Ornament Prints and Drawings of the Eighteenth Century

by CARL J. WEINHARDT, JR.  Associate Curator of Prints

The flowering of the eighteenth century in several current Bulletins is the result of a series of happy coincidences. Notable recent purchases and the Kress Foundation’s splendid gift added immeasurably to our collections of eighteenth-century decorative arts. Now Raphael Esmerian has given the Museum, for the Print Department, ten superb French furniture drawings (one shown as frontispiece) from the collection of the Prince de Ligne. All this makes appropriate an exhibition of some of the drawings and prints which helped to create and spread the styles of that century.

The prints and drawings in the exhibition opening January 20 in the Special Exhibition Galleries vary from first quick ideas for designs, to highly finished presentations intended to sell a product to a client or to provide a model for copying, to pictures of objects already executed. The eighteenth-century designer created a variety of things that startles in our unadorned age; they range from fans to fireworks and from saltcellars to palaces—all expressed, with more or less genius, in the terms of the reigning style.

Eighteenth-century Europe really created two rival styles—the rococo, born of a relaxation of the totalitarian rules of seventeenth-century art, and romantic classicism, constantly strengthened by new rules springing from the new science of archaeology. The two ran rather more concurrently than, as is often stated, successively. Classicism won a decisive victory in France as early as 1732, when Servandoni’s sober and majestic project for the façade of Saint Sulpice triumphed over that of Meissonier, who had only recently perfected the vocabulary of the French rococo. Thus a great severe pile, consisting fundamentally of two superposed flanks of Greek temples, with twin towers one of which was to be fourteen feet higher than those of Notre Dame, was rising in the heart of Paris during the heyday of the style Louis Quinze.

The current exhibition proves that while both styles were international, they remained astonishingly rich in local variations. We tend to think of eighteenth-century ornament first in French, then in English, and then possibly in German terms, often forgetting that Italy invented much of it. Both Meissonier and Servandoni were born in Italy, and most French designers still wanted to study there. Numerous purely Italian designs display the sure richness of invention of the last efflorescence in the long development stemming from Donatello and the grotesques of the Renaissance, and ultimately from Rome.

England remained cool, progressing from Burlington’s Palladio to Adam, interrupted only by a brief happy affair at mid-century with a rococo

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Sous encore plus hautement que le dessin rend mieux la face de la secrétaire que retourné de la bas relief et pochoir de fronce biscuit sur un fond petit bleu la brocart
Why should people be interested in eighteenth-century ornament when they are thinking about going to the moon? It is a fair question. Still a re-examination of the astonishing invention and all-pervasiveness of eighteenth-century decoration may be more pertinent for us than one would think, for the contemporary abnegation of ornament has led to the creation of man-made canyons surely as barren as any lunar craters, and there is probably all too little time to take stock before the tendency is reinforced by the first authentic lunar (lunatic?) style.

The nineteenth century, with few exceptions, divided the arts from the crafts and thereby left the latter at the mercy of machine-made ornament—with all too predictable consequences. The pastiche of totally inappropriate ornament applied willy-nilly became unbearable toward the end of the century, and a number of inspired young men with relatively clear vision created...
the art nouveau, now at last recognized as a brilliant if erratic and ultimately false start toward a new style. For the next generations a total denial of ornament seemed the only solution, and in the consequent new age of arid functionalism, "ornament" became a dirty word associated only with decrepit academies still trying to peddle sterile historic styles that had long lost their real meaning. The abolition of ornament and pattern proved the obvious point that they are not essential, that man can live without them. But inevitably the question arises: why should he?

There are signs—straws in the wind, perhaps—that the vast facelessness of our new cities has begun to pall and appall and that we may be on the threshold of another phase. To be sure, the first steps are hesitant and tentative. Of late, there have been attempts to enrich designs with expensive materials and in terms of that pitifully overworked concept "texture." Or the builder of an overpowering new honeycomb may proudly proclaim that a mural or sculpture has been "especially commissioned for the lobby."

Ornament in the classic sense is still generally shunned as being somehow inappropriate to contemporary life and to steel, concrete, and glass. In earlier ages designers were less awed by the sanctity of their materials; they recognized that their potentials and limitations, far from being innate, are largely imposed by man. So the Gothic stonemason at Gloucester or the rococo ironsmith at Nancy wrought his materials to suit the inspired whim of his age.

Thus we may learn something in method if not in detail from an age in which there was a rare union of effort and achievement among painters, sculptors, architects, and designers. But it will take time—like learning to speak again after a traumatic accident—for we must remember that for a century and a half ornament has been relegated first to the machine and then to the ash can.

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'entre deux guerres—
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate—but there is no competition—
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

T. S. Eliot

From "East Coker" in Four Quartets, copyright, 1943, by T. S. Eliot.
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Pencil, pen, and wash drawing for the garden façade of a large country house, by Giovanni Niccolo Servandoni (1695-1766), Italian, active in France. Signed and dated Paris, 1744. Height 16 ¾ inches. Gift of the Estate of Ogden Codman, 1951

Water-color drawing of a design for a ceiling decoration (possibly for the Duchesse de Mazarin), by François Joseph Bélanger (1744-1818), French. Height 15 ¾ inches. Dick Fund, 1932

Ink and water-color design for an enameled watch and chatelaine with mythological figures representing the four seasons. French School, about 1750. Height 8 1/4 inches. Gift of Janos Scholz, 1949

Chinoiserie, by Jean Pillement (1728-1808), French. Etching printed in color. Height 7 5/8 inches. Rogers Fund, 1921

Pen and wash drawing of the plan and wall elevations of a proposed “Great Room” for Great Saxham House in Suffolk, by Robert Adam (1728-1792), British. Height 20 3/4 inches. Whittelsey Fund, 1953

UPPER LEFT: Design for a wall with a secretary, by Franz X. Habermann (1721-1796), German. Published by J. G. Hertel, Augsburg, n.d. Etching. Height 10 3/4 inches. Whittelsey Fund, 1949


**Upper Left:** Design for a mantelpiece and wall decoration, by Giovanni Batista Piranesi (1720-1778), Italian. From *Diverse Maniere d'Adornare i Camini*, Rome, 1769. Etching. Height 15 3/4 inches. Rogers Fund, 1941

**Upper Right:** Design for a censer, by Giovanni Giardini (1646-1722), Italian. From *Promptuarium artis argentarioe*, Rome, 1750. Etching. Height 9 7/8 inches. Dick Fund, 1924


Pen and wash drawing of a scheme for the decoration of a palace hall, by Giovanni Paolo Pannini (1691-1765), Italian. Height 10 3/8 inches. Gift of Harry G. Friedman, 1957