

Grayson Perry

The man who brought Greece out of the Attic



BRUCE WHITE

The guilty rich have a habit of associating themselves with things that hint at cultured restraint, hoping that it will ameliorate their headlong pursuit of crass lucre. Maybe they want to cultivate an image of moral uprightness and control over baser desires.

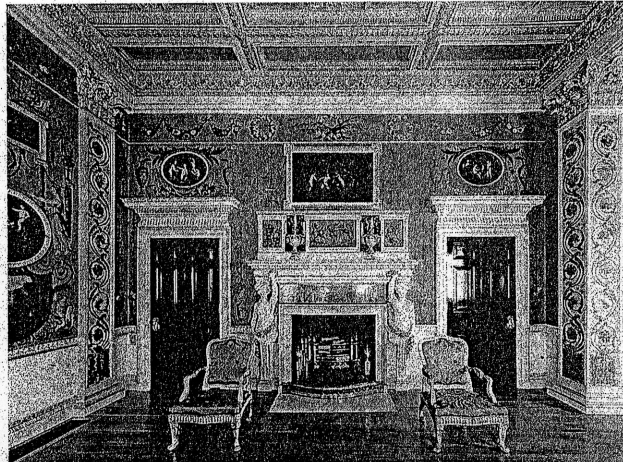
The Victorian magnates built houses that looked like gothic churches; in the 1960s the hippy entrepreneurs of Notting Hill schlepped out to India and got Buddhism; and in the 1990s the Bollinger bourgeoisie hid all their conspicuous consumption in the invisible cupboards of their minimalist houses.

Nowadays the middle classes flaunt their passes to the moral high ground in the form of a Toyota Prius, a wind turbine on the roof and a recycled bag full of organic produce from the farmers' market.

In the early 1760s England had a new king, George III, and had just finished the Seven Years' War with France in America. The time was ripe for a rebranding. The newly rich, raking it in from the growing empire and slavery, were keen to adopt a style that would at once lend them an air of respectable age and restrained good taste. What better than the style of a civilisation that was also a democracy and a maritime superpower, Ancient Greece?

In 1762 James "Athenian" Stuart, the subject of a new exhibition at the V&A, published his long-awaited book *Antiquities of Athens*. The size of a paving slab, it was the most enduring legacy of a polymath who came from humble beginnings to become an architect and interior designer whose services were fought over by the wealthiest hostesses. The book was the first accurate record of the architecture of Ancient Greece and was a principal source book for his profession well into the 19th century.

Throughout his life Stuart had a keen sense of the *Zeitgeist* and he aimed the book at wealthy gentleman, offering it as a key to appearing cultured. They were insecure with their new wealth and sought ownership of a style that



Georgian flourish: Spencer House in London, above; the work of James Stuart, below

lent an ordered gravitas and Protestant moderation to their economic status. There was a reaction against the organic exuberance of Rococo. Chinoiserie was regarded as terribly nouveau riche, Classical influences were nothing new, but the official line was that Rome, with architects such as Vitruvius, was best. Greece was regarded as primitive when compared to the later refinement of the Romans.

Stuart helped to establish the idea of Greece as the pure source of civilisation. In a flyer put out to drum up interest in his book he said: "Artists who seek perfection must return to the fountainhead of their arts."

Stuart was born in poverty in London in 1713. His father died when he was young, and it fell to Stuart to support his family, which he did by training in the fashionable art of fan painting. But he wanted to be more than a craftsman and copyist. An important part of a gentleman's education was a trip to Italy. In 1740 he left London, not to return for 14 years.

First he walked to Rome, surviving as an itinerant fan painter and portraitist. Having learnt Latin, Italian and a good deal about art and antiquities, and being good company, he began to make a living as a guide and connoisseur.

His growing interest in

archaeology resulted in a scholarly account of the excavation of an obelisk in Rome. This led to him setting off for Greece, together with Nicholas Revett, to study and measure the architecture there. At that time Greece was as remote to the English as the Moon is to us. Under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, it was difficult to access.

Antiquities of Athens perhaps reflects the contemporary appeal of Stuart not just as a scholar but as an explorer, *bon viveur* and man of taste. It is as much adventure travelogue as architectural study. Illustrations show Stuart and Revett in Turkish dress, adopted to blend in with the locals as they were suspected of being treasure hunters and were stalked by government spies.

This suspicion was



understandable as they spent a lot of their time digging out the accumulated earth and rubbish that obscured many ancient monuments.

Stuart seems to have deliberately delayed the publication of his book — it was 14 years after the initial proposal — so that he could garner commissions to decorate houses in the Greek Revival style before the book made his knowledge widely available. He became a sought-after interior designer, specialising in adapting the antique for the practicalities of the Georgian aristocracy. This sometimes results in kitsch worthy of Philippe Starck, such as the classical-urn-shaped plate warmer.

Stuart is not as celebrated as his contemporary and rival Robert Adam, and he also gained a reputation for drunkenness and laziness. Nevertheless, he was an important influence on the look of his age and designed some of London's great Georgian interiors, of which the most famous surviving example is Spencer House, near Green Park.

Ironically one of Stuart's other masterpieces, Montagu House, was incinerated by another ruling class that sought to legitimise its power behind a neo-classical façade, the Nazis.

James "Athenian" Stuart is at the V&A SW7 (020-7942 2000; www.vam.ac.uk), from tomorrow