Latin Victorian

ITALIAN ARCHITECTURE, 1750-1914. By Carroll L. V. Meeks. Illustrated. 546 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press. $25.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ITALY, to most of its eager visitors is art-frosted *dolce far niente* in glorious Technicolor. Italian cafes are conveniently arranged for the relaxed, Campari-accompanied enjoyment of the umber-toned beauties of Rome and the Renaissance: churches, palaces, fountains and plazas, gallerias and opera houses, and the Eternal City under an eternal blue sky.

What the visitor sees, however, is often not Roman or Renaissance or Eternal at all, but 19th century. He is paying his respects to Latin Victorian, to stretch a stylistic label. He would probably be as shocked by that realization as by the *riscaldamento* charge on his hotel bill.

But there they are, those great 19th-century buildings: the reverently regarded facades (hold your hat, unless you are a historian) of the Duomo and Santa Croce in Florence (respectively 1867-87 and 1857-63); major parts of the Vatican in Rome (Braccio Nuovo of the Vatican Museum, 1817-22); sections of the Piazza San Marco in Venice (1810 and later); St. Paul's Beyond the Walls in Rome (rebuilt beginning 1823—the 19th century was obsessed with a free-swinging kind of medieval restoration); the gallerias of Milan (1863-67); Genoa (1871) and Naples (1887-90); the San Carlo Opera House in Naples (1810-44) to cite just a few impressive and characteristic chunks of the 19th-century Italian scene.

However, it is not advisable to cancel the trip or ask for one's money back. It would be far better to get a copy of Carroll L. V. Meeks's illuminating "Italian Architecture, 1780-1914." Five hundred and forty-six pages and five pounds of solid, resounding scholarship, it won't do as a handy pocket guide. Nor will it do as an equally handy coffee-table status symbol, because this is no flip-through picture book of immense glossy photographs taken with a good lens and an empty mind for the kind of pseudo-architectural travelogue that induces instant trauma in the knowledgeable reader. The pictures are offset and the documentation is complete. This serious study is a major contribution to architectural history.

The author's name is clue enough, since he ranks high among specialists in the 19th century — that period of stylistic complexities that is just beginning to be unraveled and understood. His death last year was a severe loss to scholarship. Among his contributions have been an absorbing chronicle of the structural and stylistic history of that characteristic 19th-century building type — the railroad station — and the development of the theses of picturesque and creative eclecticism as guiding 19th-century esthetic principles.

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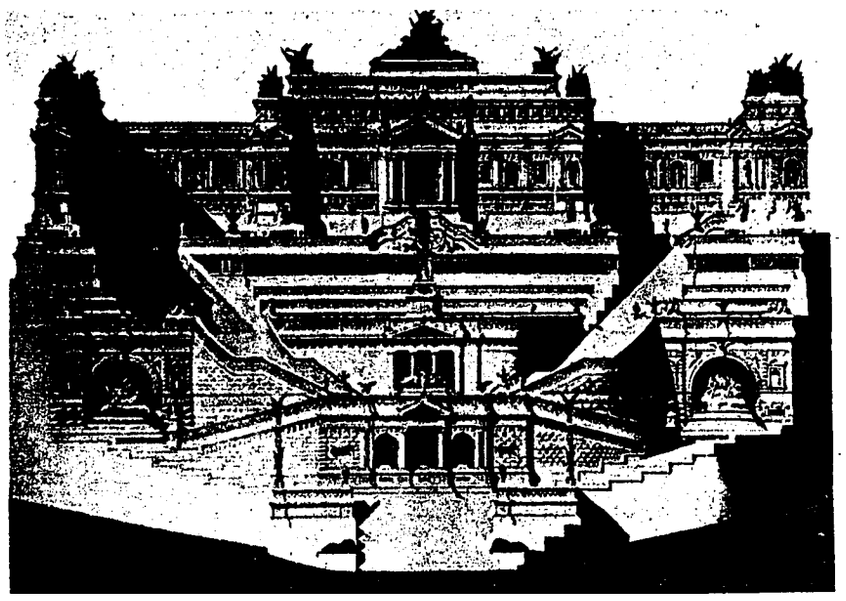
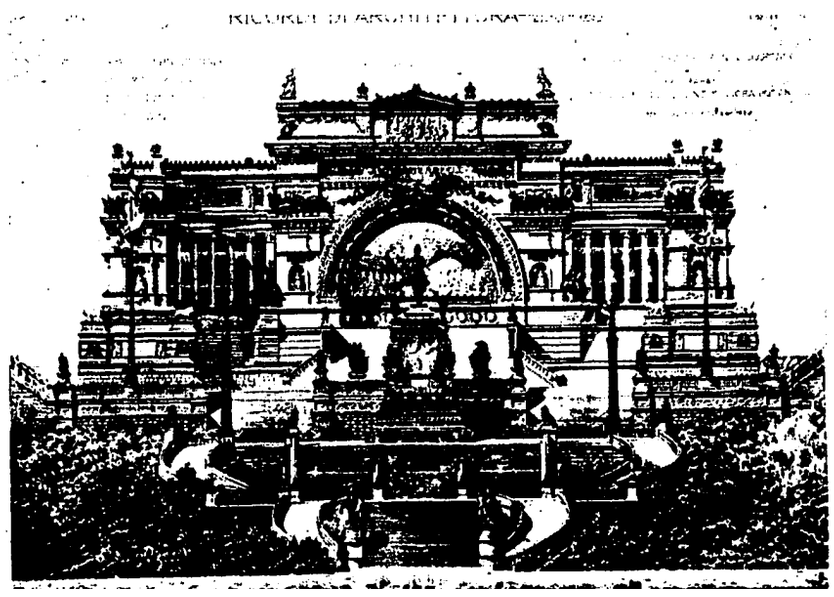
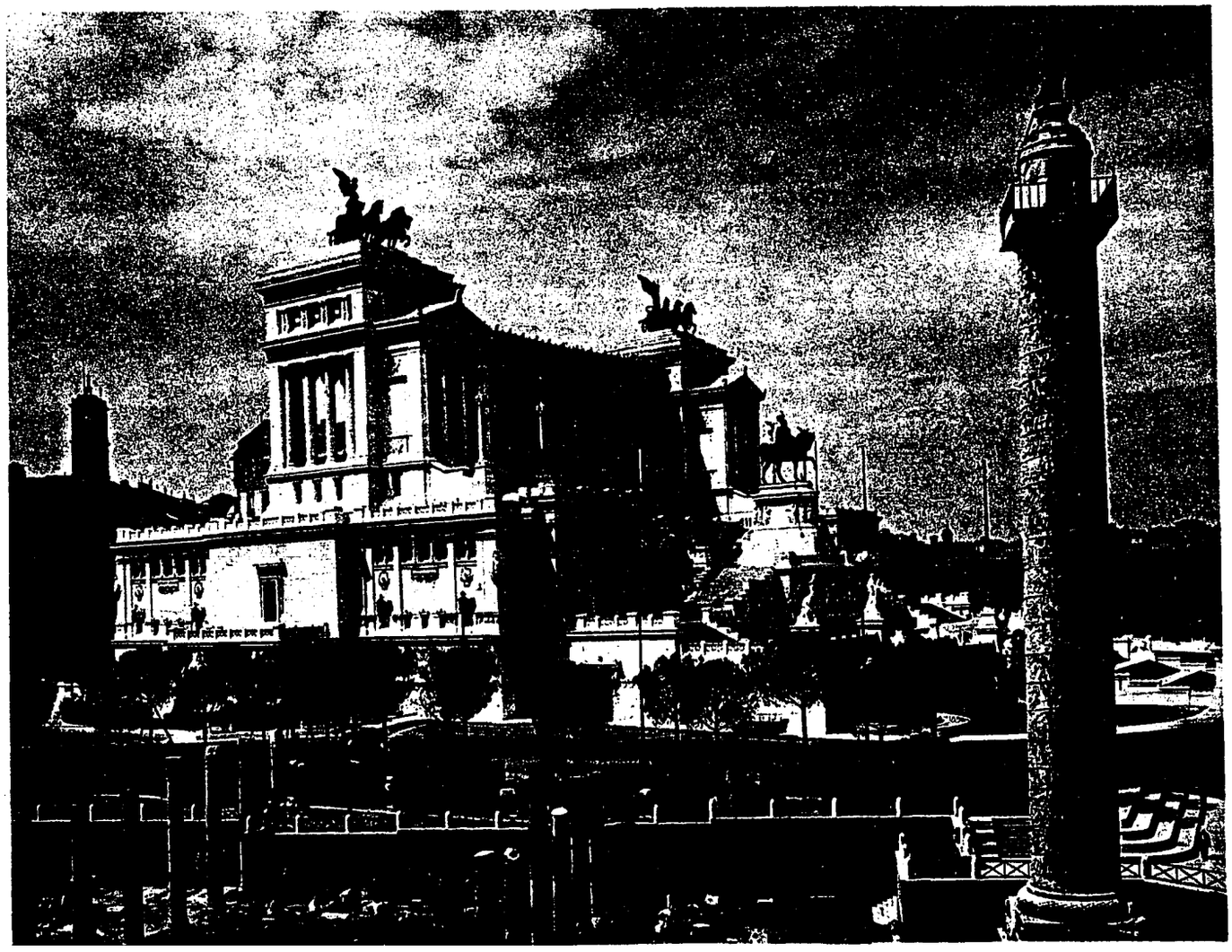




Illustrations, above left and right, from "Italian Architecture 1750-1914."

Above, designs for the Victor Emmanuel II monument, Rome, submitted in the second competition by runners-up Manfredo Manfredi and Raimondo d'Aronco in 1884. Right, the final choice, designed by Giuseppe Sacconi, 1884, and completed in 1922.



The lay reader will encounter massive passages of architectural iconography in this chronicle of Italian building—changes in neo-classical vocabulary in its rigorist or purist phases, for example—and long lists of recondite names. The table of contents alone could frighten anyone but a specialist or hardy architecture buff. What emerges, however, from the paraphernalia of scholarship, is a thoroughly absorbing, thoughtfully analytical, conscientious compilation of the vicissitudes of post-Baroque building in Italy, its relationship to that country's total cultural contribution and a revealing and fascinating light on 19th-century tastes and practices. Specialists may take issue with facts or theories, but the volume is sure to stand, like Henry Russell Hitchcock's 1958 "Architecture: 19th and 20th Centuries," as a pioneering work in its field.

The Italian architectural contribution, like all Italian art and culture, stands just a little apart from the international mainstream. Italy's long-lasting political troubles, which led to late unification in 1870, delayed the technological progress that was transforming the building art in other countries. The Italian production was never completely released from the chauvinistic trap of a glorious classical past. It runs the predictable Latin range of dramatic extremes from calculated flamboyance to deadly pedantry. Mr. Meeks has dealt with and defined the major 19th-century trends of neo-classicism, neo-medievalism, neo-Renaissance, or the Stile Umberto, and the 20th-century break with tradition, Art Nouveau, called Stile Floreale or Stile Liberty in Italy. The cutoff point is World War I.

To the 20th century, this kind of freewheeling eclecticism has been a dirty word. To the historian, however, it is the nitty-gritty of Victoriana, a fascinating field of exploration in which to pin the stylistic butterflies to the wall. To all of it, Mr. Meeks has applied the historian's measured objectivity.

For example, a work that has defied objectivity almost totally: the Victor Emmanuel monument in Rome, that omnipresent, inescapable testimony to unbridled 19th-century eclecticism and megalomania. Giuseppe Sacconi's design was selected in 1884 after four years of preliminaries including two international competitions and Machiavellian maneuvering for an Italian winner. It was completed almost half a century later, in 1922, by committees of architects who added endless details for a dull but dizzying melange. All of the competition proposals showed consistent gigantism on a pompous range of stockpiled classical themes from Praeneste to the Acropolis of Pergamon. The executed design, an aggressively overscaled, stylistically prolix affront to sensibility and the urban scene in glaring white marble, could be called, if one may mix modern cultural references with the same freedom as the 19th-century architects, classical *chutzpah*. L

Of the final version, with the runners-up by Manfredo Manfredi and Raimondo D'Aronco (later a turn of the century tradition-breaker with Giuseppe Sommargua), Mr. Meeks notes, in a simple understatement, that they "leave this generation gasping." He states, of the monument itself, "A memorable image has been created. The form is unique. Rarely has so tremendous an artificial hill been constructed to support a temple." The historian's conclusion seems to be that since outrage was intended, and achieved, the monument is a success. Certainly it succeeds in breaching the harmony of material, scale and color that united 25 centuries of Roman building.

The total production of 164 years has been so skillfully recorded by Mr. Meeks that the "in" pilgrimage may soon be to the landmarks of 19th-century Italy. To *aficionados*, new and old, we say, if you can't have the bathroom of the Pitti Palace (1812 ff.), settle for the book.