**CHAPTER III: PROPORTION, or measure of the limbs of the human figure**

1. Proportion, or pure regularity,

is (as *Plutarch* tells us in this respect)

a beautiful, noble ornament in nature.[[1]](#endnote-1)

This *Proportion*, in architecture or figures,

*Vitruvius* (always artful by nature) calls

a constant agreement in the relation of the limbs

or parts of the entire building,

if properly designed according to the rules of art.[[2]](#endnote-2)

2. For according to what he says, one can easily

compare a Human Body and a Temple.

This agrees well with the word of the Lord

when he speaks of destroying the Temple,

meaning, by the Temple, his pure Body.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The form of a righteous man’s body

is noble, and wondrously composed

by Nature with particular art.

The Human Body compared to a temple with its sections.

3. From where the hair begins to grow on the forehead

to under the chin, which we call the Face,

is the tenth part of the Body’s size

measured in length;

also the length of the hand, from where

it can bend at the very end of the arm

to the end of the middle finger,

will match the length of the face.[[4]](#endnote-4)

A person is ten faces tall, and reaches as wide as he is tall.[[5]](#endnote-5)

4. When one measures the size of the whole

Head, from crown to chin, one will find

an eighth of the Body’s height; and if you stretch a thread

behind, from the crown to the base of the neck,

you will find an eighth; and from the hairline

on the forehead descending to the middle of the chest

at the point where it arches the highest,

one will find exactly a sixth.

A Person is eight heads tall.

5. When you increase your measure to the crown

you will observe a fourth of the Body’s height;

if you wish to find the measure of the face,

from the hairline to the eyes

above the nose and between the eyebrows

is to construct a third of the whole Face.

The nose is one part, and from the nostrils

To the base of the chin is of the same length.

A Person’s face is three noses long.

6. The foot, from where the round part of the heel begins

to the end of the second toe, truly,

is a sixth of the body’s height;

and the cubit­–so that we understand,

the arm from the elbow joint

to the end of the longest finger–

will always occupy a fourth of the body’s height.

Thus is the construction of the body determined.

A Person’s foot, at its longest, is a sixth of his height. A Person is four cubits tall. The Cubit of the Ancients is six palms; each palm is four thumbs long, and there are four palms to a foot.

7. Now the chest, measured from the beginning of the stomach,

just above the navel, to up against

the chin, shows the same length.

Put the point of a long compass on the navel,

When a person is laid out flat,

Then let the other point draw a circle,

Then you will precisely hit the toes and fingers. Leonardo, Vitruvian Man

A Person’s navel is his midpoint.

8. Thus the navel naturally appears to be

the middle point of this human body,

and just as this exquisite round form is perceived in it,

so you can equally find a true square.

Measure amply from the crown to the soles of the feet,

And then once between the fingertips

when the arms are outstretched,

And it will produce the same measure.

One can conceive of a Person in both a circle and a square.

9. *Vitruvius* has written this before me,

and note also that *Pliny* agrees

that the height of a person

is exactly that of his reach; in life,

one can also master this enough with practice.

Now there are those who have widely treated proportion in books,

especially *Dürer*, who is not to be bettered. Example of Dürer’s drawing, from one of his *Four Books on Human Proportions.*

10. But I have not pursued such vexations as

matters of minutes, or the divisions of thumbs,

to keep the young Painter from going so far astray.

The customs of Great Masters or Sculptors

are unsuitable trails for Youth;

I have often heard Painters say

that those who measure too much stick fast to measuring

and achieve nothing exceptional.

According to the measurements of Geometers, minutes or grains are a quarter of the width of a finger; four fingers make three thumbs. Five minutes equals one ounce; one degree is two feet. Too many measurements are not, or at least only a little, useful for Painters, since painting well is their goal; however, measuring is necessary for Sculptors.

11. *Vitruvius*, one of the wisest Giants

in the Builders’ Art, always shows a way

without the danger of getting lost.

Observe: the Young must be commanded

to measure using heads, feet and noses:

from the Person’s head to the soles of the feet

is eight heads; each head is four noses.

I find this a quick and convenient way to measure.

12. In order to measure eight heads

correctly and without any difficulty, you will try

to place your figure on a vertical line.

The head, from crown to chin, shall be counted as one;

From the chin to the middle between the nipples is also one eighth;

From there to the navel and further to the genitals

Makes four. The remaining four should be

The mid-thigh, the knee, mid-shin, and the sole of the foot.

Measuring the height of the body along a plumbline of the body’s center.

13. Thus you will also go to work to measure breadth.

From right to left, clothed or unclothed,

A man’s shoulders are two heads wide, the hips

are the width of two faces. Now for the female body:

The height is the same, but the width of the hips

is exactly twice that of the head;

while the width of the shoulders

is barely two faces wide, as opposed to the man’s.

14. But women should not show hardness

in the muscles, which, as a whole,

must softly withdraw into the face or nicely disappear,

plump of flesh, with folds and dimples in the hands, as in children.

Now we should consider the children:

They are five heads tall, but smaller accordingly;

three heads to the genitals,

to the thighs and calves, two.

15. You will encounter different proportions in life:

short of length, and slim.

Children are (as Pliny tells us)

grown to half their height in three years.

Now, young painters, accept these few things.

I shall instruct you further in how to place a figure

so that it does not waver, and how to make it act and move,

in order to execute everything properly.

1. VM is probably referring to Plutarch’s “De Anima procreation e Timaeo”, where, summarizing Plato,he writes that God did not create matter but shape it: “disposed, digested, and embellished the confused mass. so that he brought to perfection a most absolute and glorious creature.”

   <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0007.tlg134.perseus-eng1:5> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Vitruvius *De Archtitectura* III, I: “Proportion is a due adjustment of the size of the different parts to each other and to the whole; on this proper adjustment symmetry depends.” *Proportio est ratae partis membrorum in omni opera, totiusque commodulatio, ex qua ratio efficitur symmetrarium.* [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/vitruvius/3\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/vitruvius/3*.html) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John 2: 18-21: The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?”But the temple he had spoken of was his body. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This passage is taken directly from Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, Book III, 2-3.

   [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/vitruvius/3\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/vitruvius/3*.html) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. VM uses “Mens,” while Vitruvius’ Latin is “homo.” I have translated as “person” instead of “man.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)