ARCHITECTURE VIEW: DRAWINGS FROM A LOST WORLD
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Drawings From a Lost World

The Metropolitan Museum's exhibition of "Architectural and Ornament Drawings" from the collection of its Department of Prints and Photographs combines enchantment and enlightenment to an extraordinary degree. These elegantly selected examples of the work of Juvarra, Vanvitelli, the Bibiena family and other Italian architects and artists of the 18th century, which were seen earlier at the Museum of Art of the Pennsylvania State University, are also the subject of an exemplary catalogue by Mary L. Myers, associate curator of the department. This is a department, in fact, that has always offered very special rewards in its intimate exhibitions, from the warm, humanistic scholarship of A. Hyatt Mayor, now curator emeritus, to the perceptive purchases of the late John McKendry that made this show possible.

But the particular magic of this group of drawings is that they not only offer the special seduction of superb 18th-century Italian draftsmanship, they are also the key to another world. Nothing brings an age alive with quite the immediacy of the details of its environment, and these skilled and beautiful sketches and renderings, often by names unfamiliar except to the art historian, demonstrate the richness of the talent devoted to that peripheral esthetic, the decorative arts.

Nor was it a field restricted to special practitioners—although there were those specialists who dealt only in illusionistic wall paintings and were called *quadraturiste,* for example, and others who dealt only in *vedute,* or the romantic-classical landscape views that delighted the 18th century, and all subsequent centuries as well. The best architects of the day were, if not Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo men who also dealt in every element of the built and decorated world. They turned their hand with equal attention to the whole building and the single ornament.

And they all drew superbly. The free and lyrical use of ink and wash combined with the precision of the designer-draftsman produced some of the most exquisite Baroque imagery. There are stage-set views no larger than four by six inches by Giovanni Battista Natali III, that are packed with illusion. Implied and explicit details of stairs, corridors and galleries seen through arches and colonnades are delineated in a masterful, miniature perspective that is nothing less than miraculous. And a few strokes of Filippo Juvarra's pen and brush can evoke an architectural fantasy of *tempieti* and obelisks that stays in the mind's eye forever.

It is the Juvarra drawings, from an album of fantasies by the man who was Turin's most distinguished 18th-century architect, that are the stars of the show. This album is a newly discovered treasure, unknown until 1966. Since only one drawing can be folded out for display, others have been photographed and are exhibited as transparencies on a screen wall opposite. With an angel's touch, Juvarra turns airy references to antique monuments into Baroque pastries, for a stage-set world of ordered, contained spaces. It is the mastery of the architect and the set designer combined.

And it is the stage designs that are such an important part of this work that "may be considered the Italian 18th century's ultimate expression of architecture and ornament," according to Miss Myers, in her introduction to the catalogue. Even more, they provide the ultimate 18th-century vision. Nowhere else are the spatial and ornamental intricacies that molded the Baroque, and Mannerist, ideal more brilliantly displayed. Unrestricted by reality, these drawings are pure exercises in flowing and contrapuntal spaces that build to crescendos of ornamental architectural detail, in an extraordinary vocabulary of sensuous, classical allusion. This is not a "cool" esthetic—a fact that makes many people miss its superlative control.

The architect pushed this voluptuously involved spatial concept as far as he could, but the difference between ideal and reality is beautifully illustrated in the work of Antonio and Francesco Galli Bibiena, of that remarkable family of early 18th-century theatrical designers who created a new iconography for the stage. Their work and that of Serafino Brizzi, anticipates the later, emotionally darker, more sinister and tortured scenography of Piranesi.

In a Bibiena stage set on display, the central space moves dynamically up stairs at right angles through arched openings on two levels, with still a third open level above. The whole is elaborately woven together with rusticated columns and walls, cornices and statuary. In contrast, a marvelously evocative, delicate pen study for a palatial interior necessarily treats the space as static and on one plane, but complexity and fantasy are achieved through elaborate wall surfaces and screens of columns topped by pediments and balustrades. It is a manneristic interpretation of space, not without curious and fascinating parallels to the work of some of today's younger modernist architects, from Venturian "complexities and contradictions" to the neo-International Stylists.

Francesco Galli Bibiena was the first of his family to build theaters as well as design sets. The theater at Nancy, constructed in 1708-09 for Leopold, Duke of Lorraine, was later destroyed by war, pillage and neglect. But the sections and drawings of the proscenium, ceiling and royal box and the ground plan of the theater (which as the architectural historian Henry Millon has pointed out, is surprisingly close to the plan of a church) are in the exhibition. And there are also Luigi Vanvitelli's drawings for another royal theater, at Caserta.

One can evoke this very special 18th-century world of grand imagery and ornament by simply listing the things these artists drew. Churches, villas, palaces and pleasure pavilions shared honors with the stage sets and theaters. And there was *Theatra Sacra,* or designs for church celebrations. A popular category of fantasies and *capricci* yielded some of the loveliest decorative drawings of all.

In interiors, ballroom and festival decorations engaged their attention, as well as designs for ceilings and cupolas and wall and over-door painting. Objects encompassed everything from altars and catafalques to mantels, mirrors, masks, cartouches, clocks and visiting cards. The more utilitarian the object, the more it was embellished with satyrs, putti, lions, eagles, griffins and garlands.

It is a dizzying range, from the correct, restrained classicism of a meticulously rendered Carlo Fontana church facade in Rome to a lively drawing of a bronze ewer by the Florentine, Giovanni Battista Foggini. That ewer is about as far out as the 18th century went. The base is supported by Tritons, the handle is a winged siren, and Neptune, astride a pair of seahorses, almost rides off the vessel in triumph, under the spout. This is not exactly functional design. It belonged to a world in which fantasy, sensuosity and mythology were the admired and accepted norm—a world forever lost except to scholars, museums and collectors of its legacy. The drawings tell it all.

"Architectural and Ornament Drawings: Juvarra, Vanvitelli, the Bibiena Family and Other Italian Draughtsmen" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Prints and Photographs, through March 14. Open 10 A.M. to 4:45 P.M. Wednesday through Saturday; 10 A.M. to 6:45 P.M. Tuesday; 11 A.M. to 4:45 P.M. Sunday; closed Monday.