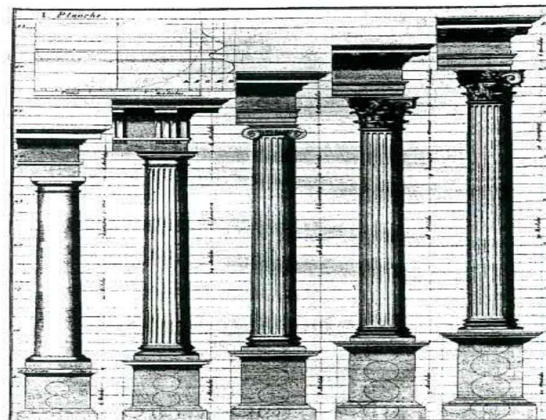
An Education of Classical Proportions

Chip Denton

Thanks to Mr. Chip Stam, our illustrious emcee at the recent Trinity Benefit and Silent Auction, many of us in the Trinity community can identify the three orders of classical architecture. Complete with hand motions worthy of our kindergartners, Mr. Stam drilled us repeatedly on the distinguishing marks of these orders of columns: Doric, Ionic, Corinthian. Who can forget?

If you missed this dinner at the Carolina Club and Mr. Stam's mnemonics, not to worry. There are other—dare we say better?—ways of learning about these things. Claude Perrault, a seventeenth century scientist and one of the principal architects of the Louvre, studied the Italian Renaissance adaptations of Roman and Greek orders and produced his own copper-plate versions of the five (Mr. Stam didn't tell us the whole story) orders of classical architecture, complete with a modular scale from which the proportions of the various parts could be read, memorized, and repeated:



One of most striking things about this drawing is the definition of classical proportions. The ratio of the column's height to its width, the relationship between the size of the pedestal and the column itself, the height of the entablature—these had all been standardized and, if you will, canonized, by the time Perrault set to work. Take the Doric column (the second from the left): The pedestal is seven modules, the column twenty-four, and the entablature six. The diameter of the column is three modules, so that the ratio of the column's height to its diameter is 8:1. The beauty and fit of this ratio may escape many of us, but if you have ever

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helped fifth graders make a model of, say, the Parthenon, your eyes have probably been opened to all sorts of dumpy or spindly alternatives.

It is a mark of the classical that it attends carefully and well—I do not say perfectly—to balance and proportion. The size and spacing of the columns in the Parthenon, the posture of the statue of Aphrodite that we may all view at our North Carolina Museum of Art, Aristotle's definition of virtue as the perfect mean between two excesses, the Greek rules for good taste in their plays—these are all examples of the classical passion for balance. "Moderation in all things" was a Greek ideal, evident around every corner in the streets of a classical Greek city-state.

As a Christian, and particularly as a Christian educator, I have long been drawn to this Greek ideal. Not that excess is always misguided—was our Lord not immoderate in his anger at the moneychangers in the temple? Not that the Greeks were able to match their deeds with the ideal—witness the disastrous Peloponnesian Wars. Still, the ideal is inspiring and true. Balance and proportion matter to the Lord, who commands us to love him first and our neighbor second, in the same measure as we love ourselves. Luke tells us that Jesus' growth was not extreme or one-sided, but full-orbed: "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." The prophet Micah taught us that we cannot measure our lives along only one dimension: "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." A life of justice without mercy is as ugly as a Doric column of perfect height and skinny as a flagpole.

Many of the practices and policies of our school reflect our strong desire to maintain these critical balances in our lives. Seeking to balance the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic sides of our students' growth ("truth, goodness, beauty"), we schedule service projects and art classes alongside math and Latin for our older students. Our commitment to a balance between the structured, formal work of learning and the unplanned leisure of play has shaped the length of our school day and the way we run our recess. Similarly, the balance of the school agenda and family priorities means that we attempt to limit the amount and kind of homework that the students are assigned.

The Greeks' passion for moderation and balance led them to build small but beautiful temples. This preference for perfection over magnitude is a biblical value as well: "Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 4:6). Trinity is a small school, but the work that is going on in these classrooms is something we can be proud of. Like the small pottery factories of classical Athens, where gifted craftsmen labored over the proportions of an exquisite vase, our classrooms are the places where talented teachers work carefully, sometimes slowly, to shape the minds and hearts and bodies of these students, who will be the leaders and citizens of the twenty-first century.

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