ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Four Centuries of Drawings— A Record of Vision and Taste

The Cooper-Hewitt Museum continues to tease us with its treasures; the latest sampling of the seemingly bottomless resources of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design (2 East 91 Street) is an exhibition of architectural drawings called "Spectacular Spaces: Drawings From the Cooper-Hewitt Collections." Organized by Elaine Evans Dee, curator of the department of drawings and prints, and tightly installed in the small ground-floor galleries by Robin Parkinson, the show contains both familiar and unexpected delights and will be on view to June 1.

The 60-odd European and American examples on display range from the 16th to the 20th centuries and are a somewhat condensed version of a larger selection seen at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne last December and January as part of an exchange between the two institutions. A selection of the small museum's unique collection of drawings by the 19th-century, Cologne-born architect, Jacob Ignaz Hittorf, will come to New York at a future date. The Cooper-Hewitt loan was Cologne's first major show of architectural work, a genre that has become an increasingly popular attraction at museums and galleries in London, Paris and New York.

These "spectacular spaces" are often equally spectacular drawings. They are both delicate and bold; there are painstakingly detailed or loosely evocative studies for buildings, interiors, monuments, festivals, theaters and imaginary places executed in precise pen or pencil or stroked in magically with suggestive brush and wash. Their elegant virtuosity delights the eye and their stylistic variety engages the mind. Part of their charm is the way in which they provide a fascinating record of vision and taste, revealing how the art of architecture has always been used to set the stage for life and history.

The show makes no pretense at scholarly selection or a balanced historical viewpoint. It is best enjoyed as a fine potluck tasting of the Cooper-Hewitt collections. There are obvious lacunae where those collections are weak, such as in the conspicuous absence of drawings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi. The 20th century is rather eccentrically represented by an offbeat selection of American Beaux Arts practitioners and the visionary delineator Hugh Ferriss. There is not a single European master of the modern movement. The visionary or fantasy aspect requested by the Cologne museum clearly accounts for some of this imbalance. But listing omissions would be an endless and pointless exercise.

There is a rich representation of the Bibiena family and Giuseppe Barberi, in which the collections are strong, and of lesser-known Italians of the 17th and 18th centuries. The 19th century gives equal time to innocently grandiose scenes of Montezuma's palace and Hindu pagodas by Antonio Basoli that somehow lack the awe implicit in their ambitious themes, and an impeccably drawn series of a Gothic-style, English country house by an unidentified designer, with every trefoil and finial beautifully detailed in precise, fine pencil. In a bit of a twist, Hector Guimard, as the exponent of Art Nouveau in France, shares turn-of-the-century honors with exponents of the Beaux Arts in America, Whitney Warren and Ely Jacques Kahn.

The very randomness of the selection offers the fun of the unexpected, and there is something to be said for the simple pleasure of a visual experience for which no rigorous intellectual arguments are made. What ties everything together is the theme — the art of architecture in single-minded pursuit of its most universal, controlling and ideal state, and the marvelous and magic play of places and

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spaces that results from this preoccupation. Human figures, when they appear at all, are grace notes, almost invariably underscaled to a staggering array of architectural features.

The character of these "places" is memorable and haunting. The 18th-century stage sets of that prolific (in both artists and drawings) family, the Bibiena, convey the very essence of the Baroque — a style in which the Renaissance reconstruction of Roman components is used to define, not just classical orders, but the shifting and overlapping movements of planes and levels and multiple-focus space in the most sophisticated and dramatic manipulation of enclosure ever devised.

Batteries of arcades and pilasters and fanfares of stairs lead the eye up to balconies and down vaulted corridors where columns and balustrades play games with solidity and transparency in a fugue of rich and elaborate forms.

Beautifully executed in black ink and washes of subtle browns, blues and grays, these fantasies are more than the archetypal palaces that so many purport to be; they are symbols and metaphors for the kind of ennobling magnificence with which man has always tried to clothe his public and ceremonial endeavors. The world of these drawings is an ideal world, free of realistic restraints, with a through-the-looking-glass quality; one feels that beyond the picture frame there is, for example, an 18th century more tangible and real than any of its surviving monuments.

In a different vein, the concepts of Giuseppe Barberi (1746-1809) are already closer to the austerities of the later Romantic Classicism that produced the overscaled, surreal stylography of Ledoux and Boulleé. But what is pushed to the monumentally macabre by those late 18th- and early 19th-century French architects is full of light and motion in Barberi's skilled sketches. His facile, free use of pen and brush infuses the massive subjects with a joyful vitality. A Gothic courtyard piled high with arches is a weightless fantasy, with spiral columns run up by a hand that is almost quicker than the eye. There is nothing static about the repeated rhythms of a Grand Palais that rush impatiently to the paper's edge.

All architecture is illusion, Elaine Dee tells us in the introduction to the catalogue. Drawing is the unique instrument of illusion that serves every phase of the building art from the initial, conceptual design notes to presentation drawings for the client and working drawings from which the construction is carried out. It also serves to take the architect's creative ideas and personal passions beyond practical restrictions for exercises in "perfection" and imaginative fantasy — architecture for art's sake and drawing for its own particular pleasures.

These images may be the meticulously detailed palace doorways of Filippo Juvarra, for example, drawn in 1708 — as precise in their measured ink rendering as they are meltingly lovely in the gray and rose washes over chalk that define columns and rusticated walls. Or they can be totally fanciful, like Giovanni Paolo Panini's composition of Roman ruins with the Farnese Hercules and the Pantheon, of about 1750, or the "ruin fantasy" by Charles-Louis Clerisseau (1722-80) with its tumbled tomb and columns.

Between the immutable monument and the evanescent dream is a whole other category of temporary architecture — the tempietos and triumphal arches that marked royal weddings and the return of heroes; the design of artifacts and scenery for festivals and special events. From stage sets to cenotaphs, this was the architecture of illusion at its most unfettered.

The ultimate achievement in this category was the royal masque — a participatory theatrical performance devised for the entertainment of the courts of England and France that combined equal parts of allegory and engineering. Princesses costumed as goddesses descended from the heavens in chariots while mountains heaved and palaces disappeared and temples replaced them in clouds of smoke, to music and thunder and lightning. These were the early sound and light shows, the first "happenings." Architects were the set designers and the special-effects men. Inigo Jones created masques for the Queen of England for which splendid drawings survive.

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The drawing by Girolamo Fontana (1690-1714) in the Cooper-Hewitt collection (illustrated in the catalogue), of palatial stairs ascending heavenward in multiple tiers, is a good example of the genre. Rising like a bombe glacée from a wildly romantic grotto at its base, the palace terminates in cream-puff clouds topped by a draped allegorical figure. In another scene, a similar arched and staired setting is flanked by a proscenium of massed caryatids on one side and paired, garlanded columns on the other, the whole framed by billowing clouds. (The smoke outlets of today's discos, the audio-visual descendant of the masque, can't hold a candle, or a laser, to those cloud machines.)

Today there is no thunder and lightning; the drawings of the "new" eclectics who claim to be carrying on a version of the great classical tradition, with their playful columns and willful porticos, seem thin and tame by contrast. They have not yet mastered the creation of those special worlds in which time stands still when we confront them in the frame. These are the illusions of which reality is made. ■