Voltaire remarked that Frenchmen wrote the good plays but Italians built the good theaters. The Italian leadership in theater design was no sudden accident but was, like the Italian leadership in all the visual arts, the ripening of a millennial experience in the arts of form. Already in the first century B.C. Italy had produced the only surviving classical manual on theater design, where, mixed up with the current practice in building forts, houses, and temples, in constructing catapults and finding healthy water, in anything and everything that a Roman contractor-engineer might need, the author, Vitruvius, gives some involved instructions for planning theaters. Since his rules of thumb were received by renaissance and baroque architects like laws from Sinai, it is interesting to see what he says about theater scenery: “There are three sorts of scenes, tragic, comic, and satyric. Tragic scenes are ornamented with columns, pediments, statues, and other royal decorations. Comic scenes represent private buildings and galleries, with windows like those in ordinary houses. Satyric scenes are ornamented with trees, caves, hills, and other rural objects in imitation of nature.” Since the extant Vitruvius manuscripts, which go back to about 900, are unillustrated, carrying out his instructions is a matter of guesswork, like trying to put together a prefabricated house without diagrams.

The first modern book on theater building was also written by an Italian, Sebastiano Serlio, though he published it in Paris in 1545 as a part of the first modern treatise on architecture to be printed with illustrations. The work appeared in English in 1611, when Shakespeare had just retired to Stratford and Ben Jonson, bitterly remarking that “painting and carpentry are the soul of masque,” had realized that his poetry passed unheard by the audiences who applauded Inigo Jones’s scenery and machines.

Serlio elaborated on Vitruvius’s three sets. In the comic one, for instance, “the houses must be slight for Citizens, but specially there must not want a brawthell or bawdy house, and a great Inne, and a Church; for such things are of necessity to be therein.” The “houses” in Serlio’s woodcut (ill. opp. page) are like those that used to be strung out along the side of a mediaeval town square to accommodate the various scenes of a miracle play. To bring these “houses” into a narrow proscenium stage, Serlio telescoped them and lined them up on either side of a perspective street. Indoor scenes were acted on balconies or porches, for Serlio’s century felt that a room with no fourth wall was unnatural. Naturalness may be, like beauty, a variable of habit.

Serlio’s set for satyric plays is also more mediaeval than classical, having many of the features of a crèche: “In our days these things were made in Winter, when there were but fewe greene Trees, Herbs and Flowers to be found; then you must make these things of Silke, and the more such things cost, the more they are esteemed. This have I seen in some Scenes made for the pleasure and delight of Francisco Maria, Duke of Urbin. Oh good Lord, what magnificence was there to be seen, for the great number of Trees and Fruits, with sundry Herbs and Flowres, all made of fine Silke of divers Collors. The water courses being adorned with Frogs, Snailes, Tortuses, Toads, Adders, Snakes and other beasts; Rootes of Corale, mother of Pearle and other shells layed and thrust through betweene the stones. I would speak of the costly apparel of some Shepheards made of cloth of gold, and of Silke, cunningly mingled with Imbrothery; of some Fishermen, having Nets and Angling-
rods, all gilt; of some Countrey mayds and Nimphes carelessly apparelled without pride.” Even such were the delights laid at the feet of Gloriana.

The oldest modern theater still existing is the Teatro Olimpico at Vicenza, planned by Palladio in imitation of a now vanished Roman theater near by. Palladio died a year after the work was started, leaving his pupil Scamozzi to carry out the permanent set of wood and plaster. Their tragic set has five streets instead of Serlio’s one, for they carried out Vitruvius’s words with the greater rigor of a more archaeological generation. “In the middle are the royal doors,” wrote Vitruvius, “those on the right and left are for the guests; and those at the ends are where the road turns off.” Greek and Roman tragedies require the main entrance to lead indoors into a house or temple, but in the Olimpico each of the five arches leads into a perspective street like that in Serlio’s woodcut. Had the builders filled in Vitruvius’s gaps without looking for indications in the tragedies themselves? Or were they so enamored of perspective that they applied it even where they knew it did not fit the action? It probably mattered little anyway, for the Olimpico was used mostly for declaiming the static closet dramas of Seneca and his renaissance imitators. This attempt to reconstruct an antique theater and to revive antique tragedy in it led to two developments—the modern theater and the opera—which would have surprised the archaeological literati of the six-


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teenth century. An excursion into the past often opens up the future.

In 1619, just when Monteverdi was bringing opera to life, Giovanni Battista Alcotti created the oldest theater which still looks workable. This first big modern theater is the Teatro Farnese, which is built of wood in a riding school in Parma and is said to hold four thousand. The roomy stage once had huge pulleys and windlasses to shift canvas scenery, since a permanent set in sculpture, like the Olimpico’s, was already a historical oddity. The proscenium arch is rich with carving and columns that project the richness of the scenery out into the house, where lights burned almost as brightly as on the stage. Baroque taste demanded unity in a room and wished the fairyland of the stage to expand right out around and above and behind the audience.

The audience sat on old Roman stadium steps like those in the semicircle at the Olimpico, but the Parma bleachers were bent into a deep U. Above the steps were two tiers of ornamental arches that look like the Colosseum turned outside in. Parma already had the essentials of the conventional opera house, which the Italians perfected about 1680 when they closed in the U to form a truncated oval and developed the arcades into tiers of shallow boxes. Good for hearing and seeing, the oval of boxes seats many people cheaply and looks full and festive even if really half empty. In 1778 this plan produced its masterpiece in La Scala in Milan, which seats five hundred more than our Metropolitan Opera and is still Europe’s largest opera house. Its six tiers of shallow boxes and its small foyers suit the Italians, who visit each other’s boxes during intermissions instead of milling in the foyers like the French and the Americans.

The Metropolitan Opera House follows the Italian plan even to the inadequate foyers. The placing of our exits, stage entrance, box office, and so forth is in the tradition which started in 1737 with the San Carlo in Naples, the first modern theater in which function shaped the whole building inside and out. The French varied the Italian plan hardly more than by enlarging the foyers and making the auditorium more decorative. Since the French considered the house part of the spectacle, and went to the theater to be seen as well as to see, the proscenium is sometimes made of boxes for a changing decoration of ornamental ladies. A wise French architect wrote in the 1880’s: “The auditorium must make a flattering background for people. Red is the safest color, since it warms the eye and glows against dresses, cheeks and jewels. Never use green or yellow, for no lady will show herself twice in a theater that makes her look sallow.”

The Italian auditorium prevailed far and wide until Wagner designed the Bayreuth Opera in 1871 in the shape of a partly opened fan. The usual New York auditorium is in such a fan shape, only wider and shallower and equipped with the deep balconies that are necessary to make this plan seat enough people to pay. Such deep balconies were impossible before electric lighting, since their recesses, if lighted by candles or gas, would have been suffocating.

Lighting equipment has dominated the development of scenery. Oddly enough the classic daylit theaters—the Greek, the Chinese, and the Elizabethan—dressed their actors richly but were content with the simplest suggestions of scene. Was this because daylight cannot be tempered or colored and darkness cannot be turned on for changes? Was it because an audience does not miss scenery where the shifting and lengthening of shadows paces the action of a drama that is geared to the clockwork of the sun? Imagine Shakespeare’s playhouse when Cleopatra was dallying with death as the wan-ness of a London winter afternoon drained away, leaving the dark for Caesar’s torches to rush into and disclose her dead. Think how the ordnance must have thundered when Hamlet was borne off the stage as the first stars began to twinkle. The bareness of the Elizabethan carpentry was in exquisite taste, for it offered no distraction from the splendor of the language or the decline of the afternoon.

But in an indoor theater the paltriness of man’s substitutes for sunlight cries for the distraction of scenery. The Italian renaissance theater used lights to decorate as well as to il-
lumine the stage. Serlio outlined his “houses” with sparklers made by lighting candles behind lens-shaped bottles filled with colored waters, like those in an old-fashioned druggist’s window, red wine suggesting the “rubbies,” white wine the topazes, and “common water strayned” the diamonds. “The bottels,” he cautioned, “must be set fast lest they fall with leaping and dancing of the Moriscoes.” Since strings of colored lights were practical for fixed sets but were too complicated to install in changing scenery, the flats and backdrops that came into use at the time of the Farnese Theater had to be lighted indirectly. Indirect lighting brought a fresh set of troubles, for it was almost impossible to keep the actors from casting shadows on the painted vistas, and the required banks of candles smoked so hotly that windows had to be opened above the stage lest the latter half of the spectacle vanish in soot. At one time Charles I stopped holding masques in the banqueting hall at Whitehall lest “the smoke of many lights” blacken Rubens’s new ceiling. Nobody seemed to fear a conflagration, for Serlio cavalierly says that if there is “something or other which should seeme to burne, you must wet it throughly with excellent good Aquavite, and setting it on fire with a candle it will burn all over.”

The glimmering dimness of no matter how many hundred candles swallowed up most colors, but what of that? The baroque theater enchanted with linear perspective, so that “a man in a small space might see great Palaces, large Temples, neere and farre off, long streets crosst with other wayes, Tryumphant Arches, Columns, Piramides and Obeliscens.” Around 1700 the Bibiena family (Europe’s stage magicians for over a century) perfected diagonal perspective, leading the eye out to right and
left toward endlessness. The delight of such settings can be guessed from the old Bakst backdrop that was used until a year or so ago for the ballet “Aurora’s Wedding.” Perspective scenery could have flourished only in the great age of autocrats, since the illusion of depth is more or less askew for everybody except the prince enthroned in the one box which is both at the level of the horizon line and square on axis. In spite of this, Italian designers continued to enchant every audience in Europe with the magic of immensity until 1784, when the Argand lamp broke the spell with the first notable improvement in illumination for a thousand years or so. As ever brighter lights enabled audiences to see more colors in stage scenery and to distinguish a painted cloth from real distances, designers were forced to make their sets look less like perspective drawings and more like easel paintings. Stage design caught up with romantic painting, kept pace with the progress of naturalism, and finally became photographic in its literalness. Design and geometry did not reappear on the stage until after 1900, when strong electric-light bulbs allowed spotlighting to become a basic part of the effect, or made it possible to design entirely with light. The baroque illusion of immensity returned with Gordon Craig.

But just because the baroque theater got along with candles and handpower one must not imagine that its marvels were limited. As early as 1637 Niccolo Sabbattini’s Pratica di fabbricar scene e machine ne’ teatri, the earliest book on stage machinery and transformations, tells how to show a town collapsing into ruin, make hell appear and mountains rise, lower clouds with gods in them, raise phantoms and disperse them, change a man into a rock and back again, conjure up the sea, and make it swell, storm, and darken while dolphins guide ships through the whitecaps. During the more difficult of these transformations Sabbattini suggests distracting the audience’s attention by having a couple of strong-lunged men bellow “Fire!” Stage machines made more contemporary reputations than painted perspectives.

The baroque statesman used the stage designer just as every autocrat has done up to Mussolini and Hitler. When a prince took over the government of a town he made this clear to everybody by spanning the streets with scenery arches and parading under them in a pageant. When a prince died a stage designer—a Bibiena or a Galliari—concocted a seventy-foot catafalque of columns and hoisted the draped casket halfway up, to be shown among urns belching heavy flames and skeletons flashing scythes. For Easter and the canonization of the new saints of the Counter Reformation, the Jesuit father Andrea Pozzo extinguished the high altar beneath a tower that soared up into clouds which expanded like incense and pillowed the newest martyrs as they swooned to the shudderings of the organ. The baroque has rightly been called Jesuitenkunst, for Saint Ignatius’s Spiritual Exercises are a classic manual of methods for attacking the spirit through all the senses. When Church and State proclaimed their high doings with spectacular ceremonial, life offered more contrasts than now, and one day differed more from another.

With this inexhaustible theatricality, why did not the Italians produce plays that found as wide a currency as their theaters, their scenery, and their operas? One reason must be that the Italian stage became most active after the French had invaded Italy and sacked Rome and the Spaniards had occupied Naples. In the discouragement of becoming vassals it is no wonder that the Italians turned back to dreams of old Rome and that their antiquarian academies saw no refuge except in archaeological revivals of Seneca and Vitruvius. Opera throng on the Italian desire to fuse various arts to one end, but tragedy was snowed under court spectacle. Italian tragic writers found no inspiring theme, as Corneille and Racine did in monarchical unity, Lope and Calderón in the fanaticism of honor, and the Elizabethans in love of England. Italian comedy fared hardly better. Since the authors of the Commedia dell’arte owed their professional or guild (dell’arte) status to their ability to improvise dialogue for any given scenario, they refused to surrender their authors’ privileges by acting to a written text. The Commedia might have left
Alessandro Sanquirico's set for the opera "Mahomet," performed at the Scala Theater in Milan in 1816

hardly a memory of its brilliance had it not had its greatest success at the French court, where a century of residence produced a tradition that nurtured Molière. Voltaire was perhaps not quite right in saying that Italy had produced the theaters and France the plays, since Molière's early comedies belong as much to Italy as any of Goldoni's. This was art's revenge upon the conqueror.

To supplement the drama symposium held in the Museum on January 23-27 the 83rd Street basement gallery has been given over to a small exhibition illustrating the history of the theater from Aeschylus to modern times. The statuettes, drawings, photographs, prints, and the model stage set that make up the show are accompanied by explanatory labels. The exhibition will remain open through March.