ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE REVEALING ART OF ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS ARCHITECTURAL DRAW

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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The Revealing Art Of Architectural Drawings

A selection of 45 of the finest architectural drawings in the outstanding collection of Avery Architectural Library at Columbia University are currently on view (through January 28, Monday through Friday, nine to five) at the Low Memorial Library on the Columbia campus. The show has been funded—underwritten, as they say in television—by the New York Bicentennial Commission, and at the risk of sounding churlishly ungrateful, one must note that it has been under-underwritten because the catalogue is not illustrated, which is like the sizzle without the steak, or the smoke without the fire.

But this elegant, fleeting sampling of the "diversity, richness and poetry of American architecture," in the words of Adolph K. Placzek, head of the Avery Library, serves to tease us into an awareness of the range and quality of the treasures Avery holds. Buildings are the clothes a society wears, cut to its taste and image; they are the way it presents itself to the world and posterity. Architectural drawings are a particularly revealing kind of art.

These drawings, which date from the 18th century to the present, can be looked at in several ways. They can be seen as beautiful examples of architectural draftsmanship, precise and sensuous at the same time, an enlightening index to American cultural aspirations and ideals, a series of socio-esthetic documents on the built environment, or a simple history of American architectural design. They have many levels of meaning and pleasure.

First, the pleasure—which is almost enough in itself. These are, for the most part, exquisite drawings, full of charm, skill and gentle subtleties. If there is a single word that, surprisingly, characterizes almost all of them over nearly two centuries, it is delicacy. The architectural draftsman's art is one of both exact specification and evocative nuance; the purpose may be the giving of accurate information in an elevation or working drawing, or the persuasive transmittal of a concept to a client through a perspective rendering.

All of these drawings are therefore marked by a combination of stringent clarity and romantic suggestion, no matter how much the style of both building and rendering may change. The early designs, from George Hadfield's Adam-influenced house of 1798 through the more modish, classical revivals of Martin Thompson and Andrew Jackson Davis in the 1820's and 30's, are confections of controlled, pale watercolor washes in cream, blue, green, beige and even pink, accented by fine pen lines and neat gray shadows.

The same refined ink-and-wash technique carries through the midcentury Gothic and Tuscan villas and churches of Richard Upjohn and James Renwick Jr. One can only be enchanted by the innocent eclecticism of this world of high architectural fashion, with its orderly air of refinement and grace.

But this delicacy reaches a degree of startling brilliance in the pencil sketches of Louis Sullivan. To find some of the boldest and most original work in American architecture in representations the size of one's hand, delineated with a feather touch, is not only unexpected, it is overwhelming.

A tiny, three-inch elevation contains the entire facade of the Farmers and Merchants Union Bank of Columbus, Wisconsin, of 1919, with each element in place and all of the ornament clearly indicated. Another five inches defines the building's arcaded side. Everything is there. These sketches are literally miniatures, and they burst with invention and mastery. They must be some of the most magical drawings in the history of architecture.

That same delicacy comes full circle in drawings from the firm of Venturi and Rauch in the 1970's. A concise linear style creates an almost abstract rendering of uniform ink lines reduced to a minimum geometry. This sophisticated treatment of the vernacular 20th-century street scene that the architects champion has a measured finesse that makes the ordinary extraordinary. The very elegance of the drawings provides a subtle paradox of meaning and intent. The city's "messy reality," which architects until now have not designed to recognize, is imbued with both art and order by the architectural intellect.

The show's drawings are equally rewarding as architectural history. The change from Martin Thompson's to Calvin Pollard's Greek Revival within a ten-year span, for example, is both subtle and startling. The flat arcades and pilasters that overlay Thompson's formal facade for New York's Second Merchants Exchange like a light, rich screen—a treatment that survived from Serlio and Palladio in Italy through Wren and Jones in England—is stripped away in the Third Merchants Exchange for the severe surfaces and openings of an austere romantic classicism.

As eclecticism and romanticism grew in the 19th century, the buildings ceased to be pure, isolated objects. The natural landscape appeared with the Gothic revival. One of the show's stars, Upjohn's beautiful 1839 watercolor presentation drawing for New York's Trinity Church (built in the 1840's) at the foot of Wall Street, includes a bucolic graveyard more suggestive of the English countryside than a growing city.

As styles became more ambitious, reflecting more money and higher aspirations, drawings and designs became freer and more "artful." Wilson Eyre Jr. produced white marble French palaces and stone-and-shingle country houses in the 1880's and 90's with equal conviction and the same drafting ease.

Paralleling the establishment tastemakers were the innovators, Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. (Unfortunately, Avery possesses no drawings by H. H. Richardson.) The perspective of Wright's Dana House dining room of 1903, with its wall murals of nature-motifs above wood dadoes,

Continued on Page 35

Architectural Drawings

Continued from Page 31

hanging lamps and plants and carefully casual bric-a-brac including a small Venus de Milo, brings the Arts and Crafts movement immediately to life—complete to the right flower arrangement.

The 1920's brought a new scale; the skyscraper became the object of presentation. For anyone of the right age, Henry Hornbostel's Conté crayon perspective of Pittsburgh's Grant Building of 1927—pure Beaux Arts-Deco—evokes a sense of both nostalgic familiarity and startling rediscovery.

Rediscovery, in fact, is the tacit theme of the show; given their historical relationships, even familiar buildings look new. Suddenly there appears to be more to see and understand in all of the work. And one wants still more—not in the usual way that architectural drawings are shown or published, as random works of art, but as they reveal the esthetic and intellectual spirit of their time, in a context of continuity and change. The American architectural heritage has grown surprisingly rich and strong. ■