ARCHITECTURE VIEW: AN ARCHIVE OF VISUAL DOCUMENTS
Huxtable, Ada Louise
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ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

An Archive Of Visual Documents

No business with a unique product to offer would have given itself a name as récherché, quite so indicative of nothing, as the Dunlap Society. It is, of course, an elegant name, redolent of some genteel and pedigreed New England group devoted to the aid of worthy, indigent females, or an organization of elite thinkers involved in the study of industrialized housing in underdeveloped countries. Yawn.

Well, I am not about to tell you that the Dunlap Society is really a cult of graffiti recidivists or something equally far-out. It engages in nothing shocking or controversial. But in its way, it is a fairly revolutionary enterprise. The Dunlap Society is a nonprofit organization established in 1974 to broaden and encourage the awareness and study of American art. Its initial projects are a revelation of up-to-date scholarship served by up-to-date technology. Funded initially by the National Endowment for the Humanities, it has subsequently been gathering support from other foundations and corporations. The aim is Olympian in scope and unconventional in approach — nothing less than a comprehensive archive of visual documents of American art and architecture, using the latest research hardware and techniques.

The first undertaking has been a study of the architecture of Washington D.C. Issued in two volumes, which can be used in many ways, the materal includes microfiche, slides and fact sheets, with much fresh and original documentation carried out with impeccable research. The result combines significant new insights and a virtually new teaching tool.

This unprecedented visual record sets a high standard for American art and architecture courses, which, with the exception of the work of a few dedicated specialists, have been notoriously superficial and sloppy. The study of American art has only sporadically approached the kind of comprehensive research established for European art history. But the project aspires to more than aiding the conventional understanding of the fine arts. The material has been prepared with an eye to its social and cultural, as well as its esthetic significance, which makes it an important and useful addition to a more general university curriculum.

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Like so many things today, the Dunlap Society product comes in packages. These packages are books containing pages of microfiche and printed information. The contents can be read or projected with a microfiche viewer, which makes the material equally suitable for individual research or seminar discussions. Lecture slides and photographs can be ordered from the microfiche. Because this is a subsidized enterprise, with the basic aim of making the results as widely available as possible, the sets are sold at very low cost. Information on all of this can be gotten from the Dunlap Society, Lake Champlain Road, Essex, N.Y., 12936, which also fills orders directly.

Oh yes, the name. This may not be everyone's scholarly trivia, but William Dunlap is credited with being the first American art historian. Slightly more than 50 years after the birth of the Republic, in 1834, he published a two-volume work called "The Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States." It was an "optimistic and proud" undertaking, according to the Dunlap Society, which displays a similar attitude toward its own daunting task.

Optimism is essential at this stage, because what the Dunlap Society is producing seems to be as little understood, generally, as its name. For one thing, it is probably somewhat ahead of its time. Microfiche is still a mystery to many. Libraries are used to dealing with it — the Dunlap Society sets are actually selling very well — but a lot of art professors are not.

Microfiche is a small card of film, about 4 by 6 inches, containing photographically miniaturized images, which can be read with a viewer that enlarges them. The viewer can also project the images on a screen or wall. In the visual documentation of Washington architecture, for example, two loose-leaf volumes have two microfiche cards on a page, removable for viewing, and each card contains 45 images, complete with text and labels. The quality of the images is excellent. The Society has stayed with black and white because microfiche color is not yet stable, and it has been unrelentingly demanding in its photographic standards, actually setting a new professional norm for a still-fluid and unstandardized industry.

To complete the documentation, and to provide color, the Society uses, in addition to the microfiche, sets of 35-millimeter slides. These are made from large negatives taken, wherever possible, from the original buildings or documents. The color slides can be ordered separately or with the microfiche volumes.

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Because color is essential in reproducing paintings, the Society produces sets of slides, rather than microfiche, for the visual arts. Here, too, it has instituted an interesting practice. In its pursuit of a superior product, it records special painting exhibitions that provide a unique opportunity to photograph from the original works of art while they are together.

Currently, there are Dunlap slide series on "The Luminist Movement," done with the cooperation of the National Gallery, and "The Art of Elihu Vedder," carried out in collaboration with the National Collection of Fine Arts. Slide series are in preparation now on "American Impressionism" and "The Architectural Drawings of Thomas U. Walter."

But it is the extraordinary miniaturization of microfiche that is the real breakthrough in visual studies. This has made it possible to put together more than 3,500 images for the Washington architectural study, many of them items that would otherwise be unknown or unavailable. To do this required the help of about 100 institutions over a period of five years. A good number are documents or drawings photographed for the first time.

There is, for example, the little-known story of the design and construction of the Washington Monument, which stood unfinished — and called a national disgrace — for a good part of the 19th century. Pictures and text trace its development, from Robert Mills's original, neo-classical design to the severely simple obelisk that is such a familiar symbol today. This history also includes a mind-boggling series of proposals for the completion of the monument elicited in a national competition of 1876 that offers an encyclopedic account of High Victorian taste. Only luck and weak foundations kept the naked shaft from being turned into a Lombard bell tower by William Wetmore Story.

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To put a conventional set of slides together to equal the Dunlap Society's documentation would severely strain the research capacity, budget and storage facilities of most institutions. Microfiche takes a fraction of the space and is a fraction of the cost — only pennies per image. But old pedagogical habits die hard. Except for an occasional shooting star, art history is a notoriously stodgy discipline. I will wager that this generation is sitting through the Roman archeology slides that looked as if they were dug up from Pompeii in my time, and nodding over the same faded standards of modern architecture gathered decades ago from avant-garde periodicals. A lot of black-and-white slides have been replaced by professional 35-millimeter color and the results of professorial pilgrimages and new dissertations, but little else has changed.

Those who have jumped the information and technology barrier to use the Dunlap material say that they will never approach teaching the same way again. Architectural drawings are a rich, untapped resource. Construction shots do a lot to dispel the myth of the building as a spontaneous art object.

The ultimate aim of the Dunlap Society is to see this kind of visual documentation included in basic American studies. Architecture, in particular, because it deals in non-traditional materials and much more than esthetic values, belongs in the educational mainstream for the understanding of American society and culture. That is something that a lot of us have been waiting for a very long time. ■

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