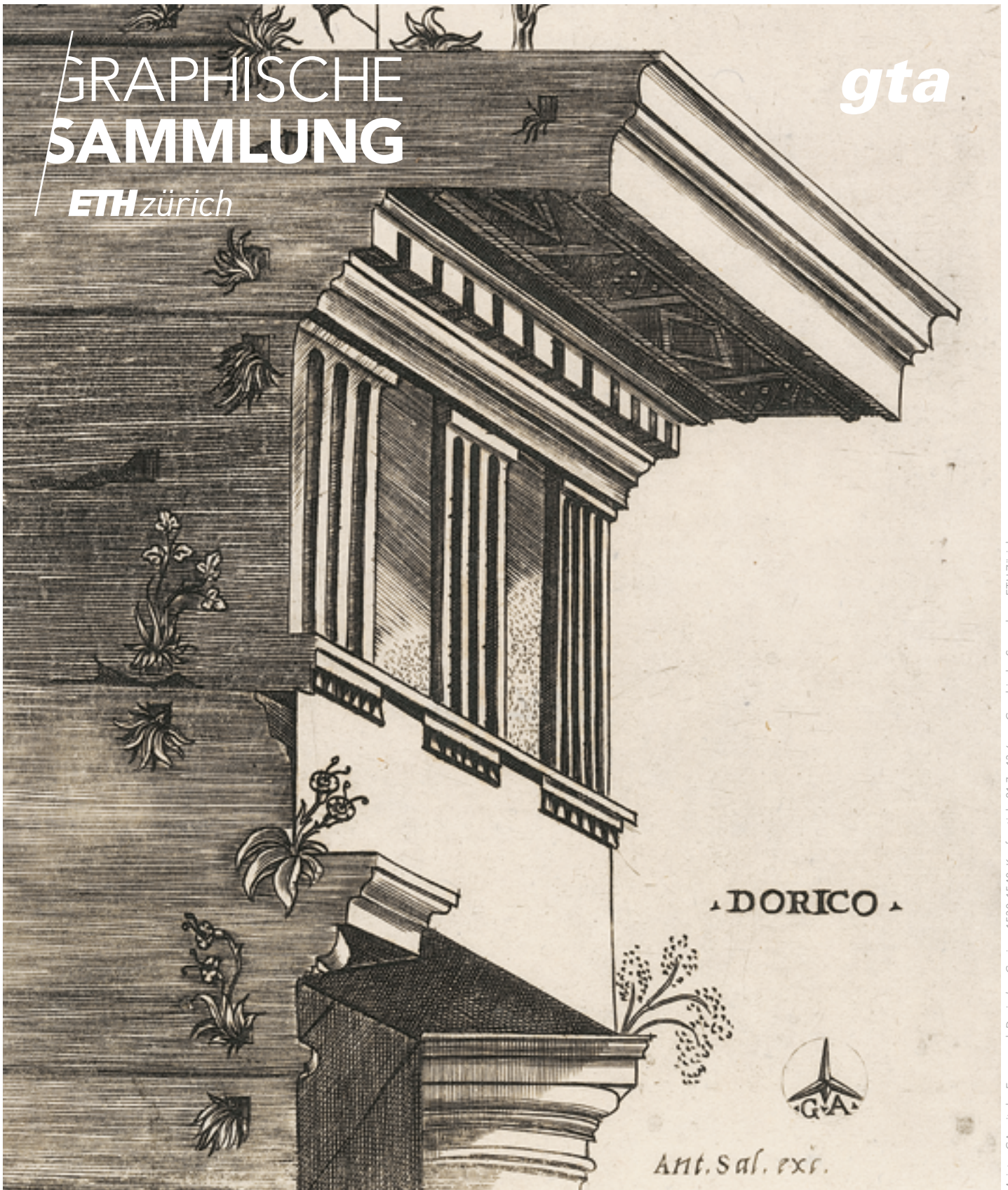


# GRAPHISCHE SAMMLUNG

ETH zürich

gta



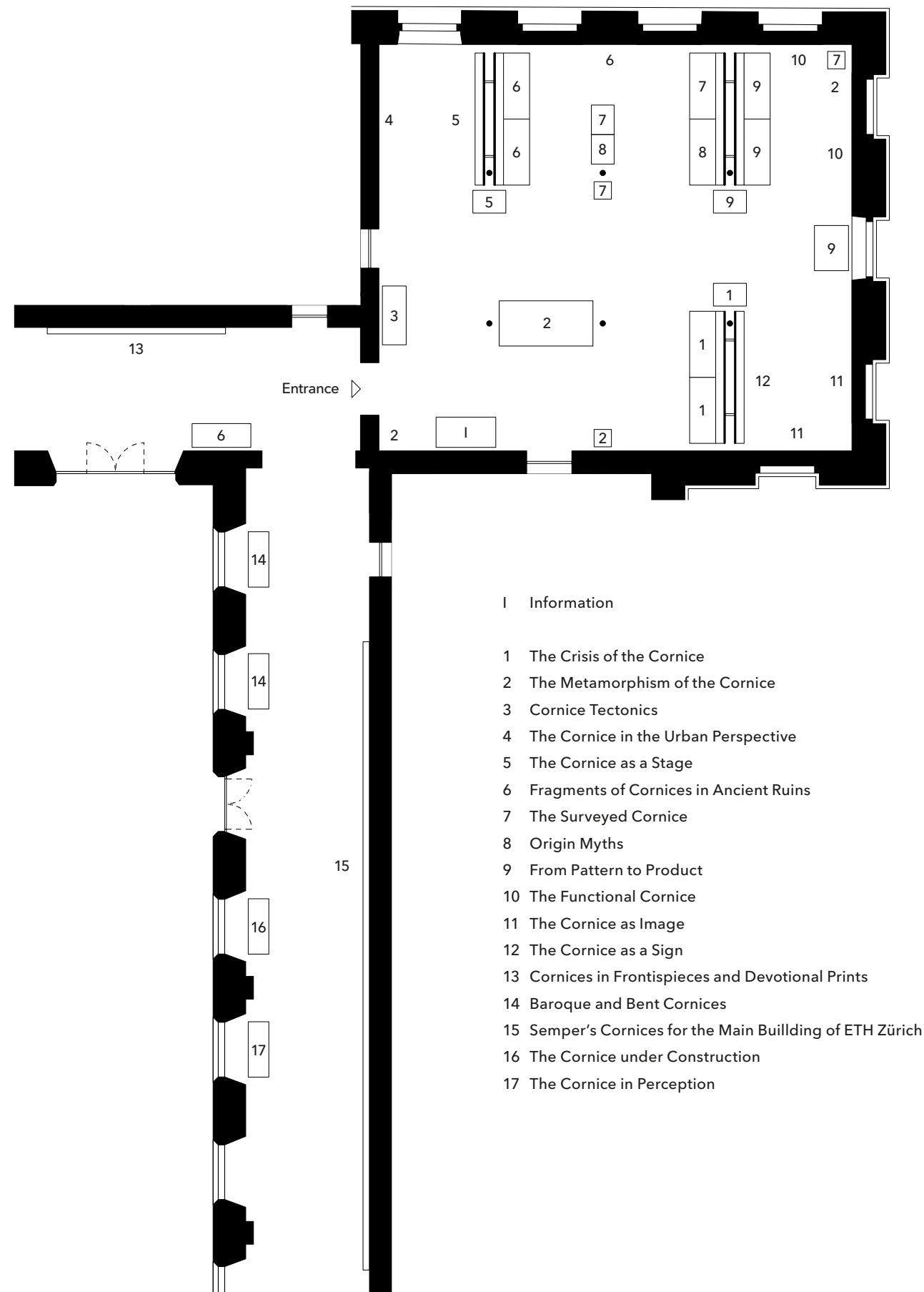
Meister GA mit der Fussangel, Dorisches Gesims, 1530-1540, Kupferstich, 21,7 x 13,6 cm, Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich

## THE HIDDEN HORIZONTAL CORNICES IN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

GRAPHISCHE SAMMLUNG  
ETH ZÜRICH, RÄMISTRASSE 101

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## 1 THE CRISIS OF THE CORNICE

The extreme opposition to the cornice by the architects of the early twentieth century—such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier—shows how it was this ornamental element, far more than the column or the beam, that symbolized for the modernists the major obstacle to the realization of their rational architecture. And yet, for hundreds of years, the cornice was treated as an essential aspect of architecture's 'character', analogous to the profile of a human face.

## 2 THE METAMORPHISM OF THE CORNICE

The enduring nature of certain cornice forms and profiles can transcend material, temporal and even geographical limitations: raising questions about how the cornice becomes contemporary through constant material renewal, and about how architectural ornament retains its relevance for contemporary life.

## 3 CORNICE TECTONICS

The cornice, projecting from a facade and often seeming to defy gravity with its overhang, is the perfect element for demonstrating a hidden constructive ingenuity. In the nineteenth century, architects began to unravel the structural mysteries of cornice construction throughout history, as they sought to implement new style-solutions for architecture based on eternal constructive laws.

## 4 THE CORNICE IN THE URBAN PERSPECTIVE

At the scale of the city, the cornice becomes an urban element that frames the perspective of the street and guides our eyes along it—in built environments as well as in depictions. Since the emergence of central perspective, the relationship between the use of the cornice as an urban motif and as a means of constructing pictorial space in streetscapes has been especially strong.

## 5 THE CORNICE AS A STAGE

Architecture in early modern prints is frequently used as a compositional device, where one can find it as a stage for the unfolding of significant religious or cultural scenes. In these cases, the cornice is the unassuming horizontal that acts as the grounding force in the virtuoso composition of bodies.

## 6 FRAGMENTS OF CORNICES IN ANCIENT RUINS

The iconic cornice of the Castor & Pollux Colonnade is one of many repeatedly depicted fragments of ancient Rome, which served as the point of departure for the architecture of the Renaissance and subsequent periods. Since then, artists, architects and printmakers have isolated cornices as ruinous fragments of a long-dead past, as well as generators of a possible new future.

## 7 THE SURVEYED CORNICE

In classical architecture, the cornice forms part of the entablature (also composed of the architrave and the frieze), which spans over the columns. From the late-fifteenth century onward, architects were concerned with trying to revive these ancient systems of architecture and their decorative schemes, through surveying physical relics from ancient Rome, as well as by reinterpreting written descriptions found in the sole surviving text from antiquity: Vitruvius' *Ten Books on Architecture* (c. 30-15 BC).

## 8 ORIGIN MYTHS

As Renaissance architects were engaged in the reconstruction of the ideal classical past, origin myths emerged within architectural discourse to explain why the ancient Greeks and Romans built the way they did. In the many narratives describing these myths that have emerged over the last five hundred years, the cornice has always been an important register of classical architecture that is frequently offered up as 'proof' of the veracity of the stories.

## 9 FROM PATTERN TO PRODUCT

The emergence of printmaking in the late-fifteenth, and especially the sixteenth century disseminated a formal syntax of art and architecture throughout Europe. Printed pattern books of cornice designs began to circulate freely between clients, artisans and craftsmen. But with the progress of industrialization in the nineteenth century, pattern books offering cornice models to be copied freely by artisans were increasingly replaced by trade catalogues, in which the cornices were advertised for direct sale by companies, who copyrighted them as products.

## 10 THE FUNCTIONAL CORNICE

Architects have often approached the cornice as both an aesthetic problem and a functional challenge. Sometimes, depending on the ideological approach of the architect, decorative cornices were cleverly concealed as functional elements—and functional elements concealed as cornices.

## 11 THE CORNICE AS IMAGE

Cornices are best understood in profile, or in section. From these views, they appear finite and contained. But seen front-on, in elevation, they read entirely differently: they collapse and lose their corporeality, becoming graphic images of themselves multiplied infinitely along the horizontal plane. This horizontal plane established by the cornice in elevation also features as part of the overall composition of façades, as a way of establishing a human proportion.

## 12 THE CORNICE AS A SIGN

Banished (at least in theory) during the modernist movement, the cornice returned with a vengeance in the 1970s with postmodernism. Postmodern architects rejected what they saw as a sterile, international modern architecture, and began to look back to and knowingly (as well as playfully) integrate classical European influences in unexpected ways.

## 13 CORNICES IN FRONTISPIECES AND DEVOTIONAL PRINTS

In frontispieces—large single-sheet prints or extracts of books from the early modern period—the cornice can become part of a miniature architectural composition that frames and celebrates authors, patrons or artists. These small architectural studies, by virtue of their being uncoupled from any particular building or design for a building, are free to deviate—sometimes radically—from the structural rules that need to be followed in built architecture, and this is how they become sites of architectural invention.

## 14 BAROQUE AND BENT CORNICES

In seventeenth-century Baroque architecture, the cornice became key to architectural expression. Rather than simply crowning a structure of walls and columns, the cornice shaped and defined façades and interiors. Following in Michelangelo's footsteps, architects like Francesco Borromini and Gianlorenzo Bernini manipulated their cornices freely to multiply and bend in three dimensions.

## 15 SEMPER'S CORNICES FOR THE MAIN BUILDING OF ETH ZÜRICH

Cornice profiles surround us in the main building of ETH Zürich, though they are not always easy to spot. A collection of construction plans by Gottfried Semper highlights them, placing the section profile of the cornice at the center of attention in a highly graphic manner.

## 16 THE CORNICE UNDER CONSTRUCTION

The cornice usually forms the top of a construction section, and during its construction, it requires scaffolding to keep it in place. However, once in place and tied back to the main structure, a cornice's cantilever can also act as a scaffold for further constructions. When passing a building under restoration, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright once witnessed a scaffolding failure. The cornice it was supporting collapsed, injuring a worker. Upon witnessing this gruesome scene, Wright was more convinced than ever that cornices should be banished from modern architecture.

## 17 THE CORNICE IN PERCEPTION

The cornice has the power to guide the viewer's perception, particularly along a façade or an urban streetscape. Its angles and profiles can be conceived in relation to the moving gaze of the spectator, as the concave and convex shapes stretch and manipulate the eye with optical illusions. For example, the size of a cornice can be indicative of its power. The grander the scale, the less architectural detail the cornice requires.