The New Criterion

Art February 2017

Adam on the Thames

by Benjamin Riley

On "Robert Adam's London" at Sir John Soane's Museum, London.

Of all the sobriquets applied to Robert Adam (1728–1792), the most elucidative of his work in London—drawings of which are on view at the Soane through March 11—may be the one he gave himself: "Bob the Roman."1 Adam had traveled to Rome as part of the scrum of young gentlemen seeking a classical education in situ, but unlike most of these dabblers he was not a young milord. Indeed, though Adam occasionally affected noble pretensions in Rome—"a good lie well timed sometimes does well" he wrote, damningly—he was there on official business as the shepherd of Charles Hope-Weir, a younger son of the Earl of Hopetoun, whose country manse Adam's father William had helped design and build. Once having arrived in Rome, Adam took to studying the monuments of antiquity: "I hope to have my ideas greatly enlarged and my taste formed upon the solid foundation of genuine antiquity . . . my whole conception of architecture will become much more noble than I could have ever attained by staying in Britain."

Rome was to prove Adam's great tutor, the source of his most solid architectural ideas, though he was sure to warn his family not to address letters to him with the phrase "architect" appended to his name, the social stigma being too much for the vain young buck to bear. Though he eventually fell out with Hope, Adam installed himself in a rarefied milieu of British gentlemen, taking quarters at the Casa Guarnieri, where the Duke of Bridgewater and Robert Wood, the antiquarian, were staying. Adam seems to have preferred the company of his countrymen to that of the native Italians, remarking in a letter to his sisters that "this country abounds in vermin of all ranks who, when they have no stranger to steal from, rob one another."

Rome was to prove Adam's great tutor.

He spent much of his time in Rome sketching under the tutelage of Clérisseau and Piranesi, with Piranesi even dedicating his book of *vedute* of the Campus Martius to Robert. His letters home reveal Rome to have been a heady mix of nobles and architects, the latter of whom would go on to be his competitors in London and for whom Robert rarely had a kind word.

Of William Chambers, whose Somerset House was built not far from Adam's Adelphi Terrace, "His taste is more architectonic than picturesque. . . . His sense is middling but his appearance is genteel." On the then-penurious Mylne brothers, "They have neither money nor education to make themselves known to strangers . . . few people know there are such lads in Rome, but as they apply very closely and will undoubtedly make considerable progress, one does not know what may be the consequence with the fickle, new-fangled, ignorant Scotch nobles and gentles who may prefer them to people of more taste and judgement."

There is no doubt who those people of taste and judgement are. On James "Athenian" Stuart, the man who was to become his principal London rival, Adam offered the scathing verdict: "pityfullisimo." Adam, doubtless, had no shortage of confidence. But even as Roman life drained him, he never lost his sense of humor. His letters are filled with comical references to his bibulous and lecherous manservant Donald, to whom he consistently referred as either "The King of Sleep" or simply "The King." "He drinks nothing but wine and eats more in a day than he used to do in a week and is turned very fat. He'll take but caukly [stiff] we hame again [before we are home], silly man."

Adam's final days in Rome were spent in an orgy of work and socializing, having taken a box at the opera while simultaneously undertaking a program of sketching Rome's baths, to be reproduced in a book that would "attack Vitruvius, Palladio, and those blackguards of ancient and modern architecture, sword in hand." The book never appeared, but Adam maintained his renegade streak through his career. His Roman adventure came to an end by spring 1757: Adam declared that "when a man can no longer make the same figure in the same town it is surely much more advisable to live like a scrub in another." Of course Adam could never live like a scrub—he exited Rome in a green chariot. Stops in Florence, Bologna, Padua, and Venice were mere prelude to the trip that would make Adam's career—his visit to Diocletian's palace at Spalatro (now Split, Croatia). At Spalatro Adam saw the ruins of the Roman Emperor's palace, grandly fronting the Adriatic, a vision which would inspire much of his later work in London and which provided the basis for a popular book of sketches. The ruins, "not only picturesque, but magnificent," spurred Adam's desire to complete a project on a similarly grand scale in London—a chance he would have years later in the Adelphi development.

The Adelphi represents at once the zenith and the nadir of the Adam career in London. While it was the realization of Adam's ambition for a grand urban project, it was also nearly the undoing of his nascent career and a source of great shame. The drawing presented here (ca. 1768–69) of the Royal Terrace, the Adelphi's riverfront, palatial block of houses, shows the scale of Adam's imagination. A monumental central block with thirty-three bays, which conceals eleven houses with the end and central houses ornamented with palmette strips running the length of the elevation, the design mimics the majestic waterfront palace that Adam had seen in Spalatro and adapts it to Georgian needs. As impressive as the Adelphi design is, the moneymaking scheme attached to it would have been even more remarkable, had it not been an abject failure. The Adam brothers—for the architectural firm in London was a family concern—had taken the lease of the Adelphi site for ninety-nine years from the penurious Duke of St Albans, in debtors' exile in

Brussels, and thought at the time they had gotten rather a good deal. They borrowed heavily to build the houses, allegedly employing fellow Scots to build quickly to the sound of bagpipers.

The rent on the houses would make a fine sum, but the scheme rested on the construction of wharves beneath the Royal Terrace, which the brothers intended to rent to the Ordnance Board. Securing permission to build the wharves was a task in itself, requiring a special Act of Parliament and nominally usurping the City's patrimony. Censorious comment was swift in coming:

Four Scotchmen by the name of Adams,

Who keep their coaches and their madams,

Quoth John, in sulky mood to Thomas,

"Have stole the very river from us."

The Adams would never work in London on a similar scale again.

The Adam brothers were already begrudged as Scotsmen, and especially so as friends of the Earl of Bute, the former Prime Minister, loathed by many of London's English. When the Ordnance Board declined to rent the wharves, the Adams were left at sixes and sevens. Although the houses were let as expected, with David Garrick taking the first residence, the loss of the wharf income, coupled with a run on Scottish banks, put the success of the scheme in jeopardy. The ever-cunning Adams devised a new plan to rescue the development. They would distribute the remaining unrented houses via a lottery, also requiring an Act of Parliament, and simultaneously auction off at Christie's the antiquities Robert had accumulated on the Continent. Despised by many for their opportunism in the wharf plan, the brothers invited more opprobrium with the lottery. Horace Walpole, always the wasp, sarcastically remarked: "What patronage of the arts in Parliament, to vote the City's land to these brothers, and then sanctify the sale of the houses by a bubble." Despite the shame of the lottery, the requisite funds were raised and the Adelphi development was saved. That the brothers themselves won a number of tickets, allowing them to retain the leases to many of the Adelphi buildings, was convenient, if highly suspicious. The project was salvaged, but the Adams' reputations were significantly damaged—they would never work in London on a similar scale again.

Even with the calumny surrounding the project, the Adelphi stood as a bold essay in a new style of London building. Contemporary comment surrounding the architecture was mostly favorable, with one observer exclaiming that the Adelphi comprised "serious and monumental structures. They could make us wish that Robert Adam had designed Imperial Delhi!" Not all were so pleased. Walpole moaned that the buildings were "laced down the seams, like a soldier's trull in a regimental old coat." But if the buildings were controversial then, they seem now to be a stunningly original and influential model. Thomas Cubitt's work in Belgravia—notably Eaton and

Belgrave Squares—represents the apotheosis of the palace-front trend, and owes a great deal to Adam's daring work at the Adelphi (not least the ascension of stucco, which Adam pioneered). Ultimately, Adam's major achievement was his translation of Roman antecedents into a cosmopolitan London style, cleverly referencing classical models while not slavishly parroting them.

While Adam's exteriors worked off his Roman models, his interiors are arguably more original formulations—energetic expressions of a classicizing idiom without concern for pesky notions of "authenticity" that might plague contemporary practitioners. His ceilings, well-represented here, are masterpieces of color and pattern, their pastel sorbet-like tones forming abstract confections that must have delighted owners fortunate enough to have them installed in their houses. The most striking design included here is from Northumberland House (1770), the London seat of the Percys that fronted the Strand until its 1874 demolition. A rare Adam use of glass, the ceiling centers on a circular medallion peopled by muses, which is in turn framed by a banded octagon, alternating Etruscan tracery and scalloped fans, which leads out to more tracery, half-lunettes, and an almost roped golden border. If the design sounds complicated, that's because it is—the whole tableau is magnificently labyrinthine, an exercise in exuberance. Though said to be inspired by work at the Villa Madama outside Rome, the polychrome ceiling, which complemented more colored glass in the Northumberland House drawing room, is all Adam—an audacious rendering of disparate elements into a coherent, fecund whole.

There is an air of nostalgia that hangs about the show, a muffled lament for London's lost buildings. Though the Blitz cost London many of its treasures, a number of Adam buildings were lost for a less sinister but equally disruptive reason: London's expansion. Northumberland House was pulled down to connect new roads to the Victoria Embankment. Lansdowne House was pocked in 1930 by the creation of Fitzmaurice Place, which connected Curzon Street and Berkeley Square. Number 20 Soho Square was demolished in 1924 to make room for a double-fronted office building with a massive Doric portico, a brutal and unfeeling replacement for the comparatively reticent Adam façade that stood there from 1771. Most notably, the Adelphi's Royal Terrace was demolished to make way for the "New Adelphi," a towering piece of Art Deco, which the Pevsner guide rightly calls "savagely ungraceful . . . in a transatlantic commercial idiom." London's ascendance was bad news for the stock of Adam buildings, as it was for the Georgian era as a whole. Private houses in prime locations were too valuable to keep up; it is difficult to justify a home where offices could sit, and it is equally difficult to convert eighteenth-century domestic spaces into places where paper can be efficiently pushed.

Adam interiors are classical phantasms.

The survival of Number 20 St James's Square is therefore even more remarkable. After multiple twentieth-century commercial owners, the freehold has once again been purchased by a private owner who plans to reconvert the structure to domestic use. Through its various

owners, the building's interiors have been preserved, a stroke of good fortune. The plans for the building are on show here and give a feel for an overlooked aspect of Adam's architecture. While justifiably lauded for his sense of external "movement" in façades, there is a graceful sense of procession at work in his floorplans too. Square drawing rooms give way to apsidal parlors, all patterned with exquisite moldings, painted panels by Zucchi, Wedgwood tablets, and scagliola chimneypieces. Adam interiors are classical phantasms, wholly unsuited for our stripped-down modern age, and for that even more charming. His gift for variation—both in ornament and in building plan—though clearly of an era now lost, still beguiles the contemporary observer.

With over 9,000 drawings in its Adam volume, it seems unlikely the Soane will run out of new drawings to exhibit for the foreseeable future and as long as the museum keeps organizing shows as clever and expository as this one, there is no reason the drawings should ever go back in the vault. Frances Sands, the Soane's curator of Adam drawings, has done an admirable job in pulling together a compelling set of material from the nearly endless Adam archive. The inclusion of Richard Horwood's 1792–99 map of London, which is dotted with numbers corresponding to the drawings and displayed in the show's first room, is an immensely useful guide, allowing the visitor to place Adam's extensive work in geographical context. Sir John Soane's Museum is one of London's treasure boxes, and this show is a gleaming example of the Museum's potential to produce tightly edited shows around a single topic. We can hope for many more in the future.

---

1 "Robert Adam's London" opened at Sir John Soane's Museum, London, on November 30, 2016 and remains on view through March 11, 2017.

Benjamin Riley is managing editor of *The New Criterion*.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 35 Number 6 , on page 48

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2017/2/adam-on-the-thames