

Antiques

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A British Pioneer Of the Greek Revival

Manhattan design mavens are in for a treat. On Thursday the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture opens an exhibition about James Stuart (1713-1788), called the Athenian, the first British architect to pioneer the Greek Revival style that later became so popular in Britain and America.

Most are unfamiliar with Stuart's architecture but quite familiar with the motifs in the "goût Grec" (Greek taste) style that he introduced in his interiors and furniture: tripods with ram heads, vases with ropelike garlands and tables with lion masks.

The show comprises 150 works: his original gouaches (never before exhibited as a series) of ancient buildings in Greece from the landmark 1762 work "The Antiquities of Athens"; designs for interiors for some of England's grandest houses; extravagant examples of carved, gilded furniture from Spencer House in London and new photographs of Stuart's garden buildings.

Why Stuart?

"I've always been curious about Robert Adam's rivals," said Susan Weber Soros, the director of the center and curator of the show. "Stuart had only been worked on a little."

Reconstructing Stuart's history was difficult. "He was a terrible record keeper," Ms. Soros said. "He kept his archive in a stable, so most of it didn't survive." Catherine Arbuthnott, project coordinator for the show, said Stuart was the son of a poor Scottish mariner who died young. Forced to become the family breadwinner, Stuart apprenticed with a fan painter and learned to draw from life. (The show includes a modest self-portrait from the 1730s.) He became a skilled draftsman, but barely made enough to support his mother and siblings.

When he was about 27, he abandoned the family, moving first to Paris, where he earned a living as a fan painter. From there he walked to Rome, where he studied Greek and Latin while acting as a cicerone (personal guide) for tourists, a fan painter and a dealer in pictures, bronzes and drawings.

He was also brave. In 1751 he went to Greece with Nicholas Revett, an architectural draftsman, to measure ancient monuments for a book. They "faced storms at sea at Delos, plague at Salonika and hostility in Athens," Ms. Arbuthnott writes in the catalog, published by Yale University Press. "Revett survived an attack by pirates, and Stuart an assassination attempt."

They spent more than two years recording temples and monuments. Stuart wrote the text and drew scenic landscapes; Revett measured the buildings. "It was a major contribution," Ms. Arbuthnott said of "The Antiquities of Athens."

They returned to England about 1754, and Stuart was soon busy with public and private commissions for houses, interiors, furniture, garden build-



NTPL/John Hammond

A James Stuart design for a plate warmer.

ings and temple follies, medals and monuments, even a hospital.

The show includes furniture designs, architectural studies and elevations, rare surviving sketchbooks and some antiques: a pier table, a gilt tripod stand, a perfume burner and a vase. Most unusual is a mammoth plate warmer decorated with scantily clothed gods, designed for an open fireplace at Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire. Michael Snodin, a former metalwork curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, writes in the catalog that it is "one of the most ambitious ormolu and base metal objects of its time in England."

Stuart's career did not have a happy ending. "The first sign of trouble came in 1763, when he got gout," Ms. Arbuthnott said. He turned to alcohol to relieve the pain caused by more debilitating bouts of gout. His creativity didn't flag, but commissions took years to complete, testing the loyalty of patrons. After his death, his work fell into obscurity.

"Time has not been kind to him, because so many of his commissions have been demolished,"

Ms. Soros said.

Charles Hind, head of special collections at the Royal Institute of British Architects, said, "Today, most English architects would not know who Stuart is." The show closes on Feb. 18 and opens at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London on March 15.

Patriotic Pots

"Health to the sick; honor to the brave; success to the lover; freedom to the slave," reads an anti-slavery inscription on a British teapot made for America.

It is one of 50 pieces of British pottery in a loan exhibition at the Delaware Antiques Show at the Chase Center in Wilmington through Sunday. Most of the pots are decorated with portraits of American heroes and battle scenes from the American Revolution.

British potters were smart businessmen. "Even before the Revolution they were eager to develop a significant market serving the colonies," the catalog notes.

Patriotism ruled. Wedgwood made an intaglio seal sporting a coiled rattlesnake with the phrase "Don't tread on me." Other firms employed inexpensive transfer printing to show likenesses of George Washington, the eagle or the American flag. Though made in Staffordshire, pots were shipped from Liverpool and thus named Liverpool wares.

By the 1820s their popularity waned, but it is coming back. "A simple jug without much history will sell for up to \$4,000," said John Sandon, the ceramics expert at Bonhams London. "Specialized scenes with ships or battles, inscriptions and contemporary portraits can go for \$20,000. History is what people are buying."

Hyde Park Antiques

The New York gallery Hyde Park Antiques is belatedly celebrating its 40th anniversary. The 20,000-square-foot shop is in a 19th-century cast iron building at 836 Broadway, at 12th Street. The owner, Bernard Karr, displays a huge inventory of English furniture and decorative arts made between 1690 and 1830.

"I can't compete with a British accent or a Saville Row suit, but I can compete with any London dealer in terms of inventory," said Mr. Karr, a native New Yorker. "I'm a compulsive buyer."

The gallery is a favorite source for decorators like Bunny Williams, Charlotte Moss and Mario Buatta, who wrote the forward to Emily Eerdman's "Classic English Design and Antiques: Period Styles and Furniture" (Rizzoli), a book Mr. Karr commissioned to celebrate his anniversary.

"I wanted a comprehensive history but not a textbook," said Mr. Karr, who illustrated the book with photos of antiques and English interiors, including Spencer House in London, decorated by Stuart. Hyde Park is famous for its fair prices. "I'm not looking to retire on each piece," Mr. Karr said. "The English dealers are not bashful about their prices."