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Stepping out of Adam's shadow

EXHIBITION: JAMES 'ATHENIAN' STUART AT THE V&A

BY ANNE CRANE

THE Victoria and Albert Museum have been hosting some dramatic blockbuster shows recently. There has been a run of exhibitions devoted to key movements of the 20th century: Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Modernism and, opening this week, Surrealism, not to mention some unashamedly populist events like the current *Kylie-The Exhibition*.

But the museum is a repository of decorative arts over many centuries and there are modest signs of redressing the balance towards scholarship of earlier periods. Their exhibition on the architect, designer and painter James 'Athenian' Stuart is the first in a series examining key figures of the 18th century with displays on Thomas Hope and Horace Walpole scheduled for 2008 and 2010.

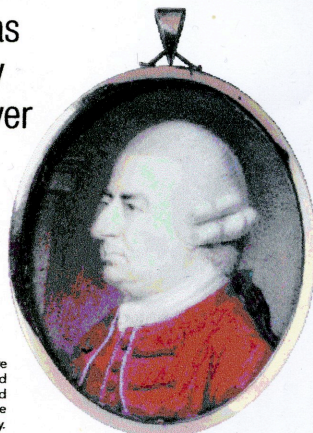
It may not have the ground-floor prominence of *Kylie* (running at the V&A until June 10), but the show, cloistered away at the end of the museum's silver department on the first floor, is certainly worth a visit. This smallish academic display should be required viewing for anyone with a passing or professional interest in 18th century British neoclassicism. It's a long overdue reappraisal of one of the movement's unsung heroes and it promises to change some perceived opinions.

James 'Athenian' Stuart (1713-88), whose work is the subject of this exhibition, was a near contemporary of Robert Adam (1728-1792). In terms of posterity therein lies his downfall. As pointed out by its curator Susan Weber Soros, the director of the Bard Graduate Center, "Adam was constantly looking over Stuart's shoulder."

Stuart championed ancient Greece while his younger Scottish rival championed ancient Rome. Stuart's conduit and the work that gave him his sobriquet was *Antiquities of Athens*. This mammoth four-volume publication arose from trips to Rome then Greece with fellow artist Nicholas Revett. There he produced sketches and drawings of ancient classical buildings and sites which were then reproduced in engraved form.

The project took over 50 years, the last volume appearing posthumously in 1816, but it was the standard reference on the Greek revival for the next cen-

'Adam was constantly looking over Stuart's shoulder'



Right: a portrait miniature of James Stuart painted c.1778 on ivory, attributed to Philip Jean, from the National Portrait Gallery.

tury. Robert 'Bob the Roman' Adam and his family firm of architects were quicker and more aggressive in exploiting their neoclassical promulgation via books, buildings and interior decoration.

The result is that today 'Adam Style' has become synonymous with the classical revival in Britain while James Stuart is a virtual unknown, a mere footnote credited, if at all, with one major reference work and a handful of largely low-key architectural projects.

But the gulf wasn't so wide in their own time. Stuart, the son of a sailor born into poverty in the City of London ended up thrice married, lived in a fashionable part of London, spending 40 years in the same grand house in Leicester Square, and was in demand from Society patrons to create his fashionable interiors in the new Grecian style or build classical temples in the grounds of their country seats.

Stuart's best-known work today is his interiors for Spencer House, formerly the London residence of the Spencer family.

One of the problems in examining

Stuart's oeuvre (and a reason why this is the first exhibition entirely devoted to him) is that he was nowhere near as prolific as Adam and his known surviving corpus is relatively small. A third of his architectural commissions were garden buildings; he is only thought to have done seven London houses, only one of which was produced from scratch, while several others have been demolished and few of his paintings have surfaced. Indeed, when outlining the genesis of this exhibition, Dr Soros explained that she initially wasn't sure whether she would be able to gather enough material together to mount a show. But she has pulled it off, amassing 200 items from public and private collections, a mix of paintings, designs and drawings, sketchbooks, books, furnishings and medals, augmented with photographs of Stuart's architectural work, much of which no longer exists.

The exhibition coincides with the publication of *James 'Athenian' Stuart: The Rediscovery of Antiquity* a major work of scholarship edited by Dr Soros. Taken together they paint a picture of a talented painter, designer of furniture, coins and metalwork, and architect. The researches reveal Stuart's importance as a tastemaker and some recent reattribution suggest that he is responsible for a rather bigger output than traditionally thought.

The exhibition includes some impressive examples of metalwork from Kedleston Hall, a house where both Stuart and Adam worked, whose designs are attributable to Stuart on the basis of a preparatory drawing in the archives of the Derbyshire house and several record drawings in the Soane Museum. These include a particularly large urn-shaped neoclassical plate warmer in copper and ormolu, dated 1760, a patinated copper chestnut

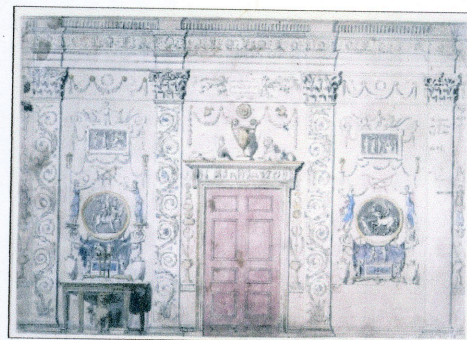


Above: James Stuart's grandest extant commission is the interior schemes that he produced for Spencer House, the London residence of the first Earl Spencer. Here he designed furniture and created painted interiors for Lady Spencer's drawing room, the so-called Great Room, and most famously the painted room pictured here. The latter not only reflects the importance of classical Greece and Rome to 18th century decoration, but provides the best illustration of Stuart's work as an artist.

Copyright Spencer House

Below: James Stuart's design for the wall decoration of the painted room at Spencer House, executed in 1759.

Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum



Spencer House is open to the public every Sunday, except in January and August with access by guided tour. A lecture on *Stuart and the Spencers in Context* to coincide with the V&A's exhibition will take place at Spencer House on April 25 at 6.30pm. Tickets cost £10.

vase from Kedleston's dining room and a perfume burner of distinctive tripod form. These pieces and a Stuart attributed gilt-bronze candelabrum and stand in the V&A are regarded as some of the earliest expressions of neoclassicism in English design.

Julius Bryant, the V&A's Keeper of the Word and Image Department, who is also a contributor to the new book, hopes the exhibition will bring more Stuart creations out of the woodwork.

One of the achievements of the show is a reassessment of Stuart from low-output architect to artist of some talent. This comes largely through its display of 18 wonderful gouache drawings that were the original source for the engraved illustrations in *Antiquities of Athens*. Apart from the gouaches, lent by the RIBA Library, and the ceiling paintings at Spencer House, only a handful of other painted works have been located, including a recently cleaned portrait of James Lee,

a merchant from Salonica, loaned to the exhibition by the Huttonian Museum. But Stuart is listed as having exhibited over 100 paintings at the Fre e Society of Artists. Where are they now? Perhaps we should be scrutinising overlooked paintings on the walls of country houses or loosely attributed Old Master paintings in auction catalogues.

Meantime, take a look at the exhibition which runs until June 24, pay a visit to Spencer House and, for a full low-down on the current state of Stuart scholarship, get hold of the new eponymously-titled book, which is published by Yale University Press at £60.

James 'Athenian' Stuart runs at the Victoria & Albert Museum, until June 24. Admission is free. Tel 00 44 (0) 20 7942 2000 or www.vam.ac.uk



Above: James Stuart was responsible for some of the earliest expressions of neoclassical design employed in Britain, such as this gilt-bronze marble based perfume burner of ancient tripod form. It is part of a group of metalwares that he is thought to have designed for Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire for Sir Nathaniel Curzon. The burner was probably made by Diederich Nicolaus Anderson, who executed many of Stuart's metalware designs.

Courtesy of Kedleston Hall

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