ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Master Builder

In one sense, the American Bicentennial has been a smashing success. Beyond the alternative earnestness and foolishness, the high of the tall ships and the low of commercial exploitation, we have experienced a surprising intellectual and esthetic coming of age. There is a new and quite complex and erudite awareness of where this country stands in culture and time, of its relationships to European precedents and models and its singular contributions to civilization's continuities. And the process is not ending with the Bicentennial year.

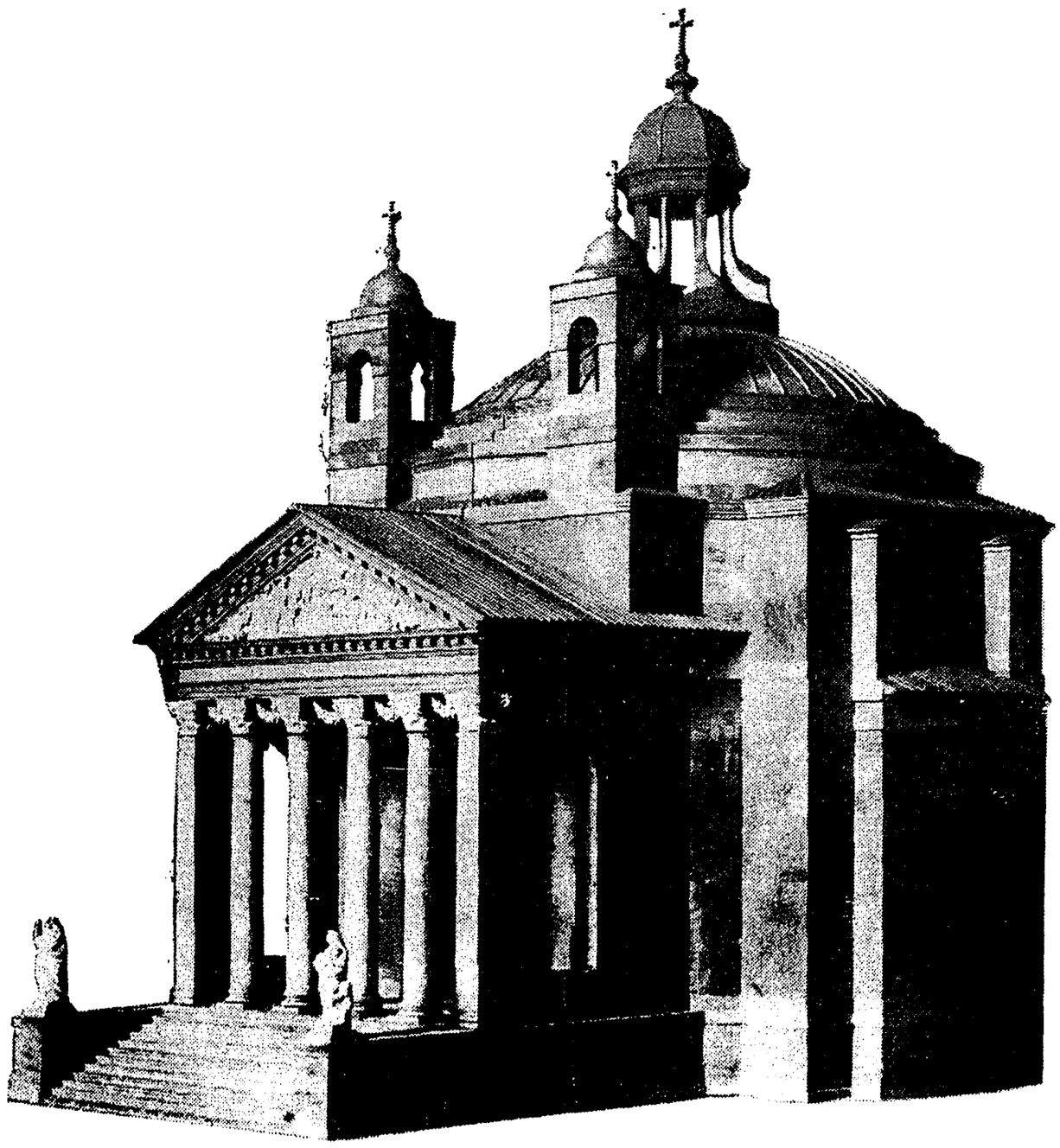
Such major exhibitions as the National Gallery's "Eye of Jefferson," the National Portrait Gallery's beautifully documented trilogy on "The American Experience," and an explosion of local shows of unusually high standard dealing with special aspects of that experience, have led to expanded perspectives. There have been some bummers as well: the embarrassingly slick commercial packaging of the second-hand images of "The World of Franklin and Jefferson," unfortunately an official Bicentennial offering, was starred at the Metropolitan after opening at the Louvre. *Tant pis!*

We failed to resolve some of our cultural confusions and discomforts, even though the attempt was made in such displays as "Two Hundred Years of American Sculpture," a provocative and quixotic show at the Whitney; and we muffed the opportunity to evaluate American contributions to the arts of design and environment. But we are never going to look at ourselves in the same way again, and the gains in self-knowledge have been enormous.

If there is one single beneficiary of all this attention it is undoubtedly Thomas Jefferson; he has been turned from a cardboard patriot cutout into a man of superbly educated interests and tastes who tugged and pulled a young country into the avant-garde world of art and sensibility. His monuments—the University of Virginia, Monticello—are fully appreciated in their proper context for the first time. His enthusiasms are finally shared.

Not the least important in this context is an excellent Palladio show that is part of the Italian Government's contribution to the Bicentennial. Organized by the Centro Internazionale di Architettura Andrea Palladio of Vicenza, it was shown first in Vicenza in 1973-74. It then traveled to Vienna and London, where it was importantly displayed and supplied with substantial catalogues.

The exhibition came to the United States this year through the efforts of Boston historian Walter Muir Whitehill and Frederick D. Nichols of the University of Virginia, who also co-authored an accompanying book called "Palladio in America." The show has been expanded beyond the body of Palladio's 16th-century work to include the formal and elegant building that was produced in America in the late 18th and early 19th century, and again at the turn of the 20th century. The point made is that the roots of American building are as firmly Palladian as were its stylistic sources in Georgian England. One can hardly dispute Professor Nichols's flat-out claim that Palladio was the most influential architect who ever lived.



"The roots of American building are firmly Palladian." Above, a model of Palladio's Tempietto at Maser.

The show opened last April in the newly-restored Rotunda of the University of Virginia (Jefferson's gem out of Rome by way of Palladio), moved to Washington this summer, and is currently on view through Friday at an appropriately classical landmark of the early Republic, the First Bank of the United States in Philadelphia, where it is being sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania and the National Park Service. After Philadelphia, it will go to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

New York was a near-miss. The exhibition has just been added to the city's schedule for next spring, because the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, the design branch of the Smithsonian that has just opened in the Carnegie Mansion, has spoken for it. There was a thundering silence from the rest of the city's art institutions, where architecture is seen neither as a crowd pleaser nor "money-raiser," nor central to cultural chic.

I caught the show at the Cocoran on one of those sultry summer days that Washington specializes in, the sky alternately burning blue and threateningly black, when a langorous, stiffling heat builds up to a climactic thunderstorm and the streets are swept by sheets of hot rain.

'Palladio was the most influential architect who ever lived.'

Inside the Corcoran the heat hung like wet bricks in the unconditioned air. The villas and churches of the Veneto seemed coolly remote.

At the same time, they were extraordinarily real and very much present, in superbly crafted wood models and photographs. These models are a visual and tactile miracle. All built to the same scale, in pale, unfinished natural wood, they are an impeccable recreation of style and intent. The only missing element—the marvelous sense of solid old stone—is provided by the pictures.

The three-dimensional experience of these masterworks, from the exquisite Tempietto at Maser to the magnificent Palazzo Chiericati, can be second only to the actual experience itself, with the advantage of being able to view the buildings all together in the models. In this form, the sheer impact of the Palladian oeuvre is spectacular.

What might have once seemed peripheral is now elegantly defined as central to the development of American building art. It is like having the pieces of a puzzle snap

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