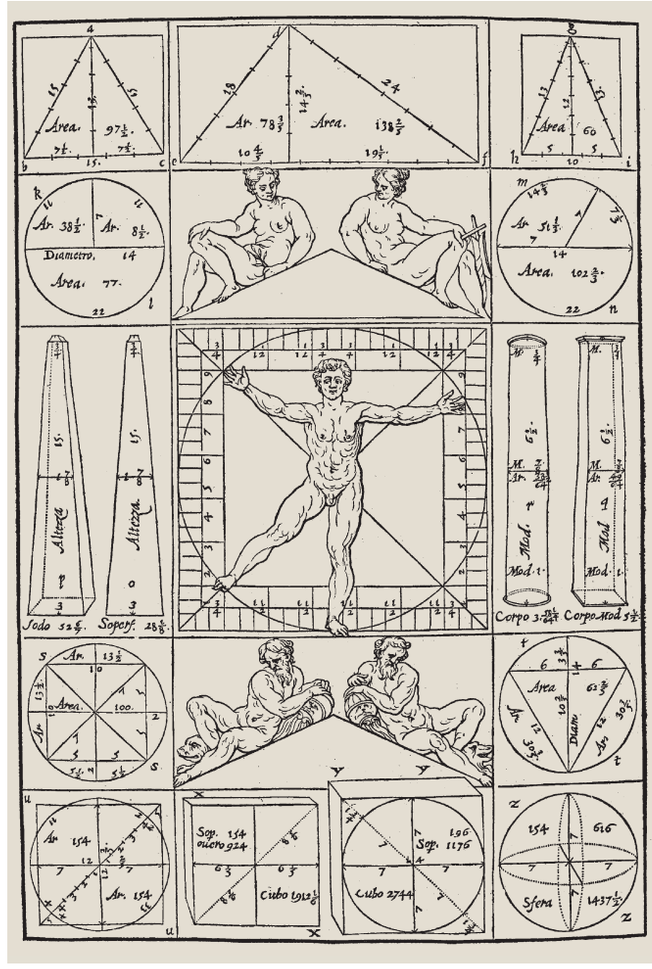
For those attuned to the glories of the past and full of the desire to create beautiful things themselves, the classical tradition inherited from the civilisations of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome offers a fathomless source of instruction and inspiration. This book examines this legacy to reveal the way in which a passionate love of the classical architectural tradition has inspired and guided the creative career of a contemporary designer of furniture and interiors, Tim Gosling.

The connection between building, the creation of interior spaces and the making of furniture has from the most ancient times been intimate. One key to all this has been an understanding of the use of wood and the appreciation of its strengths and beauties as a material for builders and makers. The form of Greek temples and great civic edifices has been traced to the simple type of the 'primitive hut', its crude timber uprights gradually transformed over time into elegant columns of carefully cut stone, its crossbeams into lintel and architrave, the original elements of its construction and fixings recalled symbolically in an elaborate system of ornamental details and flourishes – the architectural Orders.

As a codification of scale and proportion, ornament and enrichment – or, curiously, when ornament and enrichment were not required, as an almost abstract set of principles – the Orders held everything together, providing sets of rules that whilst seeming absolute also remained endlessly adaptable.

In tracing the history of the transmission of the classical tradition down to our own era, perhaps the single most significant episode was the rediscovery by the Florentine Poggio Bracciolini, one of the most indefatigable and erudite classicists of the early Renaissance, of the hitherto lost works of the Roman architect Vitruvius. Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's *Ten Books on Architecture* were written probably around 15 BCE and constitute the only complete architectural treatise to have come down to us from ancient times. Vitruvius's writings revealed for the first time a comprehensive picture of the building methods of the ancients and evidence of their stylistic concerns; not surprisingly this precious text sparked the liveliest interest among scholars, artists and architectural practitioners when first made public in 1414.

In Italian scholarly circles Vitruvius became essential reading and for two centuries his works were digested, elaborated upon and imitated by a sequence of academic writers and architectural theorists. Daniel Barbaro's translation of Vitruvius's original Latin text, published in Venice in 1556 with extensive commentaries and illustrations by the talented young draughtsman and architect Andrea Palladio, became for their generation the standard edition. Another early 'Vitruvian', Leon Battista Alberti, in his *De re aedificatoria* was among the first to claim for



architecture a status as high as that of the established learned disciplines of rhetoric and poetry and those with which it shared a more obvious connection: geometry and music.

In an intellectual arena which delighted in complex and often highly speculative thought patterns, architectural theories concerning proportion came to be interwoven with more abstract notions of musical, linear and spatial harmony based on the subtle division of the Golden Section. Influenced by the speculations concerning the human form of anatomists and the more thoughtful or scientifically minded artists, such as Leonardo, Vincenzo Scamozzi, in his *L'Idea della Architettura universale* of 1615, elaborated a uniform system of mathematical ratios and visual harmonies founded upon the divine geometry of the ideal human figure. Whilst intended to be applied to the grandest of architectural projects, such theories also carried clear implications for designers and makers in an era in which new kinds of private domestic spaces such as the *studiolo* and novel forms of furniture were developing rapidly.

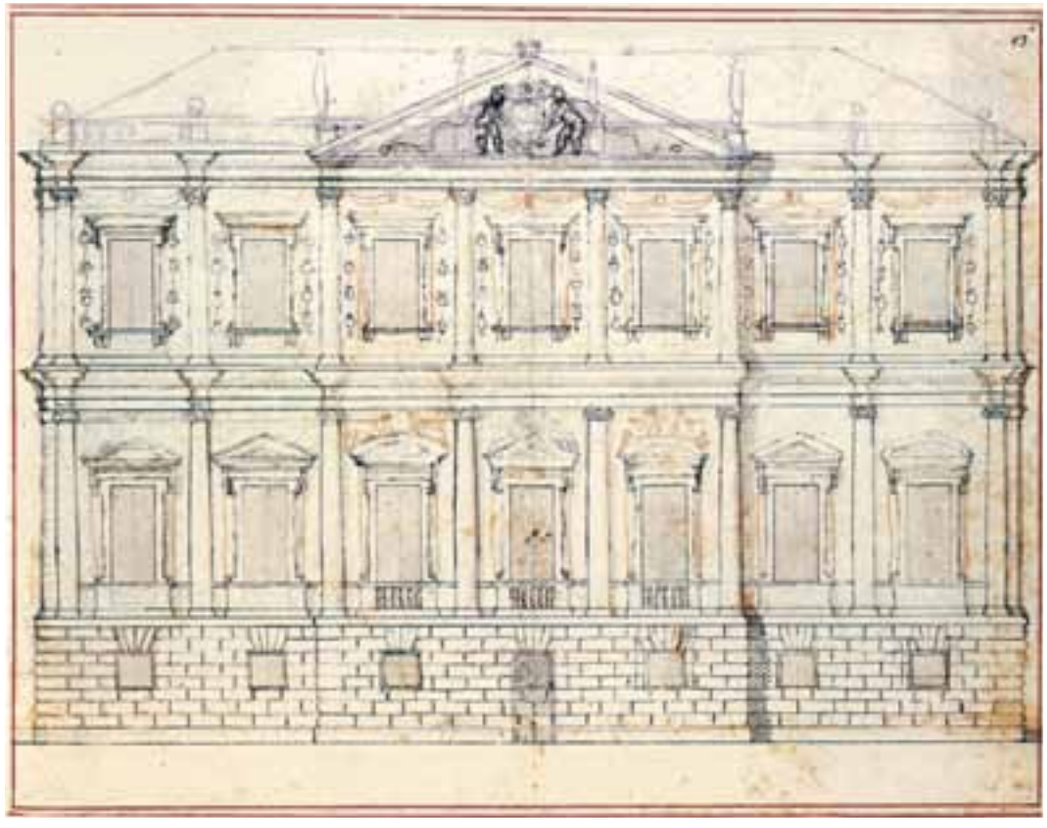
Palladio's own treatise *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura* of 1570 had, with a somewhat lighter touch, disseminated his theories of proportion and his love of geometrically complex but largely plain and unadorned forms far and wide. Whilst Palladio himself built only relatively small numbers of buildings in Venice and around Vicenza, his book became a cornerstone of architectural thinking for many years, and buildings in what came to be called the Palladian style spread as far afield as Russia and the Americas. In England in the early eighteenth century, during a period of unprecedented prosperity and confident expansion, Palladianism became the unchallenged architectural idiom of the dominant aristocratic, political and landowning classes.

The history of the classical tradition in England is essentially one of successive waves of influence reaching our shores. It was early in the sixteenth century during the reign of Henry VIII, who aspired above all to compete with his rival the French king François I as a European Renaissance prince, that new Italian architectural forms and motifs first began to appear. Seen at first in buildings and other fashionable artefacts associated with court circles, the 'Romane' fashion spread as the century progressed to the houses of aristocratic builders and even, more often than not barbarously misunderstood, to the carved oak furniture of stout Elizabethan gentlemen and yeomen farmers.

It is probably fair to say that the first British architect and designer fully to appreciate and understand the new Italian architecture, and to assimilate its ideas and its details sufficiently to build convincingly in the new style was Inigo Jones (1573–1652).

← Vincenzo Scamozzi, *L'Idea della Architettura universale*, 1615, Part I, Book I. The ideal proportions of the human body and basic geometric shapes.

→ Inigo Jones, Elevation for the penultimate design for the Banqueting House, Westminster, London, 1619–22.



Jones both travelled to Italy seeing buildings at first hand and assiduously studied the works of Serlio and other more recent texts. He worked for James I, for whom he created the first great building in the true classical style in England, the Banqueting House, his masterpiece of 1619–22, as well as the Queen's House at Greenwich. It is significant that Jones was not only an architect but also, and very much in the Renaissance manner, a versatile designer of furniture, interiors and also settings and costumes for masques and other court entertainments. For this reason, in the breadth of his vision, he remains a model for designers today. As Tim Gosling says 'our story starts here'.

Throughout the rest of the seventeenth century in England, the majority of architectural practitioners remained amateurs. Even Sir Christopher Wren and Sir John Vanbrugh, the greatest of these 'learned and ingenious gentlemen' were essentially self-taught. Wren, as an Oxford academic, had studied Vitruvius as a classical text, but it was his visits to Paris and Rome that opened his eyes to the new European baroque architecture. Gosling cites Wren's celebrated library at Trinity College, Cambridge, as well as numerous details in his London churches as seminal influences. If Wren's architecture and design was essentially cerebral, his two closest associates, Nicholas Hawksmoor, his sometime assistant and collaborator, and John Vanbrugh both introduced new elements of heady baroque theatricality into English architecture. In Hawksmoor's case it is revealed most clearly in his daring use of towers to dramatise church or college structures; in Vanbrugh it is to be seen and relished most in the extraordinarily powerful massing of the blocks of his great country houses, Blenheim Palace and Castle Howard with their unforgettable sky-lines of bristling obelisks and vases.

The fruitful association at this time of Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington and the painter-turned-architect William Kent proved to be one of the greatest collaborations between a patron of vision and a designer of genius. Burlington's grand villa at Chiswick proclaimed his architectural allegiances by placing statues of Palladio and Inigo Jones to the right and left of the portico. Internally, the villa – a pleasure pavilion on the grandest scale, which was never intended to be lived in – revealed the sophistication with which Kent could create furniture with an architectural character, and place it within interior schemes in which all the elements were integrated to an unprecedented degree. This ability to marry grandiose effect and attention to small detail continually delights the eye in Kent's finest interior ensembles such as those of Holkham Hall or Houghton, and equally in individual pieces of furniture such as a bookcase or chair, a candle stand or a simple plinth on which to display a Grand Tour treasure.

← Christopher Wren, The Wren library at Magdalen College, Cambridge, 1676–86.

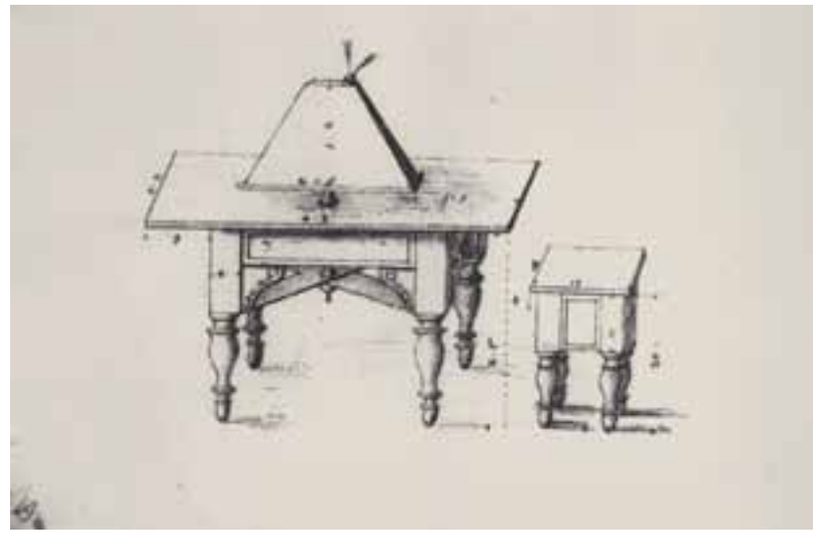
→ A bay of the Wren library showing reading tables and reading stand attributed to Christopher Wren.

→→ A sketch design of the reading tables and reading stand attributed to Christopher Wren.

The major trend of the later eighteenth-century architectural confraternity was towards an increasing professionalism. The careers of the three greatest neo-classical architects of the period, James 'Athenean' Stuart, Sir William Chambers and Robert Adam reveal a certain similarity of aim and achievement. All three had immersed themselves deeply in studies of the architecture of the ancient world and all three found ways in which to apply this knowledge to the creation of interiors and the kinds of furniture required in modern civic and domestic situations. Of the specialist furniture makers of the day none enjoys a greater reputation, even to this day, than Thomas Chippendale. Working for many of the most important patrons of his day, Chippendale exemplifies the trajectory of the talented craftsman who rose to the status of designer and highly successful contractor. His position at the cutting-edge of his trade was cemented by the publication of a book of his own designs, the celebrated *Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director.* Published in three editions between 1754 and 1762, this highly influential pattern-book spanned the crucial mid-century development in furniture design away from the fanciful elaboration of the rococo and towards a more severe and 'regular' neo-classical style.

One of the most remarkable changes in social life in the late eighteenth century was a marked movement away from formality. The greatest consequence of this trend both in social and design terms was a novel search for comfort and softness in interiors and the creation of many entirely new forms of furnishings. Old-style rooms of parade and formal parlours were replaced with comfortable morning rooms, multi-purpose libraries and new kinds of charmingly informal drawings-rooms. Sumptuously upholstered pieces of furniture such as chaises longues and Grecian couches were placed in relation to novel items such as tea-tables and ladies' sewing-tables. John Nash, the favourite architect of the Prince Regent, later George IV, was the master of this new style. His interiors for the Prince in the Brighton Pavilion combined exotic colour with the most profligate use of rich materials; in some ways this was a trend that would continue to define the interiors of a small elite of extravagant patrons in America as well as in England and France well into the twentieth century.

By comparison with Nash's lavish interiors, those created by the other great architect of the Regency period Sir John Soane seem in a way restrained. Soane's genius lay in the ordering of architectural space, the opening of unexpected vistas from room to room and the multiplication of views and transformation of light by the use of mirrors. Soane's personal extravagance lay in the collecting of antiquities and curiosities (as well as sculpture, drawings, paintings, furniture and books). His own house, laid



out as a private museum, celebrated the legacy of the classical world, but used myriad architectural conceits to create the most innovative and inventive domestic spaces and decorative interiors of his day. One of Soane's more famous pupils, Sir Robert Smirke is another of Tim Gosling's heroes, celebrated for his imposing design for the British Museum.

With the waning of the neo-classicical influence as the nineteenth century progressed, other styles such as gothic increasingly came to the fore. The Victorian interior was characterised by its unprecedented density of furnishing as well as by the overwhelming reliance it placed upon historicising styles of furniture and decoration. Even the furniture designers of the Aesthetic movement and reformers of the 1870s such as Charles Lock Eastlake, Christopher Dresser and Bruce Talbert conformed essentially to this pattern. E.W.Godwin, who took many of his models from Japan and especially from ancient Greece, was one of a few architect–designers to create spare, elegant rooms and furnish them with unornamented pieces built upon slender lines. However, by the end of the century inventive spirits such as Sir Edwin Lutyens were again breathing new life into the traditional classical forms, playing erudite games with an architecture full of witty allusions to the past.

The rise of Modernism in the early years of the twentieth century did not, as might have been expected, mean that all interest in the styles of the past was expunged and nor did it bring about the demise of the classical tradition. Classically trained architects such as Sir Albert Richardson continued to work using the Orders and ancient canons of proportions and detailing. Others, such as Sir Owen Williams adapted classical principles and applied them to the creation of new types of structure created with novel materials, such as the Dorchester Hotel or his innovative Daily Express Building in London, an Art Deco extravagance clad in black Vitrolite. For designers such as Tim Gosling who from time to time wish or are required by the nature of the commission to work in a more contemporary idiom, three great figures from the pioneering or heroic phase of International Modernism stand as inspiration: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier. Mies claimed that he sought to establish an architecture fully representative of modern times and as much the natural expression of the age as the classical and gothic styles had been. The emphasis in this twentieth-century architectural style was on extreme clarity and simplicity, and his buildings made the most daring use of modern materials such as industrial steel and plate glass to define interior spaces.

In general terms the trend in England in those creative inter-war years was towards

← Sir John Soane, The Library-Dining Room in Sir John Soane's house, London, 1798.

→ The Breakfast Room in Sir John Soane's house.

a gentler Modernism based on the observance of classical proportion in buildings increasingly stripped of any historical decorative detail either externally or internally. By contrast French designers of interiors and furniture makers such as André Arbus explored the use of novel design motifs, but worked with ever-richer materials that evoked the luxuries of the past. For contemporary designers, such as Tim Gosling, both these strategies can offer exciting potential.

These days relatively few major buildings are erected in a 'correct' classical style, adhering to the precise proportional dictates of the orders and enriched with carved decoration following the ancient models. Indeed, most contemporary buildings that are designed this way tend to be small, private and often frivolous adornments for the gardens and parks of indulgent landowners. However, every year vast numbers of new buildings all over the world, including large-scale, seemingly 'free' ultra-modernist structures and many high-tech sky-scrapers which subtly reference the three-part division of the classical column into base, shaft and capital, still conform either imperceptibly or perhaps even unconsciously to many of the proportional canons of the classical manner. Paradoxically, the fact that so much of our furnishings and interiors, and so many new buildings seem so deliberately free-form, and yet observe – however obliquely – 'the rules', serves to point up and strengthen the assertion that the classical tradition remains even today a pervasive, potent and positive influence on the way we choose to live.

↑ Gosling fitted library constructed in sycamore.

→ The oculus in a private library in English sycamore with a Venetian reliquary, the back section inlaid with London plane (lacewood).