

# ArtsArchitecture

## Greece is the word

He was the Indiana Jones of his day, dodging murderers to pull off astounding architectural coups. **Jonathan Glancey** on the life and fast times of James 'Athenian' Stuart

A few miles to the east of Regensburg, along the banks of the Danube, stands one of the most extraordinary buildings in Europe. This is the Walhalla, a temple to German heroes, commissioned by Ludwig I of Bavaria from his court architect, Leo von Kline. Built between 1816 and 1842, it is a near-exact reproduction of the Parthenon.

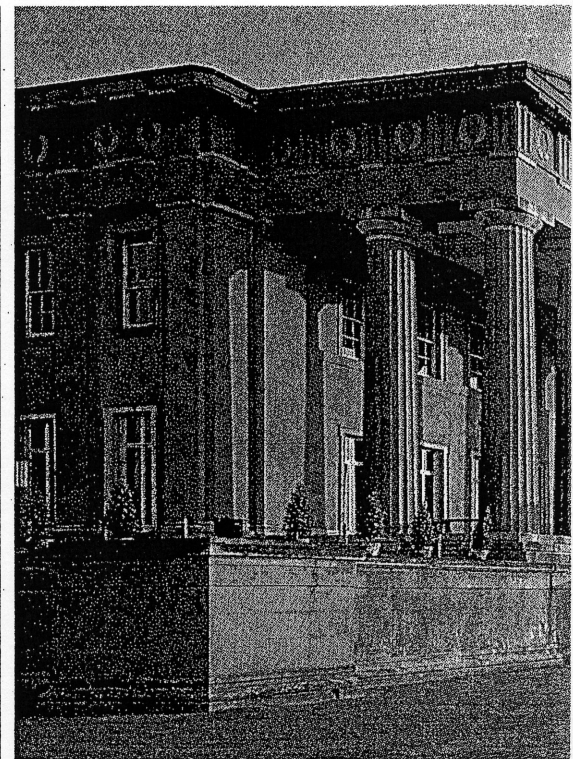
At first sight, the Walhalla seems unreal, especially when experienced on a biting cold winter's day deep in snow, its Athenian architecture a long way from its natural, sun-kissed home. And yet, such was the power in the early 19th-century European imagination of the architecture of ancient Greece – its beauty, geometry and all it stood for – that the Parthenon and various other temples were reproduced across the western world. For something like a century, beginning in the 1760s, the Greek revival was not only one of the most potent forces in European architecture, it was also, perhaps, the first truly global form of architectural design. It saw whole temple fronts reproduced in Britain, Bavaria, Poland, Finland, Russia, the US and beyond, as if they had been transported from ancient Greece to the 19th century, through some wormhole in time and space.

The driving spirit behind this global

Greek design was a Londoner called James "Athenian" Stuart, who taught himself Greek and Latin. Stuart liked the good life and found it hard to complete commissions; his work, though based on careful scholarship, was often whimsical and unlike – very unlike – that of the powerful architectural Greek devotees who followed in his wake, giving us the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, the British Museum in London, the New Admiralty in St Petersburg and countless US country houses.

Stuart, the Indiana Jones of his day, is the star of a new show at London's V&A, entitled James Athenian Stuart 1713-88: The Rediscovery of Antiquity. A collection of some 200 artefacts from books to furniture to paintings and drawings, it will intrigue anyone fascinated by the idea of global design. For it was Stuart who did most, perhaps unintentionally, to trigger a global architectural design, with Greek temples popping up in much the same way as McDonald's do now. But he was never to build on a grand scale; indeed, it took him five whole years just to decorate a bedroom for Elizabeth Montagu, the celebrated society hostess.

What made Stuart so influential was not his own work, but his travels through Greece in 1751 with his friend Nicholas Revett. On their return, they published *The Antiquities of Athens*.



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The book was a sensation. Here was the testimony of two men who had actually been to Greece, considered the wellspring of civilised architecture. Stuart was among the first western Europeans to see it, measure it and draw it accurately. This was a much greater achievement than it might seem today, when we can jump on a cheap flight to Athens and gawp, with crowds of tourists, at the ruins of the Acropolis.

An outpost of the Ottoman empire, Greece was then known, darkly and distantly, for its murderous brigands. When Stuart returned from his daring travels (on one occasion, an obliging landlord pulled down a house so that he and Revett could get a better view of the Tower of the Winds; on another, Stuart narrowly escaped murder by a party of Turks on his way to Constantinople), he was commissioned to design a Greek temple. In fact, this was a garden pavilion at Hagley Hall in Staffordshire, a modest project despite its grand name: the Temple of Theseus. A new church in Oxfordshire, built for the Earl of Harcourt in 1764, was a more ambitious project, though the proper Greekness of the building extends only to one fine Ionic portico.

In London, Stuart designed a fine house at 15 St James's Square, which, if you look up, boasts a temple front with columns copied exactly from the Erechtheion, the Parthenon's neighbour on the Acropolis. Not far away, overlooking Green Park, Stuart designed the most striking rooms in Spencer House (yes, it did once belong

**Column inches**  
... (clockwise,  
from top left)  
**Northington  
Grange; James  
'Athenian' Stuart;  
interior view of  
Spencer House**



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to the late Princess Diana's family).

What, perhaps, the unambitious Stuart was largely unaware of was his position in the vanguard of an architectural revolution. How was he to know that, after his death, the Greek revival would become the house style of the kingdom of Bavaria and of the government of the USA? Two architects who could see the writing on the wall were the hugely successful Robert Adam and William Chambers. This new Greek contagion was a threat to their beloved – and profitable – Roman styles. Though they tried to belittle Stuart and his “discoveries”, Adam and Chambers were unable to halt the Greek revival.

The revival became ever more exotic, and ultimately kitsch, as archaeologists discovered that the ancient Greek temples were originally colourful and richly decorated. In any case, the idea of fitting the rooms and services of a modern house into the shell of a faux-Greek temple was clearly a bit daft. Even so, if you have ever seen Northington Grange (1804) in Hampshire, designed by William Wilkins, you will become an instant convert to the long-lost cause of the Greek revival. It is, simply, one of the most romantic houses in Britain; the English answer to the Bavarian Walhalla, the epitome of the great global design revolution, sparked by an unambitious dilettante, and his willingness to venture where few classical architects had gone before.

**James Athenian Stuart 1713-88: The Rediscovery of Antiquity is at the V&A, London SW7, until June 24. Details: 020-7942 2000.**