Architecture is the enclosure of space and the creation of mass. Architectural drawings reduce this space and mass to mere schematic representations—floor plans, elevations, or sections. But we, today, have discovered a ready appeal in them: our eyes have grown accustomed to the aesthetic of the flat, linear, and almost immaterial qualities of Park Avenue wedding cakes—a style in which many a building seems but a two-dimensional rendering exploded to vast size.

An exhibition of English architectural drawings from the Museum’s collection will be on display in the Auditorium Lounge from September 11 to November 15. It coincides with the publication of a catalogue, by John Harris of the Royal Institute of British Architects, of English architectural drawings in American collections, a substantial percentage of which are at the Metropolitan Museum. The more than fifty examples on exhibition illustrate the varied types of architectural drawings as well as the myriad styles of English architecture from the mid-seventeenth century to the late nineteenth.

Architectural drawings reflect stylistic trends and the extent of the architect’s role in designing and building. It is only recently that most architects have relinquished what has aptly been called “the classical language of architecture”—the vocabulary of forms and motifs originating in antiquity, and in constant use since the Renaissance for ordering exterior and interior walls with a coherent decorative scheme. Historically, in designing rooms English architects have concentrated on ceilings and chimneypieces. Inigo Jones, who introduced Italian Renaissance architectural theory into English practice about 1616, made abundant use of the chimneypiece designs in Jean Barbet’s Livre d’Architecture d’Autels et de Cheminées (Paris, 1633), though always adapting them to his own purposes. The earliest drawings on exhibition, copies of two plates from Barbet, were probably executed by a member of the Office of Works, builders for the Crown. Barbet, and Renaissance architecture itself, were as yet unknown outside court circles.

The eighteenth century saw a complete about-face in this situation, so it is no exaggeration to say that at its close almost every carpenter and mason in England could handle classical motifs with competence. This extraordinary proliferation of knowledge resulted from the architectural-book boom fostered by Lord Burlington, leader of the English Palladian movement that began in the second decade of the century. Burlington sought to return from baroque excesses to the true architecture of antiquity as exemplified in the works of Andrea Palladio and of his English follower Inigo Jones. William Kent, Burlington’s favored protégé, published the sumptuous folio Designs of Inigo Jones in 1727. A major aim of the Palladians—never realized—was the erection of a new Whitehall Palace, as a symbol of the supremacy of the antique. Jones had conceived such a building long before, and one elevation of his design, drawn for Kent’s publication by “Burlington Harry” Flitcroft, is displayed.

The influence of Palladian tenets was to become universal in English-speaking countries. John Aheron published A General Treatise of Architecture in Dublin in 1754. A manuscript version of 1751 will be opened to the plan for a “Magnificent Palace” in the unpublished sixth section. The vast, nearly square plan, incorporating a series of courtyards, is not unlike that for Jones’s Whitehall Palace above. No such palace was ever erected in England or Ireland, but it was certainly not eating danson through lack of design or desire.

The inevitable reaction to ever more bookish and sterile copies after Palladio was the contribution of Robert Adam, interior decorator par excellence. Adam flaunted the rules by which classical architecture is ordered, rearranging and redesigning the standard parts of columns and cornices. In doing so he achieved great fame, though he never got the royal patronage that went to his greatest rival, Sir William Chambers. Chambers followed the rules, but adopted more of the current French decorative motifs than those uncovered in the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum that Adam made fashionable. The Museum

Note

1. Eating-room chimneypiece, Danson Park, Kent, by Sir William Chambers (1723-1796), British. About 1773. Ink and wash drawing, 11 x 8 inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 49.56.19

3. Design for a house, by Ernest Geldart, British. About 1895. Ink drawing with watercolor, 6 x 8 3/4 inches. By exchange, Royal Institute of British Architects, 60.724.58

possesses a large collection of chimneypiece designs by Chambers, a good example being that for the “Eating Room” at Danson Park, Kent (Figure 1). The facile brilliance of Adam has too long overshadowed the strong and sensitive designs of this major eighteenth-century architect, who conducted his affairs with a professional thoroughness that is closer to what one would expect of a twentieth-century architect than an eighteenth-century one.

In the 1750s there were essays in the Gothic and “French”—i.e. rococo—styles, and Chambers designed a pagoda for Kew Gardens, but no period surpassed the early nineteenth century in plethora of architectural styles. The Grand Egyptian Hall (Figure 2), with every familiar form Egyptianized, was drawn by G. Landi, an architectural painter and drawing master, for his Architectural Decorations: A Periodical Work of Original Designs Invented from the Egyptian, the Greek, the Roman, the Etruscan, the Attic, the Gothic, &c. . . . (London, 1810).

The nineteenth century was host to eclectic styles to its very end. Drawings by Ernest Geldart, a little-known but representative architect of the last decades of the century, illustrate the phenomena not only of the ubiquitous “Victorian Gothic” parish church but also of the half-timbered cottage (Figure 3). Characterized by a return to medieval styles, the use of brightly colored materials, and bold, if hitherto unorthodox proportions, this architecture at its best exhibits a vigor rarely effected since the exuberant classical misinterpretations found in the prodigious country houses of Elizabethan times. Thus it is no surprise to find an Elizabethan revival blossom in the 1840s and again in the 1870s. C. J. Richardson was its chief exponent. Drawings for his elaborate Architectural Remains of Elizabeth and James 1st (London, 1840), and for his unsuccessful project to publish the Book of Architecture of John Thorpe—a sixteenth-century surveyor’s collection of designs for houses—will be displayed here for the first time.

Only now are we opening our eyes to the vitality and color of the not-so-distant past. Just as our Victorian grandparents and great-grandparents rejoiced in rebellion against the dullness of mile after mile of Georgian London, so might we look beyond our glass canyons and profit by the observation and preservation of the remains of their age. Victorian architecture was modern, vulgar, and ostentatious when new; old-fashioned and despised after a generation; ignored or torn down for two more. Will it now, finally, be respected both for its merits and for being a foil to bland and economical contemporary building—or only when it’s too late?

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