

# ARTS

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## From Greece With Love

**James Stuart was one of the first European advocates of Hellenic art. He deserves to be remembered, Brice Brown writes.**

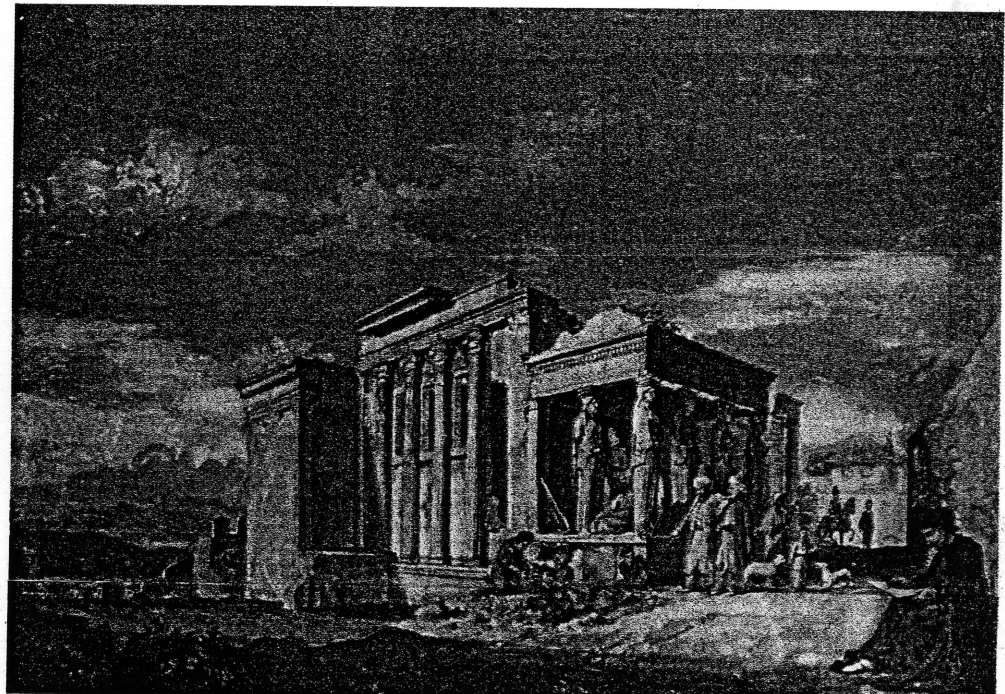
In the middle of the 18th century, when European artists were just beginning to get interested in Hellenic art — an interest dovetailing with the Enlightenment's promotion of ordered, rational ideals — James "Athenian" Stuart had beaten them to the punch. The English designer, architect, and self-proclaimed "learned and curious person" had already traveled extensively throughout Greece, with artist Nicholas Revett, between 1751 and 1753. Stuart and Revett rigorously measured and accurately recorded, for the first time, ancient Greek temples, monuments, and ruins. Their modest goal was to uncover new decorative elements by tapping the "primary sources" of antiquity. Instead, they unwittingly sowed the seeds of a full-blown Greek revival in the applied arts.

**JAMES 'ATHENIAN' STUART, 1713-1788: THE REDISCOVERY OF ANTIQUITY**  
*The Bard Graduate Center*

Stuart, along with other 18th-century notables such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann, was one of the first European advocates of ancient Greek art. His travels abroad made him one of the first artists to draw directly from Greek ruins — a fact that bestowed his images with an unassailable authenticity. In England, his designs for buildings, interiors, and furniture were some of the first instances of this newly acquired lexicon of Grecian decorative motifs used in daily practice. But unlike other historical persons who achieved landmark firsts, Stuart has remained relatively unknown. Perhaps the exhibition "James 'Athenian' Stuart, 1713-1788: The Rediscovery of Antiquity," at the Bard Graduate Center, will spark the rediscovery of James Stuart.

Curated by the founder and director of the Bard Graduate Center, Susan Weber Soros, this exhibition exemplifies what the Bard Graduate Center does best. Though not without its flaws, the show reflects Bard's roots as an educational institution. Shows at Bard are based on a belief in, and commitment to, elucidating historically important art and artists — regardless of their potential blockbuster status — in a way that is not only intellectually rigorous, but is always made accessible through detail-oriented installation. For the Stuart exhibition, this detail takes the form of numerous documentary photographs and videos that help flesh out Stuart's own drawings, etchings, designs for buildings and interiors, furniture, vases, and even medals. More than 180 works, sprawled over three floors, are used to broaden the viewer's understanding of James "Athenian" Stuart.

The work for which Stuart is perhaps best known is the three-volume "The Antiquities of Athens," published in 1762, 1789, and 1795. These volumes, containing etchings Stuart



James Stuart's undated 'Gouache of Athens,' with the artist depicted sketching at right.

ROYAL INSTITUTE OF BRITISH ARCHITECTS

made based on the piles of drawings he produced while in Greece with Revett, became a standard neoclassical design sourcebook in the 19th century. Eighteen of these on-site gouache drawings are on view here. The experience of the drawings is one part travelogue plus one part academic archaeology, adding up to an intimately personal, yet vicarious, Grand Tour. From a "View of the Amphitheatre at Fola From the West" (1750-60) to a "View of the Gate of Athene Archegetis, Athens" (1750-60), these drawings depict the ruins against unbelievably crisp, blue skies, and often with groups of figures mingling among them, lending a sense of scale to the structures. Relating less to the refined watercolors of Paul Sandby (1730-1809), Stuart's drawings do feel more like the objective, literal records they were meant to be, rather than individualized works of art. His detailed attention to the native dress of his figures produces a kind of ethnographic record. Amazingly, some of these drawings are the only remaining images of ancient structures no longer standing, such as the Temple on the Ilissus River, destroyed by the Turks in 1778.

As in 1778, the view alongside these drawings are copies of the first volume of "The Antiquities of Athens," one of which is shown closed to display the gold-tooled, red morocco leather presentation binding Stuart designed. This type of bind-

ing was a rarity, ahead of its time in the area of bookbinding's use of neoclassical elements such as palmettes and anthemion.

Stuart's accomplishments run deeper than his documentation of antiquarian architecture. He was a tastemaker, renowned in his time as a connoisseur of classical style whose objects, interiors, and buildings were based on the ideals of the Greek aesthetic. The large, elegantly proportioned copper "Plate warmer" (1760), designed for Kelliston Hall, feels like a summation of Stuart's ideas, and at the time was one of the most ambitious gilt-metal objects attempted. A large pine-cone shaped body, resting on a base of three sphinxes, is decorated with a band of statuesque Greek youths. Their elongated bodies create a geometric dynamo stretching the eye upward, creating a sense of power and

order, while their interlocked hands zigzag around the plate warmer's volume.

His designs for the famed Spencer House (1758-66), one of the most important neoclassical interiors in England, include what is known as the Painted Room. Here, Stuart applied the first example of *grotesche* — decorative arabesque with interlaced garlands, popular as frescoes in ancient Rome — to both wall and ceiling, creating a perfectly pitched horror vacui of classical motifs. Also on view are two furniture pieces from the suite Stuart designed for this room. Working with basic French shapes, he added gilt, animal-inspired legs and wings, and even lions' heads — all based on ancient seating models — creating some of the first English neoclassical-style furniture.

Stuart was not as ambitious with his career as

his well-known contemporary, Robert Adam. He apparently cared little about financial success and did not actively seek new commissions, content instead with the occasional support from fellow members of the Society of Dilettanti. Later in life, his hands became plagued with gout and he was accused of "Epicureanism" — polite code for being a drunk — both of which led to many unexecuted designs. He was, however, in the right place at the right time, for his radical ideas about mining the antique for new models were on the forefront of the Enlightenment's cultural sea change banishing the vacuous gushings of rococo. Too bad for us he never fulfilled the potential of this new, stringent style.

Until February 11 (18 W. 86th St. at Central Park West, 212-501-3000).

### MUSEUMS

## France Comes To Miami Beach

By KATE TAYLOR

A t Basel Miami Beach next week, Robert Rubin will be looking for some friends — specifically, ones with an interest in modern art, a love of Paris, and, not least, substantial assets — who want to become supporters of the Centre Georges Pompidou, the iconic, Renzo Piano-designed museum of modern and contemporary art in Paris.

The Georges Pompidou Art & Culture Foundation, of which Mr. Rubin was named president earlier this year, is a group of American friends whose central purpose is to raise money to acquire gifts of art from among its ranks. The foundation was started in 1977 by the collector Dominique de Menil but became dormant after her death in 1998. It was revived in 2005 under the executive directorship of a former investment banker, Scott Stover, who runs the foundation out of offices in Los Angeles.

As the group's new figurehead and New York presence, Mr. Rubin, a former commodities trader who is a doctoral candidate in the history of architecture at Columbia University, cannot be matched for enthusiasm for the Pompi-

er than MoMA, there isn't a museum around with the depth and breadth of modern art," he said in a recent interview at the Lotos Club. And in Mr. Rubin's own area of interest — architecture and design — he said, "of all the museums around, the Pompidou does the best job of par-

**Robert Rubin cannot be matched for enthusiasm for the Centre Georges Pompidou.**

aligning shows." He added, "They're not afraid to do exhibits that they think are important, even if they're difficult" — meaning they won't be popular.

Mr. Rubin wants to increase membership in the foundation, which is national, from approximately 30 couples to closer to 50. To that end, he and Mr. Stover have organized an exhibition

"French Modern Sources," the exhibition, which opens in Miami next Friday, is a selection of around 50 objects from the Pompidou's design collection, centered on a diverse movement from the 1930s called the Union of Modern Artists, which included Le Corbusier, Pierre Chareau, and Jean Prouvé.

"I'm looking at ways to raise the profile of the Foundation; the so-called Tropical House is a large number of bodies who would be interesting in participating in a group like ours," Mr. Rubin said. (An exhibit of works from the Pompidou's New Media collection will be on view simultaneously at the Miami Art Center.)

Mr. Rubin made the first major gift to the Foundation: the so-called Tropical House is a prototype for a prefabricated steel-and-aluminum house that could be shipped in parts to France's colonies. It was not successful, partly, Mr. Rubin argues, because Prouvé's modernist design did not appeal to the expatriate bureaucrats for whom it was intended. Mr. Rubin's house, which was originally sent to Brazzaville, Congo, in 1951, was one of three prototypes, and the other two, in the intervening years, were disassembled and are now stored in a warehouse in Paris. Mr. Rubin's suffered corrosion and acquired a few bullet holes in the Congo

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### THEATER

## Throwing Stones In Gabler's Glass House

By JOY GOODWIN

I t's a setting out of a Hitchcock film — an attractive, strangely airless space that stealthily presses in on the characters. Streamlined and gleaming, the stylish high-rise apartment revolves slowly on a turntable stage. Images of foliage flicker on its one concrete wall, reflected in overhead mirrors. Rain pours down its long floor-to-ceiling glass wall.

**HEDDA GABLER**  
*RAM*

And it's this setting that gives Thomas Ostermeier's darkly funny, revisionist "Hedda Gabler" its crystalline clarity. Gathered around a long, retro-chic green sofa in an open loft space, the characters look like plastic figures in

a scale model of a 1950s modernist glass house — except for their cell phones and laptops. It's as if Hedda and her circle have been trapped like insects under glass, the better for us to study their every move.

Mr. Ostermeier, one of the artistic directors of West Berlin's estimable Schaubühne, is known for bold choices. In his previous Ibsen revival, "Nora," which played at the Brooklyn Academy of Music two years ago, he radically reimagined "A Doll's House," replacing the slamming door with a gunshot.

It's no surprise, then, that he's taken a paring knife to "Hedda Gabler," slicing off the servant character and slashing most of Aunt Juliane's lines to clear space for the five principals. Heinrich Schmidt-Henkels' spare text (performed in German, with surtitles) cuts directly to the heart of the scenes, dispensing with minor characters. *Review by HEIDI RABINOVITCH*

### ALSO IN ARTS & LETTERS

Gallery Going: John Currin at Gagosian and Philip Guston at McKee, pp. 13 & 17  
Photography: William Meyers on Akiba Oshita, pp. 13 & 17