

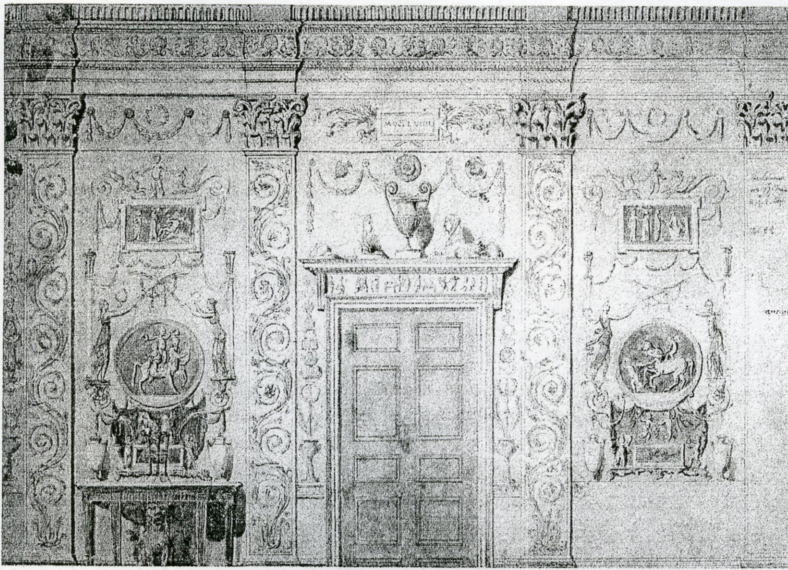
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Architect at the fountain- head

An exhibition in New York rescues the 18th-century polymath James 'Athenian' Stuart from the unjust criticism of his peers, writes **David Adshead**.

Painting is my Wife I think, & Architecture my Mistress' 'What Pity 'tis then Sir, that you have *no Living Issue* by either!' Francis Hayman's witty riposte to James 'Athenian' Stuart's idle musing on the two principal strands of his career is as likely to have tickled as it is to have stung him, but, in its half-truth, this reported exchange cuts deep to the heart of Stuart's maddeningly elusive legacy. Although the widespread influence of his four-volume publication *The Antiquities of Athens*, evident in the Greek-revival architecture of Britain, the USA and numerous other countries, proclaims him – to architectural historians at least – to have been a seminal figure, his story is little-known by the interested public and question marks have long hovered over his capabilities as a practising architect-designer.

Stuart's 'Athenian' sobriquet is a not insignificant key. In the hands of friends and admirers it was a mark of approbation, for his rivals and detractors – among whom the brothers Adam were as vicious as any – one of imprecation. In the mid-18th



1 Design for the wall decoration of the Painted Room, Spencer House, London, by James Stuart (1713-88), 1759. Pen and ink, grey wash and watercolour, 28.5 x 40.5 cm. The British Museum, London

what the cultural élite of western Europe had no direct knowledge of fell easy victim to hyperbole. The logic of the Philhellenes, in conjuring up the myth of Greece, suggested that 'Architecture owes all that is perfect to the Greeks' (Abbé Laugier) and argued that a return to primary sources – synonymous with a return to Nature – and the imitation of ancient works, was the only 'way for the moderns to become great, even inimitable' (Winckelmann).

To those, however, in the potentially lucrative business of making and selling architecture – ambitious men such as Robert Adam and Sir William Chambers – to have a potential rival possessed of just such first-hand experiences represented a very real competitive threat. Professional hostility to Stuart and censure of his architectural efforts makes sense when seen through this lens: 'the Athenian', it was feared, would spearhead a revolutionary new movement in architecture that might overshadow their particular version of neo-classicism. To thwart this, Adam, who dismissed Stuart's architectural designs as 'pityfulissimo', even contemplated making his own lightning survey of Athens. For his part, Chambers wrote: 'it hath afforded Occasion of Laughter to every intelligent Architect to see with what Pomp the Grecian Antiquities have lately been ushered into the World & what Encomiums have been lavished upon things that in Reality deserve little or no Notice' These diametrically opposed interpretations of the superiority and relevance to 18th-century British architecture of ancient Greek models have long-plagued our impressions and

understanding of Stuart's life and works.

To this cocktail of contradiction must be added the qualities of the man himself, with all his strengths and human frailties: a talented artist who raised himself from the 'utmost abyss of penury' and gained the lifelong friendship and support of an influential group of aristocratic patrons, Stuart was an autodidact driven to polymathy through natural curiosity who exhibited 'a sheer joy in designing' But the balance sheet also reveals an apparent inability to see ventures through despite enthusiastic beginnings (the very breadth of his interests denying single-minded focus), diffidence and disorder in his business practices to the point of claiming a 'contempt of money', and debilitating poor health in later life – although the attacks of gout that at times prevented him from writing or drawing were probably the self-inflicted byproduct of his 'epicurianism'

The exhibition at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, and the accompanying book, together provide as comprehensive

2 Tripodic tea urn designed by James Stuart (1713-88) and made by Matthew Boulton (1728-1809), c. 1770. Gilt copper on wood and tortoiseshell stand. Collection of the Duke of Northumberland



an account of Stuart's life and works, and the reverberation of their legacy, as it is possible to imagine. As both curator of the exhibition and editor of the book, Susan Weber Soros is owed a considerable debt of gratitude by all those interested in the origins and mechanics of Enlightenment neo-classicism for bringing together a tellingly dazzling assemblage of objects from institutions and private collections on both sides of the Atlantic and for coaxing profoundly illuminating essays from no fewer than 13 scholars of international standing. Furnished with drawings, paintings, furniture, vases, medals and ephemera associated with Stuart's life, and with newly commissioned photographs of his buildings, interiors and monumental sculpture, the exhibition-goer is given every opportunity to make an informed evaluation of Stuart's flawed genius.

Early works on paper reveal Stuart's extraordinary transformation in Italy from penurious and itinerant fan-painter to connoisseur-antiquary, able to mix confidently with, and to advise, the English *milordi* who elevated him to membership of the Society of Dilettanti; concurrently he penetrated the inner sanctum of Roman and papal scholastic circles. Frank Salmon's pursuit of Stuart's trail in Florence and Rome, unpicking his involvement (in the form of engraved illustrations and a supplementary 16,000 word archaeological analysis in Italian and Latin) in the publication of *De Obelisco Caesaris*

EXHIBITIONS

Augusti, which documents the celebrated excavation in Rome of the ancient Egyptian obelisk of Psammetichus II, is revelatory and signals Stuart's perspicacity and intellectual flexibility.

The inclusion in the exhibition of the Royal Institute of British Architects' remarkable collection of Stuart's gouaches (Fig. 3), shown in its entirety for the first time, of the Roman antiquities at Pola, in Istria, and the Greek monuments in Athens and Thessalonika, illuminates his response to place and the picturesque, and a pleasure in ruins that perhaps places him closer to David Le Roy, and his 'rival' publication, *Ruines des Plus Beaux Monuments de la Grèce*, than the precision of the plates in *Antiquities* (the products of painstaking survey by his co-author, Nicholas Revett) might suggest.

Of Stuart's own architectural and design output, the metalwork objects (Fig. 2) – tripod perfume burners, vases and a teapot – together with furniture and small-scale sculptural architecture (medal reliefs, funerary monuments and chimneypieces), show him at his most fluid and creative. His beautiful, painterly architectural drawings, of which the exhibition contains superb examples, for Kedleston Hall, Wimbledon Park, St George's, Windsor and the chapel of the Royal Hospital at Greenwich, confound Robert Adam's acidic judgment, 'excessively and ridiculously bad', but they contain more than a clue that Stuart's strengths lay in his ability to advise rather than to realise – perhaps the brief that he only ever really sought. In the glittering series of interiors at Spencer House (Fig. 1), the apogee of his town-house commissions – one has the sense that Stuart's ability to

conjure gorgeous decorative schemes, drawing on Roman, renaissance and baroque sources as much as Greek, was realisable partly because he was working within the carcass of another architect's building, and the same might be said of his exquisite enrichment of the chapel at Greenwich Hospital. Stuart's garden buildings, albeit delightful, are essentially three-dimensional re-workings of the plates from *Antiquities*. For my money, the jury is still out on whether he could master the planning and spatial challenges of large-scale architecture.

This exemplary study-exhibition, of an idiosyncratic, independently-minded British artist, is the brainchild and accomplishment of an American educational institution that has harnessed fresh scholarship and

imagination to a long-standing conundrum, James 'Athenian' Stuart, whose contradictory nature might best be summed up in the words of his supportive but frustrated client Mrs Montagu: 'In business ye strait line is the line of beauty, but Stuart is apt to chuse ye waving line'

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'James "Athenian" Stuart, 1713-1788', The Bard Graduate Center, New York (+1 212 501 3000), 16 November 2006-18 February; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 15 March-24 June. Catalogue by Susan Weber Soros (ed.), ISBN 0 300 11713 2, £60 (Yale).

❖ *The Caryatid Porch at the Erechtheion (with Stuart in Native Dress Sketching)* by James Stuart (1713-88), 1750-60. Gouache on paper, RIBA Library, Drawings Collection, London

