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FRONT COVER

Andrew Melville Halls, St Andrews, (1964–68; architect: James Stirling). Detail showing the contrast between heavy ribbed concrete (with replacement windows) and light system glazing below. Photograph: Barnabas Calder

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Comments are welcome.

EAHN

C/O @MIT, TU DELFT

FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE

P.O. BOX 5043

2600 GA DELFT

THE NETHERLANDS

office@eahn.org [email]

www.eahn.org [url]

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No. 1 shaft winding tower at Monktonhall Colliery, Fife, prior to demolition in 1989.

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

Variety, Archaeology, and Ornament: Renaissance Architectural Prints from Column to Cornice

Curators: Cammy Brothers and Michael Waters

Charlottesville, VA, University of Virginia Art Museum

26 August – 18 December 2011

‘Variety, Archaeology, and Ornament’ at the University of Virginia Art Museum is a compact yet ambitious exhibition that reconsiders the significance of the medium of print in early modern architecture. Through a discerning selection of seventy-four objects gathered from institutions across North America, the show challenges Mario Carpo’s influential notion that the mechanically reproducible image standardized architectural knowledge. To make their case, the curators emphasize the diversity with which the medium presented architecture. In a roughly chronological arrangement, objects are divided into five thematic sections titled ‘Origins’, ‘Antiquity’, ‘Variety’, ‘Archaeology’, ‘Order’, and ‘Afterlife’. Visitors can follow the sections in this sequence, but the dense, one-room layout also invites divergence from this path to draw individual interpretations.

The heart of the show is a series of single-leaf copperplate engravings from the University of Virginia’s own collection, issued by the early sixteenth-century artist Master G. A. with the Caltrop, identified by the four-sided weapon (caltrop) of his monogram. Twenty-three of his engravings after the antique are here on display for the first time. While little is known of this artist, his works provocatively suggest the existence of a poorly studied market for single-leaf engravings, where printed images circulated autonomously as collectible items. Contrary to what their methodical display of details and insistence on measurements may indicate, only a handful of these ‘archaeological documents’ actually study real Roman monuments. Rather than partaking in classicism’s rule making, the prints then reinvent antiquity imaginatively, diversifying the canon and fragmenting the model.

Master G.A. with the Caltrop (active at Rome in the mid-1530s), *Ionic base* (c.1537); engraving, 11.75 x 18.1 cm; collection of the University of Virginia Art Museum. Photograph: courtesy of the University of Virginia Art Museum



A similar notion of fantasia runs strong in many of the works on display. An example is offered by the puzzling engraving by Giovanni Antonio da Brescia (c. 1510), on loan from the Art Institute of Chicago. In what is one of the earliest single-leaf engravings of architectural motifs, we see classical columns, capitals, and bases whimsically juxtaposed with grotesque elements—a commentary on the notion of decorum and artistic license. Another, displayed under the heading ‘Antiquity’, is a first edition of Giovanni Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), whose tale is famously illustrated by fanciful buildings inspired by antique models. It is objects like these that convincingly show the pervasiveness of images of pure fantasy, which scholarship tends to dismiss as secondary and marginal.

One of the exhibition’s real strengths is its articulation of nuanced relationships between architectural drawings and prints. The show locates the origins of single-leaf architectural engraving in the painter’s workshop, through examples like the Getty’s drawing album by the so-called Master of the Mantegna Sketchbook, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Goldschmidt Sketchbook. The detailed on-site studies of the Pantheon we find on the folios of the latter were then printed as well as hand-copied in the studio by French artists. These works challenge the idea that printed images were considered more authoritative than drawings during

the Renaissance, for neither entirely supplanted the other. What then granted an image authenticity and authority if not its medium? This proves a difficult question and the show can only suggest a nebulous constellation of contestable attributes, including authorship, beauty of execution and familiarity with the original.

Because the exhibition primarily aimed to broaden the notion of Renaissance architectural culture by incorporating previously ignored visual material, its section on the printed treatises left the visitor wanting more. This was especially disappointing given the number of critical items gathered for the occasion, including works by Cesare Cesariano, Sebastiano Serlio, Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola, and Daniele Barbaro. A revision on how this material utilized reproducible images would have strengthened the critique of Carpo's thesis. Instead, here the show falls on more conventional ground. In the section 'Orders', for instance, we are reminded that the classification system for the orders was perpetually in flux, echoing the classic 1985 essay by Christof Thoenes and Hubertus Günther, 'Gli ordini architettonici: Rinascita o invenzione?' ('The Architectural Orders: Rebirth or Invention?').

More successful is the exhibition's emphasis on the consumption of architectural imagery. This avenue of inquiry is a welcome addition to a field so often narrowly focused on the transmission of ideas. The album of architectural prints assembled by the seventeenth-century Austrian collector Wolfgang Engelbert (another loan from the Getty Research Institute) is taken to indicate how creatively ornament was interpreted. Truly exceptional in this respect are Antonio da Sangallo the Younger's dense annotations to the 1513 illustrated edition of Vitruvius, which reveal one professional's response to the text. The late-seventeenth-century Belgian artist Renier Panhoy de Rendeux similarly produced a one-of-a-kind object when he appropriated a copy of Giovanni Battista Montano's treatise on architectural ornament as his journal. Approaching the culture of architectural images through such responses helps open fresh discussions on even the most well-trodden of topics, like the classical orders.

Because of the manifold issues it addresses, this exhibition has much to offer to other areas of study beyond its immediate specialist interests, such as the history



Arrangement of a room at the reviewed exhibition.
Photograph: Mari Yoko Hara

of art markets, collecting practices, print culture, antiquarianism, and early modern scientific education. The curators are to be commended for successfully inserting architecture into these broader fields of discussion.

A number of questions outlined in this review were raised during a two-day symposium (30 September–1 October 2011) held at the University of Virginia's School of Architecture. The full exhibition catalogue is now available for consultation online. 'Variety, Archaeology, and Ornament' admirably demonstrates what a college art museum does best: an approachable, thought-provoking exhibition backed by rigorous scholarship and a strong dedication to higher learning.

Mari Yoko Hara
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA, USA

Website related to the exhibition:
http://www.virginia.edu/artmuseum/on_view/exhibitions/Variety_Archeology_Ornament.php

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