The Architecture and Furniture

by JAMES PARKER, Assistant Curator of Post-Renaissance Art

“I have been twice to the country since I received your Lordship’s letter; and if I may judge by my own employment private buildings go on apace. I expect to be very little in London all this summer, having business in various quarters of England...” In a letter to Lord Kames dated in March 1763 Robert Adam alludes to the press of business from country clients, the cause of his numerous absences from town.

One of these country clients was George William, sixth Earl of Coventry, who was making improvements to his country seat, Croome Court in Worcestershire. He had begun them while he was heir to the title and estates of the Earl of Coventry and bore the title of Lord Deerhurst, for a letter from Sir Edward Turner in August 1748 states that “Lord Deerhurst has conducted his River well.” The “River” was a serpentine ditch one and a half miles long, terminating in a lake dotted with islands, laid out as part of the landscape setting by Lancelot “Capability” Brown. Lord Deerhurst must have liked his landscape architect, for after he succeeded to the title in March 1751 he retained Brown to remodel the gabled Jacobean house. Brown came late to architecture, and Croome was his first architectural commission. Though he is best known as a landscape designer his buildings of later years show the solid virtues of the Palladian school, without great imagination. For Croome he designed a rectangular block with corner turrets and tetrastyle portico on the emplacement of the original structure, leaving intact some of the old chimneys and flues. This building never elicited rhapsodies from the authors of guidebooks, and the short and disparaging allusion by J. Britton in The Beauties of England and Wales, London, 1814, is typical: “The style of architecture of the house is very plain and bespeaks comfort rather than magnificence; but its inside makes up for any thing that may be called a deficiency without.” By late 1751 construction on the house was advanced, for another letter written by Sir Edward Turner in November specifies that “Lord Coventry is furnishing his house with elegance. He complains of its amplitude.” After Brown’s death in 1763, Lord Coventry wrote in tribute to his principal architect: “I certainly held him very high as an artist, and esteemed him as a most sincere friend. In spite of detraction, his works will ever speak for him... I may be partial to my place at Croome, which was entirely his creation, and, I believe, originally, as hopeless a spot as any in the island.” The plan of the grounds at Croome, the exterior architecture, and part of the interior architecture were due to Brown; but designs for the gallery, library, and tapestry room as well as for an upstairs bedroom, many of the furnishings, the interior of the church, and the dependent buildings were provided by Robert Adam, who appeared on the scene in 1760.

Lord Coventry engaged Robert Adam early in his career. Born in 1728, Adam had traveled abroad from the summer of 1754 until January 1758, chiefly in Italy, making an architectural
survey and forming his taste. Upon his return he went to work with his three brothers in the family architectural firm and quickly took the lead in all its operations. When he came to Croome in August 1760 he had a considerable practice and the elements of his interior and exterior decoration were becoming known and prized.

The Preface to the first part of The Works in Architecture of Robert and James Adam, published in 1778, contains Robert Adam's own appraisal of the changes he had brought to domestic archi-

tecture: “To enter upon an enquiry into the state of this art in Great Britain, till the late changes it has undergone, is not part of our present design. We leave that subject to the observation of the skilful: who we doubt not, will easily perceive, within these few years, a remarkable improvement in the form, convenience, arrangement, and relief of apartments; a greater movement and variety, in the outside composition, and in the decoration of the inside, an almost total change. The massive entablature, the ponderous compartment ceiling, the tabernacle frame, al-

most the only species of ornament formerly known, in this country, are now universally exploded, and in their place, we have adopted a beautiful variety of light mouldings, gracefully formed, delicately enriched and arranged with propriety and skill. We have introduced a great variety of Ceilings, freezes, and decorated pilasters and have added grace and beauty to the whole by a mixture of grotesque stucco and painted ornament together with the flowing rainceau, with its fanciful figures and winding foliage.”

In spite of the hyperbole of this statement there is support for Adam's claim to have re-designed English interior architecture. The system of arabesque ornament which he spread over walls and ceilings was derived from Renaissance painted grotesques, and ultimately from Roman wall decorations, as implied by the Preface: “But on the inside of their edifices the ancients were extremely careful to proportion both the size and depth of their compartments and pannels, to the distance from the eye . . . and with regard to the decoration of their private and bathing apartments, they were all delicacy, gaiety, grace, and beauty. If the reader is desirous to examine more minutely into these truths, let him consult the Rotunda, the Temple of Peace, the ruins of Adrian’s villa, the Palace of the Emperors, and other Cryptae at Rome, with the inimitable remains on the Baian shore.” Whatever their source, Robert Adam’s genius reinterpreted for English drawing rooms the rams’ heads, griffins, paterae, anthemia, swags, vases, and other classical motifs that appear in his schemes. The new decorative treatment was quickly propagated and had great initial success. In the first ten years of his practice Adam received an extraordinary number of commissions and established a reputation. It was during this period that he designed the magnificent dining room for Lansdowne House, completed in 1768, which is now in the Museum, adjoining the Croome Court room on the north.

Adam’s bills for Croome are still preserved. In these bills, which he presented in installments to Lord Coventry, he lists the designs by date, giving the price charged for each in a column on the right. The first entry is dated August 1760: “Elevation & plan of a Greenhouse. £15 15s. od.” A pen and wash drawing in the Museum’s Print
Elevation of the south front, and floor plan of Croome Court. The Tapestry Room, here called Breakfast Room, is between the library and the salon. From Woolfe and Gandon's Vitruvius Britannicus, 1771
Rogers Fund, 1916
Department inscribed “Design of a Green House for the Right Honble. the Earl of Coventry Robt. Adam Architect 1760” corresponds closely to the greenhouse as built and is probably the elevation referred to. The entries continue interruptedly until June 23, 1781 when Adam produced his last design for the “Menagerie front in lines shewing what parts are stone, wood etc.” The bills invoice an astonishing variety of drawings, from a design for an artificial ruin to a “Smaller seat for the pleasure ground” and “Ornamentall paintings in Charosculo for two large pannels in the Gallery,” and provide an excellent illustration of Adam’s working methods, of the enormous care he exercised over every detail of interior and exterior decoration. Some of the designs failed to satisfy the client and had to be revised, others were repeated “at full size” or “at large” for the stoncutters, plasterworkers, wood carvers, brass founders, carpet weavers, and mural painters, Adam’s “regiment of artificers” who had to carry out his designs and who were occasionally named in the bills.

In January 1763 Adam had sketched a design for the ceiling of the library at Croome, and another for the tapestry room, charging ten guineas for each. As it turned out, the ceiling design for the library was used for the tapestry room. This design, preserved among the sets of Adam drawings at the Soane Museum in London, corresponds in every essential with the ceiling of the tapestry room recently given to the Museum by the Kress Foundation. (See page 84.)

The tapestry room ceiling is an example of Adam’s clear and vigorous early style, and the wonderful ornamented wheel molding gives substance to his claim that “we have adopted a beautiful variety of light mouldings, gracefully formed, delicately enriched and arranged with propriety and skill,” while the side bands of decoration illustrate “the flowing raingeau, with its fanciful figures and winding foliage.” At four
corners around the wheel are beautifully finished garlanded trophies of arms with two vases, the shapes of which betray collectors’ interest in Greek vases, supposed at that time to be Etruscan. Similar trophies appear on ceilings designed by Adam for Shardeloes and Osterley.

The strong lines and clear relief of the tapestry room ceiling contrast with those complicated brightly painted ceilings of Adam’s late period that invited the caustic comments of his rival Sir William Chambers: “for one cannot suffer to go by so high a name the trifling gaudy ceilings now in fashion, which, composed as they are of little rounds, squares, hexagons, and ovals, excite no other idea than that of a dessert upon the plates of which are dished out bad copies of indifferent antiques.”

In addition to the bills from Robert Adam there are preserved at Croome accounts of payments to craftsmen who worked on the house, a kind of payroll of workmen who in some cases executed Adam’s designs. Among these accounts is an entry covering the years from 1762 to 1765 specifying payments made for plastering work to Joseph Rose. This entry is corroborated by Adam’s bills which give the plasterwork on the church ceiling to Rose. The ceiling of the tapestry room must therefore have been executed by Joseph Rose and his assistants in the course of the year 1763, following Adam’s design dated January 1763. Rose did plasterwork at Syon and Shardeloes, two of Adam’s early commissions, and later worked for him on Mersham le Hatch, Kedleston, Kenwood, Harewood, Luton, Nostell, Lansdowne House and 20 Saint James’s Square. He also worked for Adam’s rival James Wyatt on the Pantheon, London, and at Wyatt’s country houses, Beaudesert, Ridgely, and Castlecoole. For his skill at Claydon House, Buckinghamshire, he was called “the first man in the Kingdom as a Plasterer” by the architect Sir Thomas Robinson.

The lateral bands of rinceaux on the Croome Court room ceiling do not repeat each other exactly, and may have been in part modeled and finished by hand, while the rest of the ceiling decoration was cast from molds. A method of casting ceiling ornaments is described in an early nineteenth-century building manual, The Practical Builder and Workman’s Companion by Peter Nicholson: “The plasterers of the present day cast all their ornament in Plaster of Paris; whereas they were formerly the work of manual labour, performed by ingenious men, then known in the trade as ornamental plasterers. . . . All the ornaments which are cast in Plaster of Paris, are previously modelled in clay. The clay model exhibits the power and taste of the designer, as well as that of the sculptor. . . . When it is finished and becomes rather firm, it is oiled all over, and put into a wooden frame. All its parts are then retouched and perfected, for receiving a covering of melted wax, which is poured into the frame and over the clay-mould. When cool, it is turned upside down, and the wax comes easily away from the clay, and is an exact reversed copy. In such moulds are cast all the enriched mouldings, now prepared by common plasterers. The waxy models are made so as to cast about one foot in length of the ornaments at a time; this quantity being easily removed out of the moulds, without the danger of breaking. The casts are all made with the finest and purest Plaster of Paris, satu-

An excerpt from Adam’s bills to Lord Coventry. The Octagon Room was in the Earl’s town house at 106 Piccadilly Croome Estate Trust
Adam’s design for the library ceiling at Croome, which was followed in the Tapestry Room
Sir John Soane’s Museum, London

OPPOSITE: The ceiling of the Tapestry Room as installed at the Museum
rated with water. The casts, when first taken out of the moulds, are not very firm, and are suffered to dry a little, either in the air, or in an oven adapted for the purpose; and when hard enough to bear handling, they are scraped and cleaned up for the workmen to fix in the places intended.”

When the parts of the ceiling were uncrated at the Museum, tests were made to ascertain the original color of the surface. They disclosed an original coat of bluish white paint, which was approximated when the room was repainted. The mechanics of refloating the ceiling at the Museum were simplified by procedures used when it was dismantled from Croome Court in 1949. At that time the ceiling was cut down in sections roughly five feet square and the original fir laths replaced with new plaster and wood supports. At the Museum the backs were reinforced with metal armatures and each section suspended from a steel grid. The joints were then filled and finished by plasterworkers.

Among the Adam drawings at the Soane Museum there is a design for a chimney piece, dated 1762, conforming in general outline to the chimney piece executed for the room. The principal difference is in the decoration of the frieze: tongue-and-dart molding in the drawing, and leafy scroll as executed. The scroll, a rococo device, may have been a concession by Adam to the exuberant rococo decoration of the Gobelins tapestries which were outside his jurisdiction, designed and executed in France between 1763 and 1771. Taken aback at the intrusion of asymmetry upon a classically balanced room, he may have allowed the design of the chimney piece to be altered as a compromise with an alien aesthetic concept.

Eighteenth-century Englishmen had a passion for rare marbles, imported at great expense from Italy and elsewhere, and liked to see them displayed in table tops and pavements and on chimney pieces. The red Veronese marble background to the chimney piece and the white Carrara trim were quarried in Italy, and the central

*A design, dated 1762, resembling the marble chimney piece in the Tapestry Room*

Sir John Soane's Museum, London
slab of lapis lazuli may have been found among deposits on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius. It was quite proper for an architect to combine these brilliantly colored marbles on a chimney piece, as directed by Isaac Ware in *A Complete Body of Architecture*, published in 1768: “We would have the architect take care also to suit his colours to the subject; let him be as lavish of the lively tincts as he pleases in an elegant chimney-piece, but let him take care not to use too many of the gaudy colours on a tomb.”

In the accounts of craftsmen’s time at Croome is a notation of payment made to Joseph Wilton in 1760 “To value of a Tabllet of true lapis lazuli feneer’d measuring 16¾ ins. x 6 ins. . . made do. to exact measure and polished.” The sight measurement of the tablet of lapis lazuli set in a frame of white marble on the chimney piece frieze is sixteen by six inches, leaving little doubt of its identity with the slab specified in the account. Lapis lazuli, a dark blue mineral speckled with brilliant pyrites, may have been a favorite stone of Lord Coventry’s, for a square of it occurs again in the top of the pier table on the opposite wall. Joseph Wilton, who cut the stone, executed in 1766 the caryatid chimney piece for the gallery designed by Adam. Though he produced various busts and funeral monuments, was given the post of State-coach carver and in 1764 the post of Sculptor to His Majesty, Joseph Wilton was also known as a sculptor of chimney pieces. He carved them for Blenheim, Osterley, and Somerset House, and according to John Thomas Smith “was for many years extensively employed in producing richly ornamented chimney-pieces for most of the mansions which were then building by his intimate friend, Sir William Chambers, [and] had considerable dealings with the Carrara Marble merchants, which enable him frequently to accommodate his brother artists with marbles.” It is possible that Wilton carved the tapestry room chimney piece, or he may have provided the stone for some brother artist, as yet unknown, who set it and carved the surround.

Another name carried on Adam’s bills is that of a master carpenter, John Hobcroft. An entry for May 1762 specifies that Hobcroft is to execute Adam’s Gothic designs for interior joinery on the church at Croome, while Joseph Rose is to carry out the plasterwork: “To Mouldings at full size for the pulpit, Pews, stucco work & the different cornices & Mouldings of the Cieling for Messrs. Hopcraft & Rose.” John Hobcroft was a protégé of Lancelot Brown and worked for him at Corsham, Castle Ashby, Claremont, and Broadlands. He had been on the payroll at Croome when Brown was architect and was known to the Earl. It is possible that he only did rough joinery in the rooms designed by Adam, leaving the fine carving on the doors, window frames, and dadoes to be carried out by a craftsman named Sefferin Alkan. The carved decoration of the library at Shardeloes was by Alkan, whose name also appears in Adam’s bills for Croome under an entry dated June 1763: “the Ornaments for Mr. Alken for the Bookcases of the Library.” Alkan’s name was on the payroll as well for the carving of friezes, architraves to doors, windows, et cetera between 1763 and 1765, so there is strong presumption that he executed the fine guilloche molding around the windows, the dentils of the
supplied designs. The carver John Gilbert may have been identical with the John Gilbert who had an upholstery and furnishing shop in Great Queen Street and called himself “Upholder to His Majesty.” He is otherwise mentioned in a long account of carving done on Lansdowne House for the Earl of Shelburne. The Lansdowne dining room displays some of his carved woodwork, and he seems even to have carved fig leaves for the original marble statues which Lord Shelburne placed in the niches.

The Earl of Coventry, who went to France in 1763 to buy tapestries, also bought French furniture, the bills for which, passed through Foley’s Bank, are preserved at Croome. A capital piece that he brought back was the marquetry secrétaire à abattant by B.V.R.B., sold in 1948 with some of the contents of the house. The Earl also made superb purchases of English furniture, and from available evidence it seems that the tapestry room furniture was mainly English. The Museum has received from the Kress Foundation most of the original furniture of the room: a beautiful pier mirror, a pier table with a multi-colored marble top, and a set of six splendid armchairs and two settees covered in crimson Gobelins tapestry.

The documentation which exists in such abundance for the house—more than three hundred of the original bills are preserved—extends to some of its contents. The large pier glass is accurately described in the accounts at Croome: “Oct. 5, 1769. To Mayhew & Ince. A large Architect Pier Frame, fluted, richly carv’d with shell on top, festoons and drops of double husks down the sides, goates head at bottom gilt in the very best Double Burnish’d Gold £35.” John Mayhew and William Ince were partners in a well-known cabinetmaking and upholstering firm and joint authors of a book of rococo designs, The Universal System of Household Furniture, which appeared in installments between 1759 and 1763. The great mirror in the tapestry room may not have been taken from a specific drawing by Adam but clearly betrays the influence of his classical designs. “Double Burnish’d Gold” meant that two coats of water gilding were applied over gesso and that parts of the gold were heightened by burnishing.

Mayhew and Ince’s London shop in Broad
Street, Soho also turned out the chair and settee frames themselves, with their husked festoon borders and bowknot crests, for the same bill itemizes "6 Large Antique Elbow Chairs with oval Backs carv'd with Double husks and ribbon knot on top, Gilt in the Best Burnish'd Gold, Stuffed with Besthair, in Linen—Backt with Fine Crimson Tammy—proper for covering with Tapistry in the Country . . . the pattern included £77 8s. od. 2 Settees for Each Side the Chimney, richly carv'd and Gilt Stuff'd and Cover'd to match the Chairs £56 10s. od." Evidently the set was originally provided with castors, for the following entry reads: "10 Setts of Castors with Screws and fixing to the Chairs and Sofas." Most of these castors are still on the chairs and settees, which also possess their original "stuffing" and gilding.

In another Croome entry there is a reference to "2 Window Cornices [the wooden boxes from which curtains were festooned], richly Carved and Gilt in Burnish'd Gold." These cornices too form part of the Kress Foundation's gift. The curtains which once hung under them are also described; they were of crimson silk, fringed, and held back by four tassels. Since the original curtains have long since disappeared, modern ones are being made to conform with the description on the bill for them.

By June 1771, eight and a half years after Adam's dated design for the ceiling, the tapestry room was being finished off, for the accounts detail one of the last stages of the work: "June 1771. To Mayhew & Ince. Three men's time at Croome putting up the Tapestry, making paper case hangings for ditto, stuffing and covering 2 settees and 6 chairs, fixing gilt borders and sundry other jobs." "Fixing gilt borders" was probably the operation of retouching the gilded chair frames after the tapestry had been fastened with brass nails, and "paper case hangings" were presumably dust covers for use when the Earl was not at home.

The black marble top inset with 176 squares of colored stones that rests on the pier table (page 90) under the mirror must be designated in the item which reads: "The Right Honourable the Earl of Coventry to John Wildsmith 1759 July 28th To a Rich fine and Marble Table in sqairs of all the curious sorts of marble No: 176 Sqr.
Piccadilly were sold. The sale included several marble chimney piece tablets and "3 marble boxes inlaid with different sorts of marble." The apron of the fine carved and gilded table supporting this top is adorned with a guilloche molding resembling the guilloche around the window frames, and the table may have been executed between 1763 and 1765, when the carving was done on the room.

The ninth Earl of Coventry, who succeeded to the title in 1843, lived until 1930, and was a great patron of sports. In 1880 he sold the tapestries with the tapestry-covered furniture and re-covered the walls with green damask, but otherwise had little interest in changing his great-grandfather's schemes. Consequently, with the exception of the tapestries and the tapestry-covered furniture, the room probably kept until the dispersal sale of 1948 some of the original furniture bought for it by the sixth earl. Members of the Coventry family who remember Croome before this sale have kindly provided information helping to reconstruct the appearance of the room before the furniture was scattered.

In addition to the furnishings already mentioned, there was a pair of English gilded wood pedestals which stood against the window wall on either side of the table. These pedestals, which are now in the possession of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, have been generously lent to us, and again occupy their original positions. They are now surmounted by a pair of handsome gilt-bronze candelabra, recently purchased by the Museum, which were made about 1770 presumably by Matthew Boulton, after a design by Robert Adam now preserved in the Soane Museum.

There were, moreover, two fine English commodes in the room, which were sold in 1948. Through fortunate circumstances, the Museum has just completed the purchase of the more spectacular of the two (page 92), and it is hoped that this new acquisition will be in place by the time of the room's opening. It is certainly the commode described in the bill dated July 20, 1764, as being in floral marquetry with gilt-bronze mounts, and on the evidence of an existing photograph was still in the room about 1880. It is a magnificent piece of furniture, the work of Peter Langlois, a French cabinetmaker who served a wide clientele from his London shop on Tottenham Court Road.

The Museum was also able to acquire last spring another commode of the same period, similarly decorated with floral marquetry and gilt bronze; it forms a fitting complement to the one from Croome Court. It resembles the work
of Peter Langlois, and was formerly in the collection of the late Sir George Donaldson.

The original rug was probably made for the room at the Wilton factory. A fine Isphahan rug is shown on the floor until the Museum can acquire a suitable English example. The hardwood floor is the original, laid down board by board at the Museum, following a numbered diagram made when it was taken up in 1949.

Robert Adam, the architect of the tapestry room, seems to have reached a good understanding with his employer. When the Earl tried to cut by ten pounds Adam’s first bill, which included designs for the tapestry room, the architect took umbrage and wrote him a letter dated April 3, 1764: “I am extremely sorry your Lordship should have thought of deducting any part of the Money, as almost every person I have done designs for . . . have generally sent me a present over and above the Bill itself, and not long since upon delivering one of seventy five pounds, I received a Hundred, with this Compliment That he knew how many thousands I had spent in acquiring knowledge. . . .” A notation in Adam’s bills shows that the Earl restored the cut on the same day: “£260 8s. 6d. London 3 April 1764. Received from the Earl of Coventry full payment of the above Bill.” Adam continued to reward Lord Coventry with his services until 1781, and when he died in 1792 the Earl was one of the pallbearers at his funeral.

George William, sixth Earl of Coventry, performed the part of an eighteenth-century English peer with éclat. He held strong opinions, proper to his rank, and did not scruple to express them. “Coventry has given us one dinner in Margaret Street, and has been most excellent in his old way of disputation,” one of his friends wrote. The Earl’s obituary notice in the Gentleman’s Magazine of 1809 alludes to his career in government, checked by opposition to war with the American colonies: “he well understood the principles of the Constitution, and acted at all times in conformity with them, supporting the Government of the Country with zeal and integrity; but when, during the American War, he could no longer approve of the conduct of the then Minister, Lord North, he resigned the place of one of the Lords of the Bedchamber, though contrary to his Majesty’s wishes, resolving that

One of two pedestals that stood on either side of the pier table
Philadelphia Museum of Art
A commode in the French taste, made to the order of the sixth Earl of Coventry for the Tapestry Room, by Peter Langlois, 1764

no private consideration should shackle his public conduct." Throughout his life he held public office in the home county of Worcestershire, where he was Lord Lieutenant and Recorder. In 1752 he married Maria Gunning, one of the beautiful and impecunious Gunning sisters, who died in 1760. In 1764 he married again and there were abundant offspring of both marriages. He lived to the age of eighty-eight, and died in 1809 at Croome, which he had spent a large part of his life improving and beautifying.

Richard Joseph Sullivan's journal of his travels around England in 1778 gives an account of the house and setting while the Earl's improvements were still in progress: "From Tewksbury, proceeding on our journey, we arrived at a seat of Lord Coventry, called Crome Court. . . . The house, which, though heavy, has the look of a modern building, is large, but situated too low. The rooms are handsome and convenient; especially a drawing-room, hung and furnished with Gobelin tapestry, the finest, perhaps, in England. . . . His lordship, however, found the house where it now stands, and contented himself with altering a few of the rooms, and in general, with giving it a fashionable exterior. Leaving the church, you enter a shrubbery . . . adorned with green houses, amply stocked with a variety of exotics. From the green houses, you pass through a nursery of young trees of all denominations, and come at length to a machine, which, by the labour of one horse, supplies the canal with water in the summer season. Quitting this, you descend on one side of the church into another shrubbery, in the same degree of order, but superior in beauty to that which commences at the house;
and about the centre of it come to another greenhouse, considerably larger than the former, and serving the purpose of a lively apartment, upon the removal of plants into the open air. Thence proceeding, you pass under the high road, and enter upon a highly delightful and picturesque walk along the borders of the river. Here, indeed, Mr. Brown has exerted his taste and judgment with the greatest success; for, instead of a marshy piece of ground, as he found it, it is now worked into a beautiful sheet of water, with several little islands irregularly interspersed. To one of these islands, where a small pavilion is erecting, there are two bridges, over both of which we passed. And thence for a considerable way tracing the confines of the water, and encountering fresh beauties at every step we advanced, we at length arrived at a small boat, which, worked by the aid of pullies, carried us across the water, and landed us within a few paces of our carriage. Altogether, this seat of Lord Coventry’s is worthy of attention. Much pains have evidently been taken in the laying out of the grounds, and the whole is kept in the most proper order.”

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A view of the Tapestry Room in the Museum
Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1958-1959