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

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Exhibitions

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

University of Virginia Art Museum
26 August–18 December 2011

This genesis of this compelling exhibition is a collection of twenty-three mid-sixteenth-century architectural prints acquired by the University of Virginia some thirty years ago. The prints are of various capitals and bases, some quite elaborate but matching none of the canonical orders with which we are most familiar. While several can be linked to known ancient monuments, others are from sources unknown, and some appear to be inventions. Their engraver is identified only by the initials G.A., with a tiny image of a caltrop (a small spiked weapon spread on the ground to inhibit the advance of mounted troops). Master G.A. may be Giovanni Agucchi, a mid-sixteenth-century Italian engraver, but the attribution remains conjectural. The prints are a reminder of how single-leaf architectural prints accelerated the spread of information on classical architecture during the formative years of the Italian Renaissance. The printed image was just then coming into its own and made knowledge of Roman antiquity widely accessible to an eager audience as never before. Moreover, the prints are evidence of how this particular master, along with numerous others, quickly absorbed and shared the richness

and variety of the wealth of ancient architectural details scattered about.

Using Master G.A. prints as a foundation, the exhibition develops four main themes: Antiquity, Variety, Order, and Afterlife. The Renaissance's interest in antiquity, of course, was spurred by the rediscovery of the text of Vitruvius's *Ten Books*, the only surviving ancient treatise on architecture. Because the text survived without illustrations, various architects, including Palladio, provided editions of the *Ten Books* with their own interpretative images of Vitruvius's descriptions. This effort led to searches among the ruins for forms and details that could relate to Vitruvius's text, resulting in a multiplicity of early sketches and drawings. These drawings represent some of the first attempts at both orthogonal and perspectival depictions of architectural elements, particularly capitals and entablatures. Many of these drawings became the basis for the single-leaf prints such as those by Master G.A.

The early images, seen in the exhibition's late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century sketches, drawings, prints, and published books, revealed astonishing variations in the ancient classical orders. Many of the capitals, bases, and cornices recorded by early masters such as Il Cronaca, Giovanni Antonio da Brescia, and Francesco di Giorgio had the individuality and sculptural touches normally associated with the Gothic style. In addition, despite a certain consistency seen mainly in the treatment of cornices, the ancients were not always constrained by a rigid set of rules related to the treatment of details and other decorations. Among the exhibition's offerings, we see capitals decorated with mythological figures, animals, fruits, and many types of foliage, all

bearing little resemblance to the standard versions of the orders. Vitruvius, of course, described the basic elements of the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian (and alluded to a Tuscan style), and laid out formulas for proportioning the various parts of these orders. However, Vitruvius's references pertained mainly to works of Greece and the Roman republic. The ruins and fragments found and studied by early Renaissance architects largely dated from the late imperial era, when sculpted enrichment of nearly every element was the norm.

The plethora of highly ornamented architectural fragments and the numerous images they inspired led various architects to attempt to seek some sense of order in ancient design and to develop sets of theories behind it. The fruit of this effort was the production of guides or textbooks on classical architecture intended mainly for use in contemporary design. While Vitruvius's treatise unlocked many mysteries of classical architecture, his text was difficult to understand and often raised as many questions as it answered. Hence, the treatises by architects such as Serlio, Palladio, and Vignola precisely defined and illustrated standardized versions of the orders, and provided rules for each element. Moreover, in addition to Vitruvius's Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian, they elevated the Tuscan and the Composite to the official roster of the orders. Both Serlio and Palladio included in their treatises restoration depictions of ancient ruins as well as illustrations of their own designs, showing how new works could be expressed with the classical language. Their definitions of the orders, both narrative and graphic, thus became the canons for the five classical orders, and have affected the appearance of thousands of buildings ever since. Indeed, Palladio's and Vignola's

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treatises served as textbooks for architects well into the twentieth century. However, the process of regularizing the orders led to their simplification, the result being that many of our later classical-style buildings lack the inventiveness and individuality seen in the ancient fragments recorded by individuals such as Master G.A.

The exhibition's final section, "After-life," traces the diffusion of the ideas shown in the exhibition's drawings, prints, and treatises to countries beyond Italy. This led to the creation of additional treatises on the five orders with examples of how to apply them. Among the early products of this dissemination were treatises by the Spaniard Diego Sagredo, Philibert de l'Orme of France, and Walther Hermann Ryff of Germany. These treatises extended the application of the classical vocabulary to innumerable buildings throughout Europe, thus making the architecture of the Italian Renaissance an international movement. Some of these treatises, along with other compendiums, included illustrations of the richly ornamented capitals that did not make it into the official canon.

In perusing the exhibition's rare and engrossing offerings, gathered from numerous institutions and private collections by curators Cammy Brothers and Michael J. Waters with guidance by museum director Bruce Boucher, we might ask what meanings have they for today's architecture. First, they help us to better appreciate the value of ornament and how it can enrich the architecture of any era. Second, we can learn how an architectural vocabulary, developed and refined more than two thousand years ago, has lasting verity. Its fundamental principles of proportion and design speak to our innate sense of beauty and continue to offer lessons for today's practitioners. Lastly, they remind us that tradition is the wisdom of experience, and that great architecture grows from and reflects tradition.

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Related Publication

Variety, Archaeology, and Ornament, online catalogue, www.virginia.edu/artmuseum/

Adapting the Eye: An Archive of the British in India, 1770–1830

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven
11 October–31 December 2011

The chronologies and categories of the architectural history of South Asia were crystallized in the mid-nineteenth century. British and Indian historians and antiquarians built upon a corpus of knowledge accumulated since the late eighteenth century that included picturesque depictions, exploratory essays, and the piecemeal documentation of sites. Many of these were published in *Asiatick Researches*, the journal of an association established in 1784 and initially comprised of British orientalists, antiquarians, and dilettantes, called the Asiatick Society. These early years of scholarship on India were critical to British imperial expansion, yet information regarding agents, techniques and processes is still incomplete. Historians agree that Indians played pivotal roles in the production and illustration of this knowledge, but their specific contributions largely remain relegated to discussions of "native assistants" and "Company artists." *Adapting the Eye*, at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, made a significant contribution toward filling out this story. The focus was on a network of patrons, artists, and assistants in western India beginning around 1790, the year that the East India Company signed a treaty with the Maratha Peshwa Madhavrao II against Tipu Sultan of Mysore. The broker of this treaty, Charles Warre Malet, was also the principal patron who facilitated the work of artists James Forbes, James Wales, Gangaram Chintaman Tambat, and Robert Mabon.

Curated by Holly Shaffer under the supervision of Gillian Forrester, the center's curator of prints and drawings, and spread across five distinct spaces, the exhibition included pen-and-ink sketches, watercolors, prints, and oil paintings, largely drawn from center's collections and augmented with loans from Tate Britain, the British Library, and the Yale University Art Gallery. Rare books were displayed in glass cases, highlighting the interdependence of architectural illustration and a thriving publishing industry. The works in the exhibition were organized around the

themes of networking, collecting, viewing and the picturesque, antiquities, social documentation, anthropology, and flora and fauna. These categories were derived from the antiquarian practices of the British. Grounded in an Enlightenment preoccupation to order the world, they were an extension of simultaneous investigations into Mediterranean and Egyptian sites and antiquities. The exhibition however, pushed back at many established notions. For instance, Forbes, who was introduced to the Maratha court by Malet on the Peshwa's request, changed his style to suit his royal patron, indicating that it was more than the native eye that was adapting to newer tastes and techniques.

The pivotal figure in the exhibition was Gangaram Tambat, a sculptor who learned to draw and who produced an array of sketches of varied subjects and in multiple genres. Tambat learnt to adapt, using the camera obscura even as he retained an affinity for depicting surface and ornament with meticulous detail (Figure 1). His drawings of the "antiquities" of western India formed the basis, as the exhibition reveals, of the canonical histories of Indian architecture written in the nineteenth century. Tambat illustrated Ekvera (Karle) and Ellora in pen and ink on paper, using techniques of linear perspective and the architectural elevation. Much of the history of these sites was only just being established. These fresh perspectives replaced seventeenth-century Indo-Islamic narratives. Wales noted that it was Tambat who informed him and Malet of the existence of Ellora, a fact that emphasizes the British antiquarian's reliance on a network of local information and skills. Malet, who wrote an essay on Ellora that was published in *Asiatick Researches*, referred to some of this local knowledge.¹ Tambat drew an elevation of the rock-cut Kailash temple at Ellora and also created a panoramic view of the site that Shaffer suggests may have been the basis for the view of Ellora featured in the sixth and final volume of Thomas Daniell's monumental series *Oriental Scenery* (1795–1807). More significantly, Shaffer speculates about a possible connection between Tambat's illustrations of Ekvera (Karle) and the publications of the collector and antiquarian Henry Salt,