

Architecture: THE EDUCATED EYE OF LOUIS KAHN

By Ada Louise Huxtable

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Architecture

THE EDUCATED EYE OF LOUIS KAHN

Exploring forms, light and space in his travel sketches, the great American architect found inspiration and meaning for his own buildings.

By Ada Louise Huxtable

Architects and gentlemen have had only one thing in common since the 18th century (when they were often gentlemen-architects): the Grand Tour. The final step in a classical and humanistic education, this obligatory itinerary of monuments, ruins and approved views of exotica and antiquity, both in Europe and the Middle East, was the finishing touch for a truly cultivated man.

That traditional pilgrimage and the educated eye it produced have been equally important to the 20th-century architect. For Louis I. Kahn, the American master whose death in 1974 unhappily ended a career that had slowly flowered into greatness in his late years, trips and travel sketches preceded the commissions that brought him fame — the government buildings at Ahmadabad, India, and Dacca, Bangladesh, the Salk Institute at La Jolla, Calif., and the museums at Fort Worth and Yale.

An exhibition of these drawings, shown publicly for the first time, has been organized by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and is now on a national tour. The show opens in New York on June 17 at the Drawing Center, 137 Greene Street, and runs through August 13.

The drawings on display span the years from 1913 to 1959; they also range from tentative to masterful, from student work to an assured, mature vision. The later studies, in particular, are clear evidence of Mr. Kahn's search for "meanings," as he put it, rather than for "style." Their thoughtful and even painful exploration reveals the way form, light and color, building and setting, can work together to create the lyrical synthesis in which the manmade and natural worlds combine to produce the highest form of art.

Louis Kahn dealt in elemental things: the weight of walls, the "shape" of space, the meeting of solid and void, of structure and sky. His response to these things involved a personal mysticism which informs many of the drawings and much of the architect's built work.

Mr. Kahn saw the buildings he recorded through the double lens of art

and history. In his drawings there are stylistic echoes — from the luminous vision of impressionism to the slick vitality of Art Deco. Some sketches are almost magically evocative of climate and place; others reduce everything to bold abstraction. At his best, Mr. Kahn extracted the poetic essence of built form from the environment.

All the drawings represent an odyssey of discovery and learning. They begin, like all young architects' Grand Tour sketchbooks, with realistically observed buildings and scenes. But the meticulously detailed pencil impressions of Tudor and Gothic buildings in London were soon succeeded by water-color paintings that exploded with rich tonalities when he reached Italy.

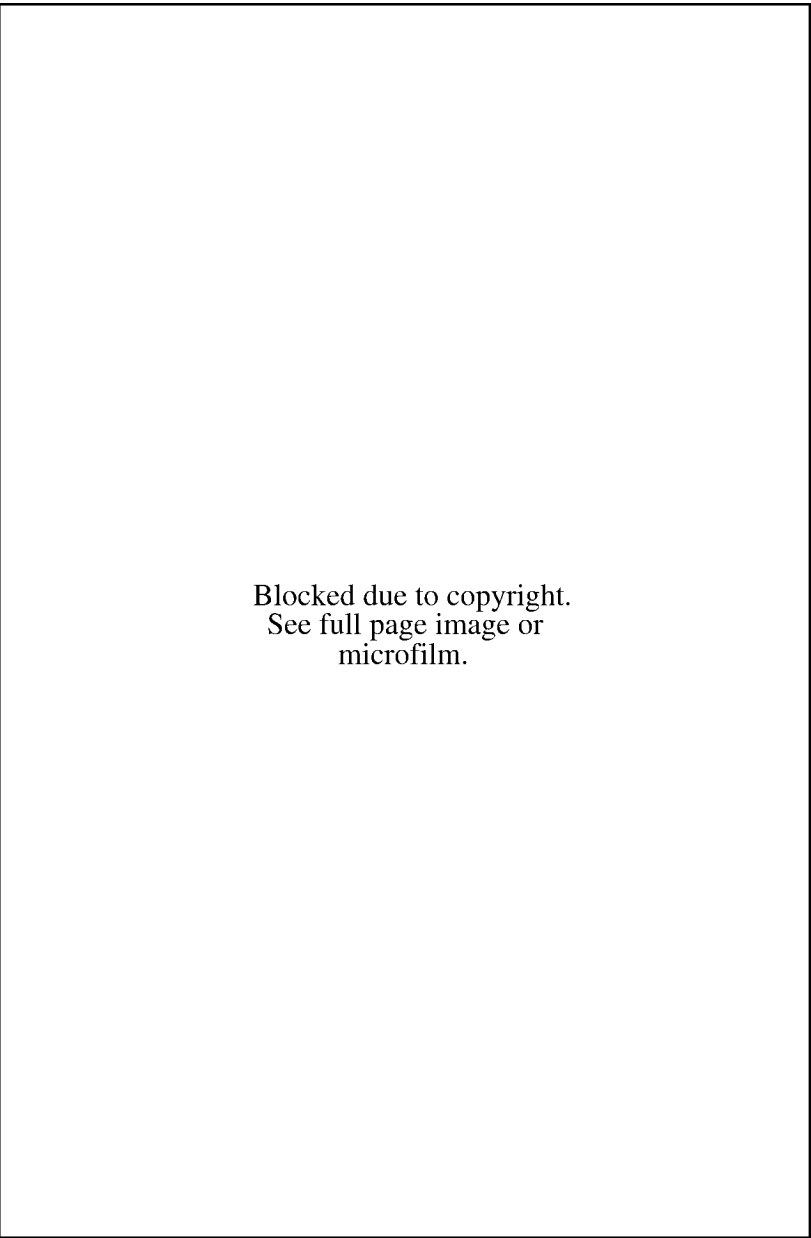
But it was a trip almost 25 years later, in 1951 — when Louis Kahn spent a sabbatical year as Architect in Residence at the American Academy in Rome — that resulted in the most stunning sketches. In this group, the uncertainties are gone; the search for his own expressive style has ended.

His bold pastel drawings of the Acropolis in Athens or the Temple of Apollo in Corinth are strikingly evocative of the warmth and brilliance of blue sky and golden stone; one is as aware of the presence of the gods as of their architecture.

No one has better caught the way Siena draws the visitor into its tilted russet and umber plaza as into the palm of a hand. The series of studies of the Pyramids are totally abstracted from the Egyptian desert as triangles of light and form. In each case, the architect-artist caught its intrinsic strengths and meanings.

These observations became the basis of the mastery of volume, plane and light that is the hallmark of Mr. Kahn's later work. He discovered the great lessons of architecture, partly through the awakening of his perceptions through these drawings, long before another generation of architects, bored with modernism, "reinvented" the past. The difference is that Mr. Kahn assimilated these lessons; he did not just play games with them.

Louis Kahn's drawings record his search for the essential art of architecture. His buildings are a testament to the fact that he found it—late in his life, and late in the age of the modern style—in time to produce some of the landmark structures of our century. ■



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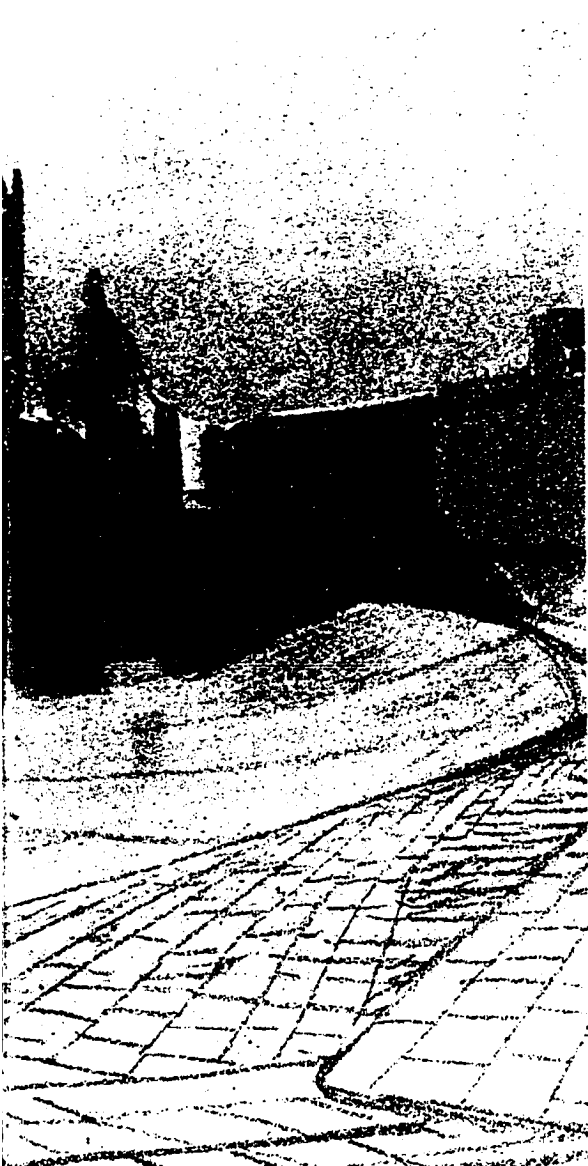
In this view of the center of Siena, Louis Kahn caught the drama of the tilted plaza that draws a visitor into it, as into the palm of a hand.



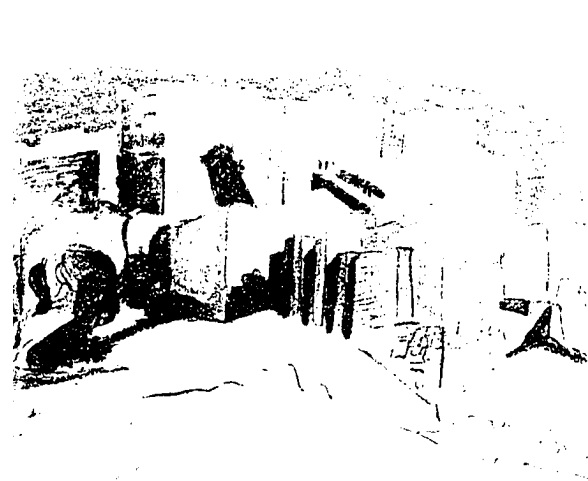
Louis I. Kahn, as he saw himself in 1949 when he was approaching the age of 50.



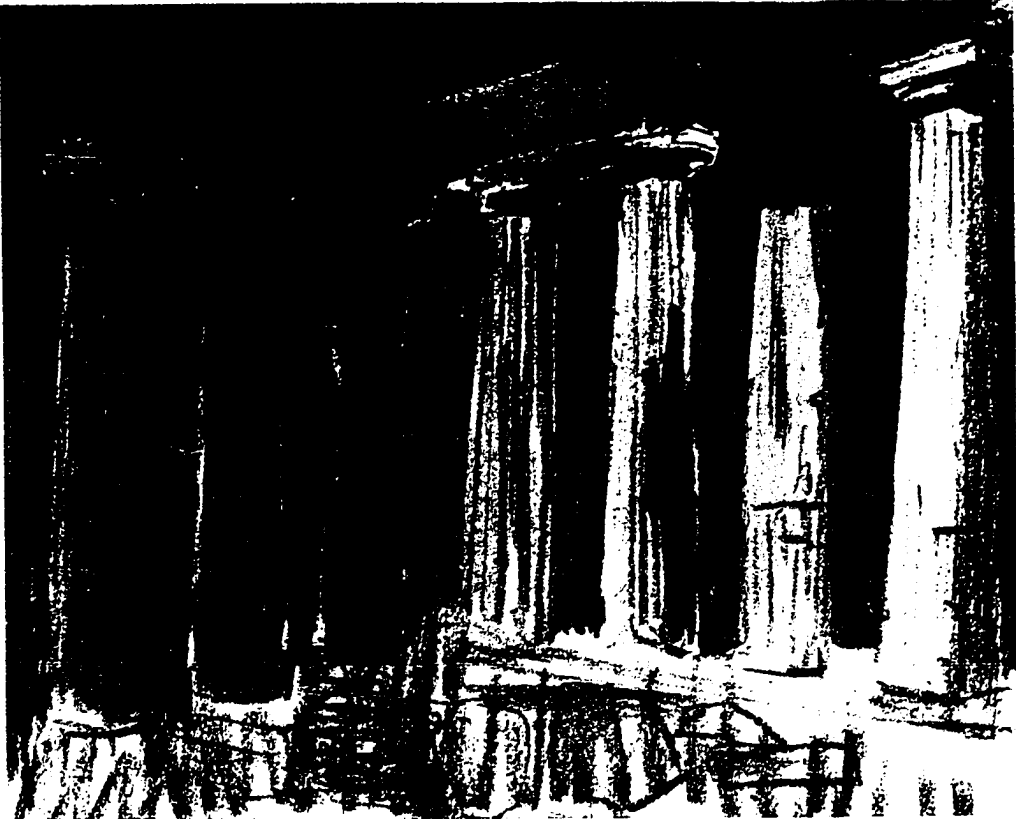
In this sketch of the Acropolis there



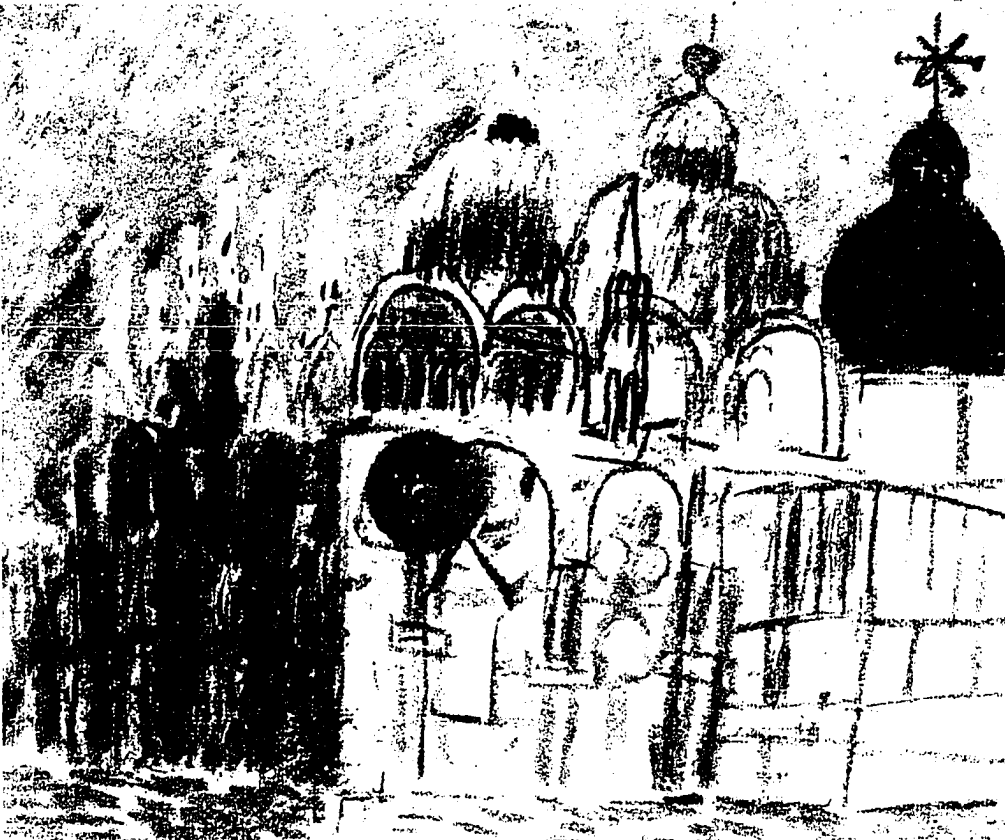
With bold, simple strokes, he defined surfaces and shapes by the way they caught the light.



is both delicacy and strength in the structural masses and in the way the ruins meet the sky.



At the Temple of Apollo in Corinth, Louis Kahn's interest was in conveying the powerful presence of the Doric columns rather than in a literal representation of them.



This free representation of St. Mark's in Venice, with the church's domes and arches suggested rather than detailed, is a burst of color, drawn quickly and with obvious delight.