ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Tastemaker Rescued From History

The 250th anniversary of the birth of Robert Adam is being celebrated in England and Scotland this month, and during those two-and-a-half centuries he has had his ups and downs.

The work of the Scottish-born architect who replaced the "correct" British Palladian style of the 17th and early 18th century with an exquisite classical mix virtually of his own making, has been rejected and revived in the 19th century and acclaimed and ignored in the 20th century. Right now, like so many other architects of the past, he is being rescued from the dustbin of history after 50 years of Bauhaus estheticism and assiduous neglect.

For some, his star has been constant. Robert Adam was, above all, one of the quintessential tastemakers of all time, and his name and style have continued to be a cachet of taste to this day. He probably ranks as the most knocked-off architect in history, since he created a vast decorative vocabulary used for everything from the architectural orders of his buildings to their hardware and furnishings, for a grammar of ornament that has lent itself to every scale and use and every sector of society.

By the first quarter of the 20th century, more Adam mantles, medallions, pallid pallasters, "authentic" copies and curious hybrids were being cranked out than ever before, made possible by Grand Rapids and a battalion of decorators who brought taste to the masses. Department-store Adam is still the prevalent image of his style.

But if the Adam manner ended as the most democratic of styles, it began at the top; he designed and furnished great houses for the British aristocracy with a skillful ordering of rooms and spaces and a highly original orchestration of classical motifs and an embroidery of delicate plaster traceries that are still unsurpassed. About 37 of those houses constructed over a 30-year period survive. In one decade—the 1760's—Adam established the new style that was to spread east to Russia and across the ocean to America.

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Syon House in Middlesex, for the Duke of Northumberland; Kenwood House in Hampstead, for the Earl of Mansfield; Osterley, near Syon; Kedleston, in Darbyshire; Harewood House, in Yorkshire—these are all Adam masterpieces. The skill they demonstrate is even more remarkable in that they were often remodellings of early Jacobian or Elizabethan structures in which the architect transformed what he saw as "ill-proportioned" rooms into suitable "classical" chambers through the use of apsidal ceilings, screens of columns and exquisite decoration inspired by the stuccoes and frescoes of ancient Rome.

Robert Adam is now being rediscovered by a generation that grew up without him. Although it is not fashionable to say so, the Georgian may have been the most bloodless of the 20th-century revivals, its refined exuberance often constipated by the narrow canons of architectural propriety. It was frequently snobbish and sterile, and Adam suffered.

All one needs, however, is a trip back to the fountainhead. This observer has just returned from visits to Syon, Kenwood and the London houses for a refresher course in the color and virtuosity of this exceptional work, which is often as strong as it is delicate. Unfortunately, it has been much too "pretty" and "pleasing" for the guts and morality school of modernism. The word genius—must it be tortured, can't it be worldly and suave?—surely applies.

The Adam anniversary is being well celebrated in England and Scotland by special events. The National Trust for Scotland had a double birthday party, on July 3 and 4, and if you missed the party, you can still make the exhibition that opened that week in Edinburgh, at Register House, a structure built to Adam's design of 1772; the show is called "A Kind of Revolution: Robert Adam, 1728-1978." It will run through the summer to Sept. 16.

Another exhibition, "Robert in Italy," devoted to the Grand Tour from 1754 to 1758 during which Adam collected the archeological data and architectural impressions from the Etruscan to the Baroque that formed the basis for his style, can be seen until July 28 at Hopetoun House, another of his works. There has been a "Robert Adam Grand Tour" of his houses in England and Scotland. And a new book has been published, "The Work of Robert Adam," by Geoffrey Beard, issued by John Bartholomew in London.

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The Adam family and firm was close-knit. Robert Adam was the son of a distinguished Scottish architect, William Adam; a brother, William, was his business manager, and another brother, James, was an assisting architect, content to remain in Robert's shadow. At one point, the Adam firm had between 2,000 and 3,000 employees and controlled a number of subsidiary businesses supplying brick, stone and lumber. It employed an army of skilled craftsmen, including the superb stucco artist Joseph Rose, and the potter Josiah Wedgwood.

So much for the solitary creative spirit. Like so many who altered the course of art or history, Robert Adam was a man of great talent and ambition whose innovative work soon became an institutional symbol, a familiar classic, and eventually, a knee-jerk cliché. He was never a radical loner who had to fight for understanding or acceptance; his work was an instant smash.

Nor did he ever make any pretense at humility. In "The Work in Architecture of Robert and James Adam," a promotional publication that was issued periodically, Adam simply stated that he had brought about "a kind of revolution in the whole system of this useful and elegant art," and that the "novelty and variety of the designs" justified "communicating them to the world."

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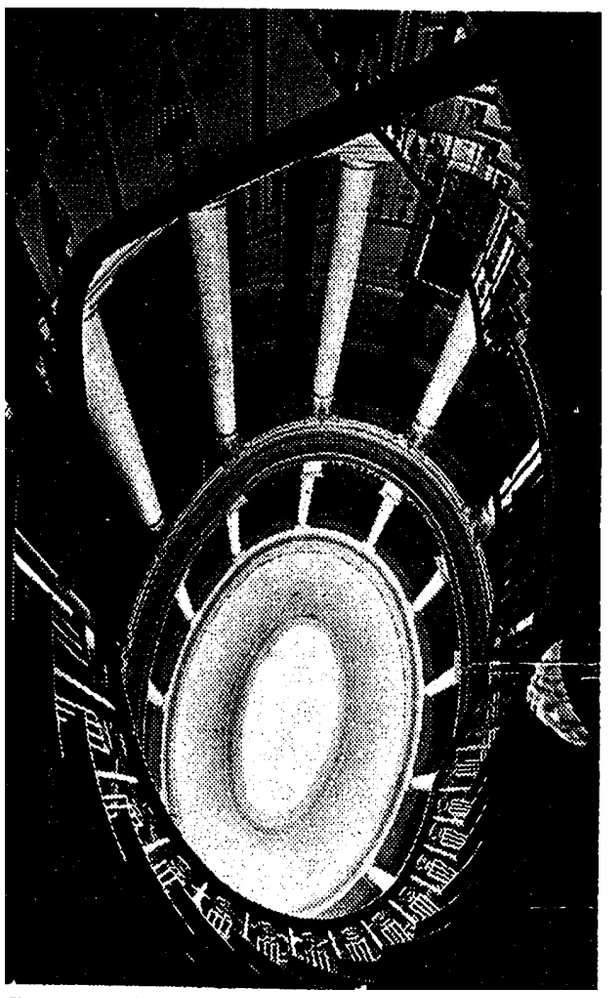
Like all revolutionaries, he was quick to explain the failures of his predecessors. After a visit to Vicenza, he found Palladio's designs "ill-adjusted in both their plans and elevations." Palladian architecture in England was scored as heavy and rigid, a clear misuse of classical sources. The work of Vanbrugh was "crowded with barbarisms and absurdities." A freer, lighter hand with Greece and Rome was what was needed, as was an attitude toward design and decoration that admitted "the wonderful power of pleasing"; the words "gay and elegant" keep appearing in his text.

But the key word, inevitably, is taste. Adam operated at a time when taste was informed, selective, sophisticated and joyful; it counted as much in the scene of English life as politics and power. It was, in fact, an indispensible part of both.



Culzean Castle in Ayrshiro, Scotland, designed by Robert Adam

The visitor to Syon House, mindful of the Duke of Northumberland's decision to "fit up the apartments in a magnificent manner," is not disappointed. The cool Roman grandeur of the white, grey and black entrance hall, with its basilican apse and screen of Doric columns sheltering the Dying Gaul, has a spellbinding scale and serenity.

The transition to the strong blue-green and gold of the ante-room with its verde antique marble columns from Rome topped by gilded statues, the wall reliefs flashed with scarlet, is so dazzling that it takes a while to notice how cleverly the rooms' proportions are manipulated by the architectural and decorative details.

The gold-and-white dining room with its statuary niches and two apsidal ends—a device perhaps at its finest in the Kenwood library—seems to glow a blush-pink. The crimson drawing room has a coved ceiling like a tapestry of gilded ornament and painted medallions. The long, narrow library is a tour de force of low relief putty, grottesche, arabesques, medallions and friezes, in tones that seem to shade from acquamarine blue to mauve, that turns awkwardness into intimacy. It is all incredibly rich and beautiful and unbelievably gay and elegant. Are we ready for Adam again? ■

Georges de la Tour's "Fortune Teller," discussed in Nicolson's book on the artist