

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Avery Library Shows Off Its Riches

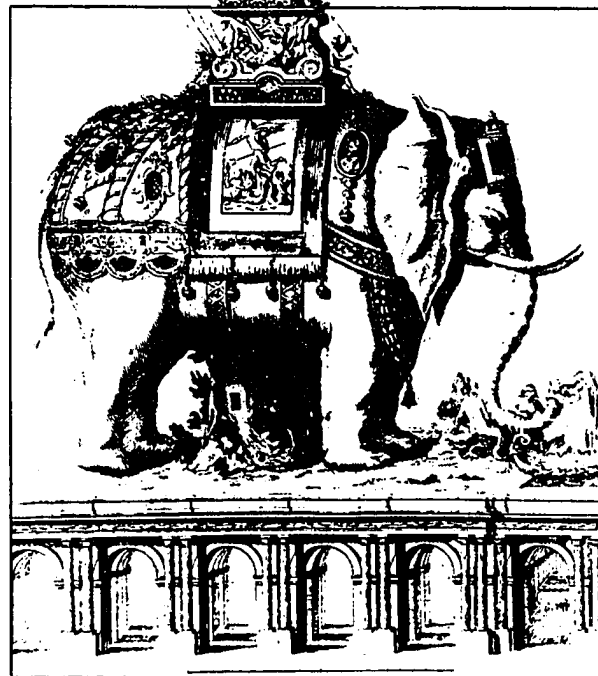
Truth is elusive if it exists at all; history, which is supposed to be truth, is the construct of those who record events. The idea of truth no longer has the power it once had over men's minds; it has ceased to be seen as immutable or absolute. Revisionism has become the cottage industry of historians.

But the pursuit of truth goes on. The desire to know what really happened, to record and interpret human events and creative impulses, is compelling. And the only reliable sources are the original documents that every age leaves behind in the archives that are the haunts of scholars.

Research is the life-blood of history. You can take the historian out of the library, but you can't take the library out of the historian. Contrary to popular belief, these repositories are not dead places for dull people. I always enter a library with pleasurable anticipation; I always leave it with new information that changes some aspect of my vision of the world. These discoveries can be made only by holding the actual works of art or literature, or the original articles of faith, in one's own hands, assessing them with one's own eyes, receiving the author's direct messages. I suppose one might call this an authentic experience, of which there are all too few left to be had.

I celebrate libraries often, as any regular reader knows. And the library that I celebrate most is the one that has contributed most to my own knowledge and development — Avery Architectural Library at Columbia University. This time the occasion is a special one — an exhibition of selected acquisitions of the past 20 years, prepared to honor the retiring Avery Librarian, Adolf K. Placzek, under whose sensitive and concerned stewardship the material was gathered and the library has grown in size and stature. The exhibition will be on view in the rotunda of Low Memorial Library through July 14.

Avery is acknowledged to be the greatest architectural library in the world. It contains 160,000 volumes, of which 10,000 are rare books, and a collection of 30,000 drawings. Mr. Placzek is fond of saying that it is possible to consult everything from the latest pamphlet on solar heating to the



An 18th-century proposal for the Champs Elysées—"a most elegant folly"

first incunabulum on architecture, the treatise published in 1485 by Leon Battista Alberti.

Among the highlights of his directorship have been the publication of "Drawings of Louis Henry Sullivan," recording one of the library's outstanding collections, and the

printing of one of its treasures, the long-lost Renaissance manuscript, "Sebastiano Serlio, On Domestic Architecture," written in the architect's own hand four centuries ago. (Reading that book in the original gives new meaning to that old cliché about bringing history alive.) Mr. Placzek is also responsible for the 19-volume index to periodicals in the Avery collection, which makes its rich resources available to scholars everywhere.

The current exhibition contains 77 examples of rare and beautiful acquisitions of the past two decades, selected from many hundreds of possibilities. Their range is from the Renaissance to the 20th century, from monuments to fantasies. The display is representative of the library's main strengths — rare books and manuscripts, sketch books, drawings and engraved suites, or series. The choices were made by Lawrence R. McGinnis, a former Columbia doctoral student and now a professor at the New York State University at Binghamton, and Herbert Mitchell, Avery's curator of rare books, who made many of the suggestions for purchase; they were assisted by Janet Parks, the Avery archivist.

According to the catalogue, which was made possible by private donations and the Architectural History Foundation, this is a display "not of the established classics of architectural history but rather of those special items — unique, as with the drawings and sketch books; very rare, as with the early printed books and engraved suites" that distinguish the Avery collection.

The show appeals on many levels. The examples on view have a staggering diversity. Even the most casual visitor will be struck by the dazzling range of images and styles — from the design of the facade of the Louvre done in 1665 by Pierre Cottart to the tower of the Empire State Building rendered sometime after 1950 by Chester B. Price.

For the specialist, the rarity and importance of the material make the display a notable event. The first edition of Julien Mauclerc's 16th-century treatise on the five classical orders of construction is noted, even with scholarly understatement, as "excessively rare"; the first edition of Ed-

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ward Pearce's 17th-century "Friezes of Ornament," done in the manner of Inigo Jones, for whom Pearce worked, is "of the utmost rarity." The Piranesi drawings of the unexecuted commission for San Giovanni in Laterano in Rome had been lost for 200 years; rediscovered, they joined Avery's important Piranesi collection through the generosity of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur M. Sackler.

For sheer delight, aside from their significance as documents, there are the "Vues d'Optiques" of Jacques Androuet du Cerceau, a set of unforgettable 16th-century architectural fantasies engraved in exaggerated perspective, or the ultimate and most elegant of follies, Charles François Ribart's 18th-century building in the shape of a colossal elephant ridden by the French king, which was meant to be placed at the end of the Champs Elysées to terminate the view from the Tuileries.

The American material of the 19th and 20th centuries is particularly strong. The library has archives of the work of Alexander Jackson Davis, Charles A. Platt, the brothers Greene and Greene, Ely Jacques Kahn and Philip C. Johnson, among others. There are the renderings of Hugh Ferriss and the photographs of Lewis Hine. There are surprises, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's beautiful drawing of an unknown and unexecuted apartment house for Pittsburgh, and Josiah Cleveland Cady's curious omnibus medievalism in the presentation drawing of his gigantic competition proposal for New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine. A watercolor of the entrance of the building at 1410 Broadway, done by Ely Jacques Kahn in 1930, shows Kahn's lively mastery of a colorful, "modernistic" ornament that is only beginning to be appreciated now.

It is increasingly clear that American documents are desperately in need of collection, conservation and study,

and that no single institution is dedicated to doing the job. The constant loss of important material is reaching crisis proportions. Avery's next step, being considered now — as the primary resource of a proposed Study Center for American Architecture — would be a superb and badly needed move in the right direction.

Many of Avery's acquisitions have been made possible by the library's firm band of friends, an unofficial group for whom there are neither glamorous parties nor membership drives. These include those architects and their families who have presented the work of a lifetime, scholars like Henry-Russell Hitchcock, who has already given his entire collection of Americana, foundations like the Edgar Kaufmann Charitable Trust, which has made purchase of important drawings and documents possible. Unfortunately, one cannot name them all here.

But not a little of Avery's distinguished reputation and contents are

due to a remarkable series of librarians, of whom Adolf Placzek is the seventh, serving from 1960 to 1980. His immediate predecessors were the preservationist James Van Derpool and the scholar Talbot Hamlin. Each director has represented a totally different kind of taste and talent; all have been united by their devotion to the uniqueness of Avery.

Under Mr. Placzek, the library grew in more than its collections. Two years ago, Columbia's architecture and fine arts libraries were brought together in a new \$5.5 million addition to the original McKim, Mead and White building constructed in 1912. The successful extension, which is underground, below a courtyard, was designed by Alexander Kouzmanoff of the Columbia architectural faculty. The entrance, appropriately, is still through the early Beaux Arts structure.

Mr. Placzek will be missed when he retires. All of us who work in the fields of architectural history and criticism are in his debt. He has been friend and mentor; even better, he has made each one of us feel that all of Avery's wonderful works are our own. His mark on the library and the collection is clear, but his mark on the rest of us is the intensely personal pleasure we take in the pursuit of the elusive truth at Avery, in company with the highest works of man. ■