

## CONCLUSION: *VITRUVIAN MAN* AND *VIRTUOUS WOMAN* A RETROSPECTIVE ON THE *HOMO BENE FIGURATUS* THROUGH LEONARDO DA VINCI AND HARMONIA ROSALES

Mathias Hanses

On September 16, 2017, the then-thirty-three-year-old Afro-Cuban American artist Harmonia Rosales presented her oil painting *Virtuous Woman* at her first art gallery exhibition, called ‘Black Imaginary To Counter Hegemony (B.I.T.C.H.)’, at the Simard Bilodeau Contemporary in downtown Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> The work is based on Leonardo da Vinci’s famous visualization of Vitruvius’ description of the *homo bene figuratus*, that is, of the ‘ideal’ or ‘well-formed’ human being on whose symmetry and proportions the construction of temples should be modeled (Vitr. *De arch.* 3.1; fig. 5.3).<sup>2</sup> Rosales retains the presentation of a nude human figure in an interlocking square and circle on a background covered in handwriting. Yet Rosales’ rendition of the lettering is even less easily legible than the Italian paraphrases of, and expansions upon, Vitruvius’ Latin that the left-handed Leonardo had written in mirrored script around his sketch.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Rosales’ painting fills not the page of a book, but a large canvas damaged at the edges and marked by red-orange blemishes. Most importantly, the person at the center is no longer the stern and, to a modern viewer, White-presenting man of da Vincian fame. Instead, she is a Black woman (fig. 7.1).

In this paper, I explore the reception of Vitruvius’ *homo bene figuratus*, through the intermediary of Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man*, in Rosales’ *Virtuous Woman*. My aim is to tie together several salient points raised in the essays that precede my own and to add further reflections on the topics of race, gender, and Vitruvius’ conscription in White supremacist, anti-Black, and patriarchal discourses to this collection’s earlier points about the *homo bene figuratus* and ‘his’ afterlife since the early years of the Roman empire. In doing so, I hope to provide an additional and very different example of the *Vitruvian Man*’s iconicity lending itself, as Michele Kennerly and Jennifer K.L. Buchan have emphasized in this issue, either to supporting or to criticizing established values. Combining allusions to Greco-Roman literature and Renaissance art with evocations of

---

I would like to thank Elena Giusti, Erin M. Hanses, and *Ramus*’ anonymous referees for their numerous helpful comments, which have much improved this article. I am also grateful for the stimulating conversations I have had with Giovanna Laterza and all participants in the *homo bene figuratus* workshop, and to Helen Morales for securing the image rights to Harmonia Rosales’ *Virtuous Woman*.

1. For Rosales and her work, see [www.harmoniarosales.art](http://www.harmoniarosales.art). Accessed December 28, 2022.
2. The Latin text is taken from Granger (1931). All translations are my own.
3. For the details of Leonardo’s design, see Isaacson (2017), 140–59.



Figure 7.1. Harmonia Rosales (b. 1984), *The Virtuous Woman*, 2017. Oil on linen 81" × 54". © Harmonia Rosales.

religions of the African diaspora such as La Regla de Lucumí—the syncretic faith originally shaped in Cuba, known also as Santería, that joins elements of the Yoruba religion and Roman Catholicism—Harmonia Rosales presents a decolonial, Black feminist subversion of the ‘ideal man’ whom Vitruvius envisioned and whom later generations continued to update to fit the racist, sexist, ableist, colonialist, and imperialist requirements of their own times. As Rosales put it in reference to the most famous painting in the B.I.T.C.H. collection—i.e., *The Creation of God*, a reimagining of Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* that figures both god and the original human as Black women—she endorses a beauty ideal that differs profoundly from the White male tradition: ‘I wanted to take a significant painting, a widely recognized painting that subconsciously or consciously conditions us to see white male figures as powerful and authoritative and flip the script, establish a counter narrative ... Replacing the white male figures—the most represented—with people I believe have been the least represented can begin to recondition our minds to accept new concepts of human value.’<sup>4</sup>

Looking back through Rosales’ *Virtuous Woman* and Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man* at Vitruvius’ *homo bene figuratus*, I investigate more closely the extent—and the limits—of *De architectura*’s participation in the celebration of White, able-bodied men that Rosales decries. Rosales’ *Virtuous Woman* calls vivid attention to the androcentrism that is indeed inherent both in Vitruvius’ original presentation of ideal human corporeality and in the Renaissance’s visualization(s). Simultaneously, her painting shines a bright and accusatory light on Vitruvius’ clear and enthusiastic support of imperialist enterprises by foregrounding those human beings—the subjects, that is, of empires—for whose violent repression *De architectura* provides early and influential endorsements. In fact, Vitruvius’ celebrations of Augustan imperialism, including strictly prescriptive views about the human form and its applicability to the built environment, were problematic already in their own day and proved at least equally harmful in their reception by later powers, who relied on ancient Roman precedent to rationalize the racist and sexist practices that remain active even in the twenty-first century.

At the same time, Rosales’ centering of the historically marginalized human majority also calls attention to a number of distortions and omissions that have impacted the *homo bene figuratus* passage in the many centuries of *De architectura*’s reception. If we separate Vitruvius’ original text from Leonardo’s image, we see that the Roman author participates in some harmful practices but not others, silencing some marginalized perspectives (both of his day and of our own) but giving voice to others. In this context, Rosales’ *Virtuous Woman* can remind us that Vitruvius may himself have faced exclusionary assumptions acting against his identity. He appears, after all, to have been of sub-elite status, and, as I discuss below, it is possible (though this possibility is often

---

4. Blackmon (2017).

contested) that he was a freedman and that he had a connection to Africa. If, furthermore, we detach Vitruvius' own words from the Renaissance images, we can note (as I do below) that while he *is* androcentric, he is notably less explicit in gendering the 'well-formed human' whose proportional aesthetic he recommends for temple architecture than the later visualizations suggest. On a related note, *De architectura* eagerly supports Roman imperialism and displays its own kind of color prejudice. However, the epidermic norm it endorses is not Whiteness—a concept that, as I discuss in more detail below, did not exist in its modern form in Vitruvius' day. Instead, the text posits a darker complexion as the human/Roman norm. Finally, Vitruvius provides a description of the idealized body, but his endorsement of any such outward beauty is conditional, hinting as he does at a preference for interior rather than exterior virtue (see Tom Geue's contribution in this issue).

On the one hand, Rosales' take on the *Vitruvian Man* thus constitutes a firm and necessary challenge to both Leonardo's and (all caveats notwithstanding) also Vitruvius' very real participation in sexist, ableist, and imperialist discourses. On the other hand, *Virtuous Woman* provides a visualization of the 'well-formed human' that can serve, in certain respects, as a correction of—or, at least, a counterweight to—Leonardo's take on the first-century B.C.E. formulation of the *homo bene figuratus*. By looking for possible compatibilities between Rosales' *Virtuous Woman* and Vitruvius' *De architectura*, we can move some of the Roman author's original priorities back into the foreground, without denying, however, the detrimental role that *De architectura* has played in the proliferation of reductive corporeal ideals, and of an ideology of imperialist aggression, since the time of the early principate.

### *Virtuous Woman*

Let us begin, then, by noting that the Black woman at the center of Rosales' *Virtuous Woman* has assumed a posture almost identical to that of the *Vitruvian Man* as imagined by Leonardo. Arms, hands, legs, feet, and torso are positioned in the same manner as they are in the Renaissance sketch, highlighting the symmetry and proportionality of body and limbs through their placement within geometric shapes and directing the viewer's focus to the genitalia. The similarities between the two visualizations underscore that human commonalities could, at least in theory, have outweighed the discriminatory distinctions inscribed on them by such artificially constructed cultural categories as race and gender.<sup>5</sup> Yet in practice, this has not been the case. Indeed, Rosales' substitution of a

---

5. For recent discussions of race, in particular, as a social construct rather than a biological reality, see Mukherjee (2016); Rutherford (2017); and Saini (2019). To account for the fact that race, notwithstanding its real impact on human lives, is an artificially constructed marker of identities, I capitalize the first letters of racial designations throughout this essay. Cf. Appiah (2020).

Black woman for an apparently White man creates a startling awareness of the harm that endorsements of a model human defined as White, able-bodied, and male have done to those who do not fit the description, rationalizing—as these idealizations did and do—oppressive practices across the globe. The fiery stains on Rosales' canvas resemble spilled bodily fluids or chemical burns, one of them severing a hand from the arm and another hinting at a crushed foot. As such, the blemishes evoke the realities of mass murder, lynching, enslavement, disruption of family ties and natal alienation, rape and sexual abuse, bodily dismemberment, forced sterilization, human commodification, scientific experimentation, as well as destruction of traditional practices and extraction of natural resources that threaten those who live at the intersection of racism, sexism, ableism, and other modes of discrimination.<sup>6</sup> The artist clarifies on her website that 'The gilding of metal and rust ... [serve] as a motif for moral decay in society.'<sup>7</sup> In this context, Rosales' inclusion of handwriting that is notably less angular than Leonardo's undercuts the Renaissance design's aspirations to a clinical cleanliness representative of the hegemonic perspective of the scientist. In its place, she evokes and embraces less rationalistic powers, such as the spirituality of Lucumí.<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, then, the painting's geometric shapes double as a torture rack that exposes the Black woman's naked body to the onlooker's sexualizing and objectifying gaze. On the other hand, she raises her head high—higher, in fact, than Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*—and forces the viewer to look up to her and to recognize her magnificence. The *Virtuous Woman* thus emerges as a savior figure, with her outstretched arms suggesting not just Vitruvian proportionality but also crucifixion. In the Roman world, that mode of punishment was typically reserved for the enslaved, and its most famous victim, Jesus Christ, would in today's categories himself have been a Person of Color. The painting accordingly points the viewer to a continuum of oppression ranging from the ancient Mediterranean to modern America, yet it also emphatically presents the Black woman as an ideal of both morality and beauty, and as a new messiah.<sup>9</sup> She is an embodiment of the divine feminine, part Christian liberator and part goddess of the Yoruba religion, an embodiment—I would submit—of the Orisha Oshun, the goddess of femininity and love who is burnt in her quest 'for humanity and for forgiveness',<sup>10</sup> her eyes closed in a resilient introspection that vividly contrasts with the da Vincian man's aggressively challenging glance directly at the viewer. As an Orisha, she represents 'physical manifestations of

6. For the term intersectionality, see Combahee River Collective (1977); Crenshaw (1989). For its applicability to *De architectura*, cf. Kim (2022).

7. [www.harmoniarosales.art/theartist](http://www.harmoniarosales.art/theartist). Accessed December 28, 2022.

8. For these practices and their place in Rosales' work, see Padilla Peralta (2022); Pérez (2022); Rosales (2022).

9. Rosales develops this theme more directly in her painting *I Exist*, likewise part of B.I.T.C.H., where she depicts a crucifixion scene with only Black women as participants.

10. Rosales (2022).



life's healing tools',<sup>11</sup> and it is notable that the woman's head is shaved or burnt, which can suggest that she has been deprived of a significant mode of self-expression that is both cultural and individual, or that she is using her baldness as a way to express herself. She hence embodies a different kind of dignifying universality that contrasts the experience of the global majority with that encoded in Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*. The painting's name in fact inverts, as it were, the latter title, jumbling and switching out some of its constitutive letters and turning it into its apparent opposite. The resultant phrase *Virtuous Woman* occurs in the Hebrew Bible (Prov. 31:10 KJV), where it describes an active wife who, however, remains ever subservient to her husband. Indeed, the very use of the English adjective 'virtuous' in Rosales' title—derived, as it is, from the Latin *uirtus* or 'manliness'—underscores the long and violent history of patriarchal policing of women's behavior and of the enforcement of male-centered definitions of feminine 'virtue'. Rosales reclaims the term and inverts its meaning to celebrate the historically marginalized, laying claim in the process to true beauty, to independent power, and to moral and spiritual superiority over the *Vitruvian Man* on the part of the *Virtuous Woman*.

## Gender

Moving ahead, I would like to take the above interpretation of the *Virtuous Woman* back into Vitruvius' text and have it contribute to our understanding of the *homo bene figuratus*. Re-reading the opening of book three of *De architectura* with this premise in mind—and focusing first on an appropriately nuanced assessment of the role that gender plays in the author's presentation of ideal corporeality—it appears that Vitruvius would indeed have imagined the body of the well-proportioned human (*corpus hominis bene figurati*, 3.1.1) as male by default. This much is made clear by the masculine gender of *homo/hominis*, reinforced immediately by *figuratus/figurati* and again two paragraphs later by *conlocatus*. The latter participle occurs in the context of the supposedly ideal human's placement on 'his' back while an imaginary compass draws a circle touching the extended hands and feet, taking the navel as the person's center (*si homo conlocatus fuerit supinus manibus et pedibus pansis circinique conlocatum centrum in umbilico eius, circumagendo rotundationem utrarumque manuum et pedum digiti linea tangentur*, 3.1.3). Yet this reading is immediately complicated in the succeeding sentence, where Vitruvius describes the square containing this same 'well-formed' person from head to toe and from extended arm to extended arm. Here, the neuter *corpus* has replaced the masculine *homo* at the center of the writer's attention (*in corpore; in eo*). With this observation in mind, we can note that even the noun *homo* is less specifically gendered

11. [www.harmoniarosales.art/theartist](http://www.harmoniarosales.art/theartist). Accessed December 28, 2022.

than such alternatives as *uir* or *mulier*; it means ‘human being’ more so than it does ‘man’.<sup>12</sup> Or, rather, it resembles an antiquated usage of the latter English term, in that it refers to any member of humanity but nevertheless privileges the masculine gender (cf. ‘mankind’ and compare Elizabeth Merrill’s observations on ‘man’ as a stand-in for ‘human’).

Men thus do provide the norm for Vitruvius, and we should also acknowledge that, regardless of the precise definition, *any* attempt at identifying a ‘universal’ human necessarily glosses over the enormous range of human diversity. Such supposedly unifying acts of setting a standard inevitably lead to reactions ranging from mild disappointment to outright trauma whenever somebody either discovers on their own that they diverge from it, or when others ascribe harmful meanings to such discrepancies from the outside (with the severity of the impact depending on the degree of one’s difference and the authority of the model). Still, women are not as categorically excluded from Vitruvius’ original definition as they are from Leonardo’s more specifically gendered visualization. In her contribution to this issue, Kathrin Winter makes this same point implicitly, but nevertheless quite vividly, by imagining as female the reader who gains an instinctive understanding of proportionality through the abstract Vitruvian *corpus*’ appeal to her own sensorimotor system and by measuring herself and others against the reference it provides.

In these respects, Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man* with its focus, as Elizabeth Merrill notes, on the male genitalia constitutes a notable re-shifting of emphasis from the relevant passages of *De architectura*. Craig Williams observes in his discussion of Vitruvius’ comparatively ‘low rhetoricity of gender’ that the source text does not in fact mention the sexual organs at all.<sup>13</sup> Adding them at the center of the geometrical square and—as Indra Kagis McEwen has noted—lifting the *homo bene figuratus* up from his back into a more assertive standing position,<sup>14</sup> Leonardo and other Renaissance artists have decidedly masculinized the Vitruvian ideal.

Apparently, then, Rosales’ *Virtuous Woman* could in certain ways be seen as providing a balance or, as it were, its own kind of proportionality to the reception of an ancient Roman author who did not regard the female form as (much) less relevant to temple construction than its male counterpart. The implications of this claim are thrown into sharper relief by a passage in book four of *De architectura* that has not yet been addressed by the preceding papers. Here, Vitruvius discusses the etiology of Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns, as well as the proper application of human proportionality to these architectural features. The

---

12. Cf. Williams (2016), 238f., who notes that Vitruvius uses the ambiguously gendered *homo* four times in the passage and in preference to such terms as *uir*, *uirilis*, *mas*, or *masculus*. Similar observations apply to Vitruvius’ ‘anthropology’ (*De arch.* 2.1), where the topic is the development of *homines* in general, rather than of men and/or women in particular (Williams [2016], 237).

13. Williams (2016), 239.

14. McEwen (2003), 157–60.

starting point, more explicitly this time, is a man's body that, as Andrew Riggsby has observed, most directly fits the underlying 6:1 ratio endorsed in the *homo bene figuratus* passage.<sup>15</sup> The mythological hero Dorus serves as a namesake for this first design, which—after a false start—began to exhibit in buildings the proportionality and strength and elegance of a masculine body' (*dorica columna uirilis corporis proportionem et firmitatem et uenustatem in aedificiis praestare coepit*, 4.1.6; cf. 1.2.5). Soon, however, the Greek builders 'seeking an appearance of a new kind ... transitioned to a womanly grace' (*quaerentes noui generis speciem ... ad muliebre transtulerunt gracilitatem*, 4.1.7).<sup>16</sup> The fluting on the second, Ionic shaft resembles robes or *stolae* typical of married women (*matronali more*) while the volutes in the capital 'hang down like curly locks of hair on the right and left' (*uolutas uti capillamento concrispatos cincinnos praependentes dextra ac sinistra*, 4.1.7). In these respects, Vitruvius renders the column explicitly feminine. It is along similar lines that, for the third type, the Greek inventors turn to 'an imitation of the slenderness of a young woman' (*uirginalis habet gracilitatis imitationem*, 4.1.8; cf. again 1.2.5) and a capital based—in a tale of almost Ovidian transformation—on a dead Corinthian *uirgo*'s abandoned basket, overgrown by acanthus flowers.

As Kristina Milnor has pointed out, the Doric and Ionic orders are here imagined in human terms as parents (*est procreatum*, 4.1.3) of the Corinthian, which 'by the time of Vitruvius' writing ... was the one most beloved in Roman architecture, so that the story of the orders contains a strong sense of progress from the (Greek) past to the (Roman) present.'<sup>17</sup> Reconceiving this narrative in light of Marcie Persyn's reflections in this issue about the proportionality inherent in Vitruvius' code-switching between Greek and Latin terminology, we can speak of a balance between Roman and non-Roman elements that presents the architectural order most emblematic of the Augustan regime as based on the body of a *uirgo*.

What emerges, then, from the triangulation of Vitruvius, Leonardo, and Rosales is a distinct duality inherent in our assessment of the treatment of gender in the presentation of the original *corpus hominis bene figurati*. On the one hand, the above reading of the creation of Corinthian columns can serve as further evidence that Vitruvius' architectural aesthetic does not prefer the male to the female body in as obvious a manner as the Renaissance depictions of 'well-formed' humanity to which Rosales' painting reacts. On the other hand, we must also acknowledge that Vitruvius' assumptions about gender and sexuality still are binary, reductive, and ableist in their stereotypical application of what the Roman author believes to be appropriate bodily proportions and sartorial choices for a perfectly formed man or woman. Just as significantly, he does

15. Riggsby (2016), 286 n.7.

16. The noun *uenustas* with its feminine connotations anticipates this shift even in the description of the Doric column.

17. Milnor (2008), 97.



not portray women as independently sentient beings, but as objects of men's visual contemplation, artistic appreciation, and the writing of *ecphraseis*. One is reminded of Ovid's tale of Pygmalion (*Met.* 10.243–97), and its depiction of a sculptor who shapes a feminine form for his own erotic enjoyment.

This realization brings me to the architect or sculptor whom Vitruvius credits with the invention of the Corinthian column. The innovator in question is one 'Callimachus, who on account of the elegance and subtlety of his work with marble had been named *catatechnos* ("artful") by the Athenians' (*Callimachus qui propter elegantiam et subtilitatem artis marmoreae ab Atheniensibus catatechnos fuerat nominatus*, 4.1.10). This Callimachus apparently is not the famed Alexandrian poet, but many among Vitruvius' Augustan readership would presumably have thought of that Callimachus as well when studying this passage. After all, the references to *elegantia*, *subtilitas*, and *gracilitas* recall the programmatic vocabulary of the Hellenistic compositions that were *en vogue* in Rome at the time. Vitruvius thus suggests that he participates in some of the same artistic and metapoetic discourses that also define the works of Horace, Propertius, or Vergil and prefigure the aforementioned Ovid.<sup>18</sup> I would submit in particular that Vitruvius is alluding to the Callimachean sophistication typical of contemporary Latin poetry and implies that its tenets find a reified, three-dimensional expression in the architectural features of Augustan Rome—and especially in the Corinthian columns—that *De architectura* describes and endorses. Callimachus the poet is provided with an alter ego in *Callimachus catatechnos*, and, while the two Callimachuses are different people, they serve as parallel figureheads for two 'disciplines' whose aesthetic objectives Vitruvius presents as aligning both with one another and with Augustan imperialism (to the possible chagrin, one might imagine, of a Vergil or Ovid). Most significantly for my present purposes, both Callimachuses are men, and Vitruvius presents the creation of works in either area—architectural/sculptural and literary—as a male domain.<sup>19</sup>

## Gender and Imperialism

Vitruvius' *homo bene figuratus* was less obviously gendered, then, than Leonardo's visualization suggests; in this respect, the original 'well-formed human' does not stand in as strict of an opposition to the ideal expressed in Rosales' *Virtuous Woman* as the works of Vitruvius' Renaissance successors may lead us to expect. It nevertheless remains true that Vitruvius foregrounds the interests

18. For *De arch.*'s embeddedness in the literary discourses of the late republic and early empire, see also and especially McEwen (2003); Romano (2016); Nichols (2017); and Oksanish (2019).

19. See Milnor (2008), 94–139, and Williams (2016). The latter discusses Vitruvius' description of Artemisia of Halicarnassus (*De arch.* 2.18.14–16) as the exception that proves the rule. On Artemisia, see now Kim (2022).

and perspectives of men, that his celebration of the female form does not extend to the female mind, and that he figures his own craft of author-architect as masculine. This brings me to a number of further, closely related ways in which *De architectura* uses contemplation of the human body to participate, in a very direct manner, in the kind of male imperial projects that Rosales' *Virtuous Woman* so fiercely condemns, and hence to the area where the contrast between the first-century Latin text and the twenty-first century painting is at its most pronounced.

Most significantly, *De architectura*'s obvious aesthetic appreciation for the male and female body does not stop its author from recommending representations of the human form in the built environment that explicitly advocate for the violent integration both of non-Romans and of women into imperial hierarchies. In one especially famous passage, Vitruvius explains to the Roman reader the use of columns fashioned to resemble *stola*-wearing Caryatids and defeated Persians, such as were on display in the Forum of Augustus. These weight-bearing statues underscore that enslavement awaits the emperor's enemies and present this repressive treatment as justified. To begin with the former pillar type, Vitruvius' narration of the backstory to which the design alludes claims that the city of Carya had sided with the Persians during their attack on Greece in the fifth century B.C.E.<sup>20</sup> The victorious Greeks subsequently led '[the Caryans]' married women into enslavement, nor did they allow them to take off their *stolae* and other matrimonial attire, so that they would not be presented together [with the men] in a triumph but—providing an eternal warning through their enslavement and pressed down by severe reproach—would be seen enduring punishment as stand-ins for their city' (*matronas eorum in seruitutem abduxerunt, nec sunt passi stolas neque ornatus matronales deponere, uti non una triumpho ducerentur, sed aeterno seruitutis exemplo graui contumelia pressae poenas pendere uiderentur pro ciuitate*, 1.1.5).

By making anachronistic reference, here, to Roman triumphal practices and employing the markedly Roman word *stola* to describe the women's garments, Vitruvius points to the Greek story's applicability in Rome. The lesson is that sculptural representations of the Caryatids—be it in the Forum of Augustus or elsewhere—are meant to suggest to the viewer that (the) women deserve a subordinate position. As Kristina Milnor has convincingly argued, this presentation aligns with Vitruvius' implicit argument throughout *De architectura* that women ought to work in the Roman *domus* to prop up the family of which they are a part, and that this function moves the *materfamilias* closer to an item of furniture, a part of the decoration, and a cog in the domestic machine than to an equal of the *paterfamilias*, the head of the household in whose interest the entire *familia* operates.<sup>21</sup>

20. See most recently Oksanish (2019), 77–88, for the historical inaccuracies Vitruvius introduces in the relevant narratives in order to better serve his rhetorical objectives.

21. Milnor (2008), 94–139, esp. 109–14.

Add to this that, as Marden Nichols proposes, the transference of the Caryatid design from Greece to the Tiber celebrates Rome's own imperialism as a continuation and culmination of similar practices across the Mediterranean, including the Greeks' defeat of the Persians.<sup>22</sup> This Vitruvian narrative rationalizes and even endorses the subjugation of those who, like the Caryatids before them, suffer oppression and thereby prop up the empire both figuratively and, when it comes to an anthropomorphic column, also literally. In the case of the pillars resembling defeated Persians—i.e., Vitruvius' second example—the justification of enslavement and repression is applied broadly to all who are culturally Othered. Vitruvius speaks of victorious Spartans who, 'after [the Persians'] arrogance had been punished with justified violence' (*superbia meritis contumeliis punita*), 'designed statues of the captives in their barbarian clothing ... as roof-supports' (*captiuorum simulacra barbarico uestis ornatu ... sustinentia tectum conlocauerunt*, 1.1.6). According to *De architectura*, this narrative of warranted repression encoded in statuary also applies to similar architectural features in Rome, such as the Augustan forum. Here, columns representing sartorially Othered foreigners propping up ceilings celebrate the city's rule over the wider Mediterranean world. On the one hand, they rile up Roman citizens to embrace and defend their own dominance (cast in the propagandistic language of 'freedom': *uti ... ciues ... ad defendendam libertatem essent parati*, 1.1.6). On the other hand, these pillars warn the oppressed to accept their exploitation in support of metaphorical and actual structures that rely on them yet are much bigger and allegedly more important than themselves (*hostes horrescerent timore*, 'that the enemies might shudder in fear', 1.1.6).

Keeping in mind such literal applications of the human form to architectural celebrations of imperialist practices, we can view Rosales' *Virtuous Woman* as a decolonial attack on Vitruvius that foregrounds those people whom *De architectura* places at the receiving end of Roman violence. Rosales' *mulier bene figurata* is a bloodied Caryatid who has borne the weight of empire since at least the times of Vitruvius and his Greek models. She has made possible the supposed cultural advances for which texts like *De architectura* have more commonly credited history's conquerors, and she insists confidently that she be seen. Consequently, she is portrayed in the same standing position as the anthropomorphic columns of ancient Rome and the Renaissance's sketches of idealized humanity. At the same time, and in a notable contrast, the Black woman's outstretched arms and, most strikingly, her spread legs also recall the Vitruvian human's original positioning flat on the back, pinned to the ground by the navel in a manner that evokes the realities of rape and sexual violence. Her positioning may even allude to childbirth as well, thus recalling the mother-Orisha Yemaya in addition to Oshun, which adds a further layer of duality and complexity: just as the woman

---

22. Nichols (2017), 30–2.

herself is both injured and emboldened, so the act of giving birth could be read either as an effect of gendered oppression or as a source of empowerment.<sup>23</sup>

Rosales' *Virtuous Woman*, in sum, is the pillar that has carried the worlds of men. Yet she is also an active participant in history in her own right, and she has willingly and unwillingly born(e) the people who have made history and/or been marginalized by it. To them, she remains connected by the navel—a remnant of the umbilical cord and a reminder of her capacity to give birth that is found, significantly, in the center both of the geometrical circle and of the painting as a whole.<sup>24</sup> In this context, the Black woman's nakedness may appear to enhance the vulnerability of her position, yet when read through the lens of *De architectura* it may in fact demonstrate that she has been freed from the forced marital adornment of the Caryatids. Having shed the *stola*, she challenges the viewer to face the oppression inflicted upon her and celebrates the moral, spiritual, and physical beauty embodied in her dark skin tone and femininity.

There appears to be a clear contrast, then, between the top-down perspective on Roman imperialism provided by *De architectura* and the bottom-up alternative view on global modes of oppression reflected in Rosales' *Virtuous Woman*. Yet much as was the case for Vitruvius' treatment of gender, this second, deceptively neat divergence likewise bears further nuancing. What complicates any reading of *De architectura* as fully aligned with dominant perspectives is Vitruvius' own potential emergence from less privileged strata of Roman society. In the preface to his first book—amid much enthusiastic praise for Augustus' imperial project and a prominent reference to the support the author enjoyed from the emperor's sister, Octavia—Vitruvius famously describes himself as having been 'known' (*notus*) to Caesar and as having been 'put in charge', more recently, 'of the building of *balistae* and *scorpiones* and the repair of other catapults' (*ad apparationem balistarum et scorpionum reliquorumque tormentorum refectionem fui praesto*, 1.praef.2). This brief piece of autobiography provides further evidence for Vitruvius' involvement in the expansion of empire by pointing to his role in constructing military machinery. Yet at the same time, as Nicholas Purcell has argued, the passage also suggests that the writer was a *scriba armamentarius* and hence stemmed from the apparitorial class.<sup>25</sup> This reading does not make Vitruvius less complicit in Rome's and Augustus' imperial enterprise, but it does place him among the empire's less privileged subjects.

*Apparitores*, after all, were public servants of decidedly diverse backgrounds, ranging from men of the equestrian class to many others who were formerly enslaved. Marden Nichols has recently revisited the question of Vitruvius'

23. Contrast the focus, in Leonardo's sketch, on 'man's regenerative capacity, his position as both an agent and a result of procreation' (Merrill in this issue, my emphasis).

24. As Vitruvius himself had put it, 'the precise center of the body, by nature, is the navel' (*corporis centrum medium naturaliter est umbilicus*, 3.1.3).

25. Purcell (1983), 155f.

status in detail, reviving the suggestion that he may have been a freedman and noting especially the similarities between his authorial self-fashioning and that of Horace.<sup>26</sup> The latter famously describes himself as the ‘son of a freedman father’ (*libertino patre natus*, *Sat.* 1.6.45, 46; *Epist.* 1.20.20), and he likewise served as an apparitorial *scriba*. Both authors underwent their intellectual formation in the transitional period between republic and principate (taking opposite sides in the civil wars), and they seem particularly concerned with dispelling suspicions that they are driven by greed or an undue desire for upward mobility. Such, Nichols submits, were elite prejudices against *apparitores*, and part of *De architectura*’s mission would accordingly have been to validate the writer and his profession in the eyes of his social superiors (a task that, we may note with Elizabeth Merrill’s contribution in mind, appears not to have been fully achieved until the Renaissance).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Dan-el Padilla Peralta notes that ‘the practice of appointing specific communities to supply Rome with ... *scribae* is emblematic of the imperial fantasy of converting the subordinated into instruments for the aggregation of knowledge. However, this fantasy reached fruition not only through positive accumulation, but through systematic demolition as well.’<sup>28</sup> Vitruvius’ *De architectura* can be seen as one such product of imperial knowledge accumulation combined with epistemicide: it gathers information relevant to a Roman (elite) readership even as it erases other modes in which subdued communities—present in the text as Caryatids and Persians and, perhaps, the author himself—would have viewed the world.

It is worth remembering in this context that the only name securely attested for the author in the manuscripts is, precisely, ‘Vitruvius’. The full appellation of Marcus or Lucius Vitruvius Pollio is, in the case of the *cognomen*, very likely a conflation with a separate author, potentially Asinius Pollio.<sup>29</sup> The *praenomen*, in turn, is deduced from epigraphical parallels. Consequently, the oft-noted reference to a freedman *architectus* named Lucius Vitruvius Cerdo on the arch of the Gabii in Verona (*Lucius Vitruvius Lucii libertus Cerdo architectus*, *CIL* 5.3464) might point directly to the writer of *De architectura*, adding a further building to his portfolio beyond the *basilica* at Fano mentioned at *De architectura* 5.1.<sup>30</sup> Even if Cerdo is not ‘the’ Vitruvius, his existence still suggests that the author, whether *ingenuus* or *libertus*, was part of an extended *gens* that had the architectural trade as a signature occupation both among its freeborn members and among

26. Nichols (2017), 42–82; cf. also 180–94 and Baldwin (1990).

27. For examples of banausic prejudice against architects, see the parody of the *architectus* Cyrus at *Cic. Att.* 2.3.2 or the evaluation of different professions at *Off.* 1.150f. When Vitruvius in book one famously models the encyclopedic training of the architect on the similarly expansive education of the orator, he might, as it were, be seen as using Cicero against Cicero, employing *De or.* to counter *Att.* and *Off.* Pace Oksanish (2016), 119–43.

28. Padilla Peralta (2020), 64.

29. Granger (1931), 2:xvii f.; Baldwin (1990), 430.

30. Nichols (2017), 43; Oksanish (2019), 32 n.5. Zucca (2009), 103f., tentatively dates the inscription to the late-Augustan or early-Tiberian era, which would be a bit too late for Cerdo to be the author of *De architectura*.

those who were enslaved or freed. The author of *De architectura* might very well have fit the latter description.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps we ought also to keep in mind that Vitruvius may have had a connection to Africa. In 1961, Paul Thielscher called attention to an epigraphic reference mentioning the building efforts of a Marcus Vitruvius Mamurra, who had seen to the construction of two arches in the Numidian town of Thibilis (*Marcus Vitruvius Mamurra arcus sua pecunia fecit*, CIL 8.18913). The inscription led Thielscher to suggest that this Vitruvius Mamurra was the writer of *De architectura* and that he was identical to the infamous associate of Caesar's whom Catullus attacks as a *mentula* in his poetry. This thesis has been widely rejected.<sup>32</sup> Most significantly for my present purposes, Raimondo Zucca has observed that the verb *fecit* more likely indicates that Vitruvius Mamurra gave the order for the arches' creation than that he was himself an architect; in any case, the inscription appears to stem from the second century C.E.<sup>33</sup> For these reasons, Vitruvius Mamurra can probably be ruled out as the writer of *De architectura*, but he may still have been a relation of the author. The Vitruvii maintained a strong foothold in Formia in Italy, but their presence in Africa is similarly pronounced. Zucca notes that as many as seven members of the Vitruvian *gens* are epigraphically attested in Thibilis alone, a fact that he connects to the establishment of a Caesarian-era colony in Numidian Cirta under Publius Sittius.<sup>34</sup> Pierre Ruffel and Jean Soubiran provide inscriptional evidence for as many as twelve Vitruvii across Numidia and an additional seven in *Africa proconsularis*.<sup>35</sup> In this context, the mention at *De architectura* 8.3.25 of a 'Gaius Julius son of Masinissa' (*Gaius Iulius Masinissae filius*)—a name evoking Numidian kings—among the author's acquaintances provides further circumstantial evidence linking Vitruvius' *De architectura* to Africa.<sup>36</sup>

Vitruvius, whether freedman or not, might accordingly be connected to an area that was at some distance from the centers of power, and to which *De architectura* refers as 'the parent and nurse of wild beasts' (*Africa parens et nutrix ferarum bestiarum*, 8.3.24). Notably, the inhabitants of North Africa are described throughout Latin literature as displaying a darker skin tone than the Roman norm.<sup>37</sup> If Vitruvius was originally from the area, then he may himself have fit that description. If this was not the case and/or if he did align with the epidermic norm of Augustan Rome, we still ought to remember that—as I

31. One wonders how Vitruvius' callous observations regarding the decreased monetary value of enslaved pregnant women (2.9.1) relate to his own legal status. Did he experience the slave markets from the perspective of the enslaved, or of the enslavers, or of both at different points in life?

32. See esp. Ruffel and Soubiran (1962) in response to Thielscher (1961).

33. Zucca (2009), 97–101.

34. Zucca (2009), 101.

35. Ruffel and Soubiran (1962), 174–6.

36. See again Baldwin (1990).

37. e.g., Plaut. *Poen.* 1112f.; ps.-Verg. *Moretum* 33; Manilius 4.728–31; Seneca, *De ira* 26.3. On the depiction of Scybale in the *Moretum*, see Haley (1993) and (2009). For the Roman comic evidence, see Hanses (forthcoming). Cf. also Cic. *Scaur.* 19 with Čulík-Baird and Hanses (2024).



noted at the start—this norm was not ‘White’ in the modern sense, but significantly darker. Whether personally from Africa or not, Vitruvius may, at least to a modern viewer, quite plausibly have been closer to Rosales’ *Virtuous Woman* in terms of skin color than to Leonardo’s version of the White-presenting *Vitruvian Man*.

## Imperialism and Color Prejudice

As I thus turn to the role of regional origin and color prejudice in Vitruvius’ conception of ideal corporeality, it bears repeating that modern racial markers such as ‘Black’, ‘White’, or ‘Person of Color’ are culturally specific. They would have been unintelligible to Vitruvius or his contemporaries and should not be applied to him or them uncritically. As Shelley Haley explains, the ancient world may not have been as free from color prejudice as Frank M. Snowden, Jr. argued years ago,<sup>38</sup> but the Romans’ preconceptions nevertheless were different from those of the modern era. ‘Skin color’, writes Haley, ‘was a factor in [the Romans’] formulation of a social construction of *difference*. But it was one of many factors [that also included] gender, class, and culture’<sup>39</sup> and do not map easily onto today’s conventions.

For the purposes of this paper, we should note in particular the Romans’ conceptual centering not of Europe, but of what they called the *mare nostrum*—the Mediterranean Sea, that is, which connects Europe to Africa and Asia. In the first chapter of the sixth book of *De architectura*, Vitruvius explicitly places Rome at the core of this domain, and, while he does voice a deleterious understanding of the people off to the far north and far south that rationalizes their oppression by the centrally placed Romans (see esp. 6.1.11), his prejudices do not reflect the White/non-White dichotomy of the modern era. Instead, he and several other ancient writers endorse a tripartite system, marking, as Jackie Murray puts it, ‘peoples with very dark *and* very light complexions as morally inferior to themselves and [locating] them on a continuum at opposite extremes from their own light to medium brown complexion’, i.e., the somatic norm, in the center.<sup>40</sup> Developing a theory of environmental (rather than biological) determinism that harks back to such predecessors as the Hippocratic *Airs, Water, Places*, the works of Posidonius, and Aristotle’s *Politics* (1327b), yet adapts these sources to fit Rome’s imperial needs,<sup>41</sup> Vitruvius submits specifically that tall, light-skinned northerners with straight, reddish hair (*inmanibus corporibus, candidis coloribus, derecto capillo et rufo*, 6.1.3) tend to be courageous but intellectually

38. Snowden (1970), (1983).

39. Haley (2009), 27.

40. Murray (2021), 137, emphasis mine. Cf. Thompson (1989) and Dee (2003/2004).

41. See Thompson (1989), 101–4; Isaac (2004), 83–5; Romano (2016), 349–51; Kennedy (2018) for Vitruvius’ theory of environmental determinism, its Greek roots, and later receptions.

sluggish, while the shorter, dark-skinned, curly-haired, and black-eyed people (*breuioribus corporibus, colore fusco, crispo capillo, oculis nigris*, 4) who grew up south of the Mediterranean are smart but lacking in fortitude (cf. also 6.1.9f.). Therefore, and in line with his broader appreciation for *mediocritas*, he finds it best to be a Roman in the middle, both geographically and chromatically, between *candidus* ('light') and *fuscus* ('dark').<sup>42</sup>

We are probably never going to know with certainty if Vitruvius passes judgment on the *candidi* and *fusci* because he himself fit his times' middling ideal, or if he diverged from the norm he proposes. If the latter suggestion is true, then Vitruvius' somatic systematization would be expressing an internalized prejudice that also targets himself (an observation that, if he did have a connection to northern Africa, might apply equally to his aforementioned comment describing the area as a home of wild beasts). Either way, it is worth noting that—a few decades before the likely time of *De architectura*'s publication—Cicero explicitly connected proportionality of the limbs with 'sweetness' of skin color in a definition of corporeal beauty.<sup>43</sup> It is therefore not just in *De architectura* that bodily proportions and skin color *both* feature in conceptions of the ideal *corpus*. The ten illustrations that originally accompanied *De architectura* have long been lost, and they appear, in any case, not to have focused on the well-shaped human body. Still, the above considerations make it seem likely that, if Vitruvius had himself undertaken to provide a visualization of the *corpus hominis bene figurati* that included a presentation of skin pigmentation, he would have chosen a complexion that reproduces the middling epidermic norm that he openly celebrates. His rendition would accordingly not have been *fuscus*, yet it would also not have been anywhere near as *candidus* as the sketch that Leonardo produced a millennium and a half later with different presumptions in mind.

Indeed, the Renaissance's versions of the *Vitruvian Man*, as pale as the pages on which they appear, reflect a different era's and a differently delineated region's assumptions about flawless humanity. To add to Elizabeth Merrill's discussion of the intellectual world of Leonardo and his contemporaries, and to paraphrase the work of scholars like Lloyd Thompson, Madeline Caviness, and Geraldine Heng, the Renaissance sketches presuppose Medieval European Christianity's association of the color white with saintliness and courtliness (and, inversely, of darkness with sin and the devil) alongside a re-shifting of cultural focus to the

42. On a related note, a broad selection of ancient sources—ranging from Greek vase painting to Roman love poetry—employ dark skin tones to indicate men and masculine traits, while light ones point to women and feminine attributes. In these contexts, references to skin color gradations could be used to undercut or to prop up individuals, but the primary reference was to their conformity with gender norms, not to regional origins. A recent overview of the evidence is at Whitmarsh (2018). See also and esp. Eaverly (2013) for Egyptian influences on Greek practices.

43. *Tusc.* 4.31: *corporis est quaedam apta figura membrorum cum coloris quadam suavitate eaque dicitur pulcritudo* ('There is a certain proper form of the limbs combined with a certain sweetness of skin colour, and this is called beauty'); cf. also *Tusc.* 5.46: *color suavis*; *Opt. Gen.* 8: *suavitas coloris*. For color prejudice in Cicero, see Čulík-Baird (2022) and Čulík-Baird and Hanses (2024).

north.<sup>44</sup> As the paint adorning ancient statuary faded with the passing of centuries, and growing prejudices against darker skin colors aligned with anti-Semitism and Islamophobia especially during and after the crusades, these influences contributed to the creation of Whiteness as a somatic ideal, a trend that would later be further aggravated by—and provide rationalizations for—the enslavement of Black Africans in the Americas. The emergent White supremacist systems repurposed the building styles described in *De architectura* to project their own dominance, and they selectively mined deliberations on environmental determinism, including Vitruvius and his negative statements about *fusci*, to prop up their anti-Black beliefs. Yet these appropriations conveniently ignore the Roman writer's remarks about the *fusci*'s intelligence and the shortcomings of light-skinned northerners.<sup>45</sup> As far as Leonardo da Vinci is concerned, his participation in this development, just like his deliberate masculinization of the *homo bene figuratus*, is not accidental. Rather, he actively foregrounds the paleness of his idealized human's skin by underlaying the sketch with crosshatch shadings (see fig. 5.3). The result, given the outspread arms, is an evocation of the Christian savior as a 'White' man showing none of the signs of physical suffering so prominent in Rosales' painting.<sup>46</sup> Even more to the point, Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* may have been a self-portrait,<sup>47</sup> and hence constitute a presentation of the artist himself as a divine figure that celebrates his own conformity with his time's somatic norm. From that norm's descendant—the modern definition, that is, of Whiteness—the skin tone for which Vitruvius expresses a preference is excluded alongside that of the women of Harmonia Rosales' paintings, whom the artist has described as 'people of color ... in their purest darkest form.'<sup>48</sup> After all, modern social constructions of Whiteness are based in the aforementioned, artificial, dualistic opposition of White and non-White that subsumes all Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color in the second category. Vitruvius himself posited a separate, third category 'in the middle' that, it bears underscoring, provided its own basis for discrimination based on somatic difference. Still, that category too would have seemed 'non-White' to modern viewers conditioned to focus on racial dichotomies. At least in terms of skin color, then, and adhering strictly to admittedly anachronistic modern conventions, Vitruvius' *homo bene figuratus* might be read as being closer to Rosales' *Virtuous Woman* than to Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*.

### Vitruvius' Body

As we thus conclude our deliberations on the degree of Vitruvius' own participation in the presentation of harmful and reductive corporal ideals, we should

44. Thompson (1989), 101–4; Caviness (2008); Heng (2018), esp. 181–257.

45. See n.41 above.

46. Compare, again, Merrill in this issue on Christian resonances in Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*.

47. Isaacson (2017), 157.

48. Mercado (2018), 156. Discussing this artistic decision as a decolonizing move, Elizabeth Pérez (2022) notes 'the exception of the divine twins, or Ibeji, who are shown as having albinism'.

recall that *De architectura* asks the reader to visualize not only the *homo bene figuratus*, but also the author himself, which can add a final, further element of nuance to our triangular comparison of the original *homo bene figuratus*, Leonardo's visualization, and Rosales' *Virtuous Woman*. According to the preface to book nine of *De architectura*, those who peruse the works of Ennius, Accius, Lucretius, Cicero, or Varro will make each writer appear in front of their mental eye 'as if face-to-face' (*uelut coram*, 9.praef.17). We are clearly meant to apply the same method to *De architectura*, yet significantly, and unlike Leonardo, Vitruvius depicts his own body as in no way 'well-formed'. Instead, the author asks us to summon in our minds an outwardly flawed *corpus* that nevertheless contains knowledge of exceptional quality. He does so explicitly in the preface of book two, where the Greek city planner Dinocrates impresses Alexander the Great with a physical beauty that conceals serious defects in his professional practice. Vitruvius, by contrast, is not outwardly beautiful: 'Nature, Emperor, has not gifted me with height, age has disfigured my features, my health withdrawn my vigor' (*mihi autem, imperator, staturam non tribuit natura, faciem deformauit aetas, ualetudo detraxit uires*, 2.praef.4). Nevertheless, he expresses confidence that he 'will obtain commendation' (*perueniam ad commendationem*) through his 'writings' (*scripta*)—or, as Tom Geue argues, through his reliance on the writings of others—and through his expert command of the 'subject matter' (*scientia*) that he has internalized.

Geue suggests that Vitruvius here presents himself as superior to Dinocrates precisely because of the latter's 'perfect physical form' and 'aristocratic class position', which keep him from understanding what a city and the human body actually need for sustenance. This proposition aligns well with the argument that Vitruvius was of lower social status than the elite audience for which he wrote. Relying on the support of others—or gathering, as I would put it, varied resources from across the empire into his only-superficially flawed *corpus*, thereby turning himself into a representation of his and his social equals' contributions to the Augustan project—Vitruvius formulates a collectivist concept of authorship that clashes with the individualism of the Roman elite and adds further complexity to *De architectura*'s overt endorsements of repressing conquered populations. Not unlike a statue of subdued women or Caryatids, Vitruvius too has suffered repression and yet he presents himself as doing his part in supporting the imperial structures of which he has become a part. On a related note, Marden Nichols and John Oksanish have discussed the contrast in *De architectura* between those who cultivate their bodies and those who work on perfecting their character, which issues a challenge not only to Dinocrates, but also to athletes and especially to the honored generals of the late republic and early empire.<sup>49</sup> With them, Vitruvius engages in a sustained form of competition as he, too, attempts to immortalize

---

49. Nichols (2017), 63–8; Oksanish (2019), 144–84.

Roman rule for the benefit of Augustus, albeit by different, non-elite means that do not rely on his own, physical body but on the power of the mind.

Not in the assessment of temples, then, but apparently in the evaluation of human beings, the rejection of exterior beauty à la Dinocrates in favor of an interior virtue à la Vitruvius constitutes a defining component of *De architectura*. One of the most vivid expressions of this idea comes in the preface to book three, immediately preceding the passage on the *homo bene figuratus*. Here, Vitruvius wishes that the human body came with open windows granting a clear view of the soul—and, as Giovanna Laterza underscores,<sup>50</sup> of a person's professional expertise—which would provide a sounder basis for judging human excellence than physical appearances do. This imagery links Vitruvius to Socrates, another thinker who is remembered for his interior rather than exterior splendor. As Daniel Anderson discusses in this issue, the human with *pectora fenestrata et aperta* ('a chest with an open window', 3.praef.1) provides 'a negative of the well-formed body', an alternative figuration of a human being connected to (and, in this case, fused with) architectural features that reveal a kind of beauty that is expressly non-corporeal.<sup>51</sup>

Significantly, Vitruvius' vision of the human with a window in the breast undercuts the 'well-shaped body' as a reliable measure of human worth at the precise moment when we are about to read of its usefulness as a model for architectural perfection. Unlike Rosales, Vitruvius may not mount a straightforward attack on the traditional definitions of physical beauty on which, as Anderson has shown, he directly and indirectly relies. Rather, Vitruvius accepts and refines conventional aesthetic ideals as he combines the squares of Greek statuary design and the circles of Greek cosmological thinking into a geometrical norm of human physicality that is assumed to correspond to the larger universe. This norm he then applies to temple construction. Yet finding his own body to fall short of these same standards, Vitruvius also plays up the distinction between outward and inward beauty that, as Anderson notes, was likewise already present in the tradition as early as Simonides. Rather than side with those who, like Polykleitos in his *Canon*, express a belief that corporeal proportionality indicates a virtuous person, Vitruvius finds a sculpted body reminiscent of the Doryphoros—*bene figuratum* though he declares it to be—less important than the qualities of one's character. He will have us know that different rules apply to people than do to buildings, and that (somewhat paradoxically) the *corpus hominis bene figurati* should serve as a measure of architectural proportion rather than of human virtue. Accordingly, as Elizabeth Merrill highlights and as I already noted above, Vitruvius makes the 'well-proportioned human' decidedly passive—pinning 'him' down, as it were, with the compass. Kathrin Winter notes that the

---

50. Laterza (2018).

51. Laterza (2018) notes that this shift involves a redefinition on the part of Vitruvius of the noun *uirtus* ('manliness'). This, of course, is the very term that is echoed in the title of Rosales' painting in the further act of reclaiming and refocusing that I discussed above.

proportional person can, in our imagination, even be reduced in size to fit into a hand, making ‘him’ easier to contemplate, and less imposing.

Returning with these observations in mind to the juxtaposition between Vitruvius’ *homo bene figuratus*, Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man*, and Rosales’ *Virtuous Woman*, we can note that Leonardo’s sketch visualizes not only Whiteness and maleness but also a beauty of the ‘prime’ of age that is emphatically exterior, and that the self-declaredly aged Vitruvius (2.praef.4, see above) described at length even as he questioned its reliability as a measure of moral worth. We are dealing here with another significant incompatibility between Vitruvius’ text and Leonardo’s visualization. Rosales’ ideal, by contrast, is feminine and reflective of People of Color, and, while in the painting under examination in this paper she likewise focuses on youth, some of her other works, including the aforementioned *Creation of God*, also portray the beauty of aged bodies (albeit not in the nude). Just as significantly, Rosales’ definition of beauty encompasses not only the exterior but also the interior. Moral and physical magnificence align in the *Virtuous Woman*, and the painting’s title implies that the same does not apply to Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man*. Interestingly, Vitruvius might have concurred with certain aspects of the latter suggestion, in that he discusses the exterior beauty of the *homo bene figuratus* and the interior excellence of his own elderly self as two models that remain distinct from one another in *De architectura*. Unlike Rosales, he does not bring the two ideals into alignment, expressing instead his regret that the human body lacks windows by which to glance into the soul.

## Conclusion

The place that Vitruvius holds between Leonardo and Rosales thus emerges as a complicated one. Like Leonardo, Vitruvius did consider the male form the aesthetic norm, even if to a lesser degree than the Renaissance man whose more specifically gendered visual illustration of the ‘well-proportioned (hu)man’ has—as Elizabeth Merrill observes—displaced Vitruvius’ text in *De architectura*’s broader reception, saturating since the 1950s—as Michele Kennerly and Jennifer K.L. Buchan have explored—even the popular culture of the twentieth and now the twenty-first century. Indeed, Vitruvius’ architectural applications of the human form border on the jingoistic and are sexist even and especially where they express appreciation for the feminine form. When Rosales figures her *Virtuous Woman* as a response to, and refutation of, imperialist and androcentrist practices that reach back through Leonardo to Vitruvius and beyond, she has the text of *De architectura* to back her up. Still, Vitruvius—though an enforcer of Roman power—may also have been on the receiving end of it. While he outspokenly endorses many practices and prejudices of the culturally dominant, he may at least in part have been motivated by a desire to improve his standing among elites who frowned upon people of his background as a potential



*apparitor*, a potential freedman, and a man potentially from Africa. One area in which, at least to the modern viewer thinking in the terms of the twenty-first century, he really does seem closer to Rosales than to Leonardo is in his understanding of the aesthetics of skin color. Here, Vitruvius notes a preference for a hue that, to this same modern viewer, would indicate a Person of Color. Nevertheless, he retains a prejudiced stance against those who are of much lighter or of much darker complexion than his posited standard. This is incompatible with Rosales' celebration of people with darker skin colors than the Vitruvian middle. Similarly, when it comes to the moral qualities supplementing or even replacing contemporary norms of physical beauty as measures of human excellence, the views expressed in the *Virtuous Woman* echo certain aspects of Vitruvius' text, and the painting would seem to provide a more forcefully negative reaction to Leonardo's sketch of the *Vitruvian Man* than to the *homo bene figuratus*' original expression in the pages of *De architectura*. That said, Rosales proposes a new standard of physical excellence in alignment with moral virtue that eluded Vitruvius, suggesting as she does that it is not among the dominant (as depicted in the Doryphoros or Leonardo's sketch) but rather among the historically oppressed that physical beauty can coincide with a morally excellent mind.

Having looked back, then, at the preceding papers and added some thoughts of my own, I hope that our discussions of the *homo bene figuratus* have provided a *longue durée* examination of Vitruvius' discussion of human proportionality—including its sources as well as its reception—that can make a small contribution toward a re-conceptualization of the discipline of classics in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Calls for a truly interdisciplinary engagement with ancient materials have long been proliferating, and we accordingly brought together scholars of varied academic and national backgrounds for an application of their respective methodologies to one particular passage. We observed the ideas expressed within that passage as they traveled from Greece and Rome through the European Middle Ages<sup>52</sup> and Renaissance into the modern day, providing inspiration to many along the way, while doing serious harm to innumerable others.

This summary points to what, one hopes, has been accomplished by these papers, even as it makes glaringly clear what work remains to be done. To start with, we have, in our exploration of ancient contexts, remained focused predominantly on Europe, rather than on the wider, multi-continental world that informed Vitruvius' views. On a related note, the participants in the 2018 conference from which these papers stem were overwhelmingly European or of European descent. In my own case, there can be no doubt that my privileged perspective as a White, cis-gendered, straight, able-bodied, German man has

---

52. On the comparative neglect of the Middle Ages in studies of Vitruvius' reception—admittedly evident also in these papers—see Verbaal (2016).

severely limited my understanding of Harmonia Rosales' art, of her reception of Vitruvius, and of Yoruba religion and the Lucumí tradition.

Since the conference, we (the organizers and participants) have gained a renewed awareness of systemic racism as a result both of the COVID-19 pandemic's disproportionate impact on communities of color and of the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others. We acknowledge that we must keep expanding the diversity of voices both ancient and modern that participate in the conversation about the ancient Mediterranean world, and that this effort must involve the unconditional dismantling of the traditional privileging of White, European, male authors and texts. As Dan-el Padilla Peralta recently noted in a series of reflections, precisely on the works of Harmonia Rosales, it is key that we commit to a 'praxis of redistribution' (both financial and intellectual),<sup>53</sup> and, while I endorse that trajectory, I must admit that we have thus far not lived up to its demands.

As we move forward, then, and continue to retool, we must not use ancient Roman texts like *De architectura* as models to celebrate unquestioningly, but as objects of study and critique that coexist with alternatives produced in other times, media, and spaces and by other people, all of which are easily as important as the texts that we have so long treated as canonical. If, in this manner, we can find a way to consider a reading of an author like Vitruvius an inspiration for innovation (in line with what Elizabeth Merrill has noted was the case already in the early modern period), then perhaps we may yet arrive at a new version of the classics that explores an ancient Mediterranean world that is more broadly conceived (both spatially and temporally), grants equal prominence to the study of reception, acknowledges openly the discipline's centuries-long participation in global modes of oppression, and treats with equal respect and equal urgency the perspectives of the People of Color portrayed so vividly on the canvases of Harmonia Rosales.

Penn State University  
[mhanses@psu.edu](mailto:mhanses@psu.edu)

---

53. Padilla Peralta (2022).