ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE FOUNTAIN --A DELIBERATE ACT OF FANTASY

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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The Fountain —A Deliberate Act of Fantasy

An etching of Jacques de Lajoue's "Fontaine Glaceé" in the Met show

Another of Lajoue's Rococo fountains— "a vehicle of invention for its own sake"

The relationship between water and architecture has always been one of poetry and magic. Fountains are meant to transcend utility. The *jet d'eau* is the *grande geste* of the architect; the sight and sound of water brings buildings and spaces to a special kind of life.

This relationship between brick and stone and pools and torrents is a profound, mysterious and timeless harmony. The counterpoint of the permanent and static with the changing and transparent contains meaning and effect that go beyond the act of design; even the most scetic architect abdicates to water's sensuous pleasures. Imagine the Piazza Navona without Bernini's cascading Four Rivers with their recumbant giants and splashing basins, the Alhambra without the theme and music of gently flowing streams. Dry architecture is as unthinkable as *la grande cuisine* without wine.

The purpose of the fountain is pure enchantment. Its design is a deliberate act of fantasy. Never has this particular form of intellectual and sensuous seduction reached a greater height than among the Rococo artists of the first half of the 18th century. Artists and architects alike used the fountain as a kind of consummate expression of joyful, self-indulgent style. There are no uptight Rococo fountains. They are all exercises in lyrical excess.

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About 40 of the best of these imaginative French Rococo fountain designs, shown in superb etchings and book plates, are currently on view (through Nov. 27) in the Blumenthal Patio of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This small but lovely exhibition, in what is customarily a quiet oasis of print, drawing and photograph displays in the Met's spectacular hurly-burly, has been organized by Mary L. Myers, curator in the Department of Prints and Photographs, with a grant from the Esther Annenberg Simon Charitable Trust.

The introduction notes that the show has been timed to coincide with the ancient Roman celebration of the "Fontinalia," which paid homage, in October, to water in the form of fountains, wells and springs. It may be a first for this particular festival in New York. "But nowhere," Miss Myers writes of these etchings, "before or since, has the fountain been so celebrated on paper."

The French fountain designs of the 18th century may be the ultimate expression of the elegances and eccentricities of the Rococo style. Most of these projects were never meant to be built, although Boucher's nymphs and dolphins, as Miss Myers points out, can easily be imagined in stone and bronze.

But the fountain as a decorative image was a natural instrument for the exotic, the fantastic and the unreal, a vehicle of invention for its own sake, or pure flights of fancy and the greatest artistic license. The practical application of such designs was not in architecture, but in the decorative arts—they appeared in ceiling plasterwork, wood paneling, tapestries, rugs, porcelains and jewelry.

These fantasy fountains are cascading compositions of sinuous asymmetry and curving lines, elaborate composites of elements from nature (in accord with the romantic naturalism of 18th-century taste) deployed in the most arcane and artful manner. There are gods and nymphs, courtiers and courtesans, birds and beasts, monsters and grotesques—all in constant undulating motion. Figures, stairs, walls, balustrades, vegetation and water out-whiplash Art Nouveau. Bodies arch, arms reach, branches sway, reverse curves writhe, and architectural backdrops are a roller-coaster array of volutes and cartouches elevated to supergraphic proportions. Water is everywhere—it gushes out of vases, horns, shells, cracks and crevices. It forms streams, showers, rivulets, avalanches and the waves of the sea.

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These French artists not only believed in the sanctity and validity of high style, but conveyed it through the most calculated and enchanting artificiality. Nothing could be more art for art's own sake than Boucher's Leda and the Swan disposed gracefully on a base of cartouches, monsters and branches, or Jean Mondon's fashionable lovers meeting in a secret architecture of bulging pilasters and sliding volutes, or Pierre Quentin Chedel's "grotesques" of leaves and shells as masks spewing water into a splendor of fruits and flowers, or the ultimate chinoiserie of Jean Pillemont's delicate dragon spouting over a bamboo balustrade. These are the ultimate conceits.

In the occasional examples that are buildable, such as Juste-Aruèle Meissonnier's Pavilion with Fountains, or Fireworks Machine with Fountains, a Rococo stage set architecture of arcades, pavilions and double-curving stairs is soberly predominant, with the waterworks taking second place. Still, they are an essential enrichment of the architectural whole.

And in something like Charles Eisen's much more pragmatic and realizable designs of female figures or putti holding up basins topped by spouting geese or dolphins, we see the source of all those heavy, static, solidly bourgeois maidens weighed down with grapes and garlands of serious Victorian taste. (One of the best of these 19th-century examples is Bartholdi's Centennial Fountain near the Capitol in Washington, a 30-foot high, cast-iron extravaganza with draped nymphs and "aquatic monsters" supporting a basin trimmed with lights, made originally for the Philadelphia Exposition.(It is a bit off the Washington tourist track, but well worth the detour.)

Although there is no indication that the Rococo exhibition has any purpose except pleasure, these fountain designs fit right into the current mood of architectural revisionism and rediscovery of the past. This is the kind of thing that several generations of 20th-century architects have been taught to despise: frivolity, sensuality, the fanciful, the distorted and the arbitrary—the evocation of pure delight in the name of art. And that esthetic indulgence is exactly what today's generation of architects is coming back to, in principle, using history as creative example rather than as literal model. To the Modernists, the Rococo was original sin. Here are the masters of that wicked indulgence of the heart and mind. ■