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ADAM AND CHAMBERS

John Newman

Robert Adam's greatest rival was William Chambers. Chambers, born in 1723, was five years older than Adam, and remained five years ahead in reaching Italy for his Grand Tour. Though they overlapped in Rome only for about a month in February-March 1755, Adam at once recognised the threat posed by the older man to his own ambitions: "Chambers is a mortal check . . . All the English who have travelled for these five years are much prepossessed in his favour and imagine him a prodigy for genius, for sense and good taste. My own opinion is that he in great measure deserves their encomiums."¹

In the event both prospered in their careers, Adam by a swift rise to the peak of fashionability as a domestic architect, followed by unrelenting practice through thick and thin over the ensuing 30 years; Chambers by securing his position in the establishment, first as tutor to the Prince of Wales, then as the power behind the foundation of the Royal Academy, and finally as architect of the major public building erected in London in the second half of the 18th century, Somerset House.

This essay will concentrate on one aspect of their activities, the production of finished architectural drawings, in order to illustrate some aspects of the different practices of an "outsider" and an "insider".

For both, their time in Italy was a crucial formative experience. Thanks to John Fleming's classic publication of the Adam correspondence we know a great deal about what Robert Adam did in 1755–58, while he was established in Rome, polishing his architectural talents, in particular his draughtsmanship, as he prepared to take London by storm. By contrast we know all too little about Chambers's activities. Adam was, of course, an almost wholly negative witness, reporting that Chambers made unsuccessful approaches to Piranesi, got all his ideas from Clerisseau but behaved "ungratefully" towards him, and learnt figure drawing from Laurent Pecheux. Adam had much more fruitful relationships with all these three.²

Chambers himself gives us a more positive account in his own letters, in particular in the letter of advice to his favourite pupil, Edward Stevens, written nearly a quarter century later in 1774. In this Chambers stresses the importance of sketching antique fragments and studying painting and sculpture. He expresses his opinions of Italian Renaissance and Baroque architecture, dismissing 18th-century architects *en bloc*, "excepting Salvi, who had indeed no general principles to guide him, yet sometimes fortunately hit upon the right, as appears by parts of his fountain of Trevi, and parts of his Dominican church at Viterbo".³ Also in 1774 Chambers revisited Paris, and it is clear from his correspondence then that he was able to meet again many leading architects and artists who had been students while he was in Paris in 1749–50 or in Rome in the early 1750s.

Surviving drawings by Chambers made during his study years in Rome confirm these outlines. In the Soane Museum is a beautiful elevation of the Trevi Fountain (Fig. 1), signed and dated by means of the inscription in the lower right corner, "Mesurata et delineata per W.C. et Pecheux 1753".⁴ Sir John Soane acquired the drawing at the Chambers sale in June 1811, and shortly afterwards, in his fifth lecture as Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy, referred to it as follows: "I wish to call the attention of the Student to the elevation of the Fontana di Trevi, by a drawing, which I regret is not in Perspective. This drawing was



Fig. 1. Measured elevation by Sir William Chambers and Laurent Pecheux of the Trevi Fountain in Rome, 1753 (Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum).

made by the late Sir William Chambers whilst pursuing his studies in Italy. There is a chasteness in the manner with an effect produced without much labour, which makes this drawing preferable to the present more elaborate mode of treating Architectural Designs.”⁵

In 1753 the Trevi Fountain, though architecturally complete, had not yet received its full complement of marble sculpture. The central figure of Oceanus and the tritons and sea-horses below were represented by full-scale stucco models, and the niches on the palace front had in 1744, when the flow of water was restarted, been filled by paintings of the proposed statues of Agrippa and Trivia. The marbles were set in place only in 1760–61, the flanking statues by Filippo della Valle representing Fertility and Health. The Chambers/Pecheux drawing shows the architecture of the palace facade and the rockwork below it with great accuracy, and the stucco statues are also correctly depicted; however, the flanking statues and the reliefs above them as drawn do not correspond with anything known to have been intended for the fountain, and so must be a piece of artistic licence.

Nicola Salvi, architect of the fountain, had died in 1751 after a lingering illness, and his successor, Giuseppe Panini, had little or nothing to do towards its completion until 1758.⁶ It may, therefore, have been difficult for Chambers to get access to workshop drawings. All the same, the character of his elevation, in particular the accuracy of the palace facade, strongly suggests that he and Pecheux did work from a drawing as well as taking selected measurements from the more accessible parts of the building.

Soane acquired further drawings of the Trevi Fountain when he purchased the Adam drawings. These are vivid chalk sketches of the rockwork, sculpture and gushing water studied from three different viewpoints.⁷

Part only of the palace facade is indicated, and that very summarily. The drawings show the fountain in its condition prior to 1758, and were presumably made for Adam while

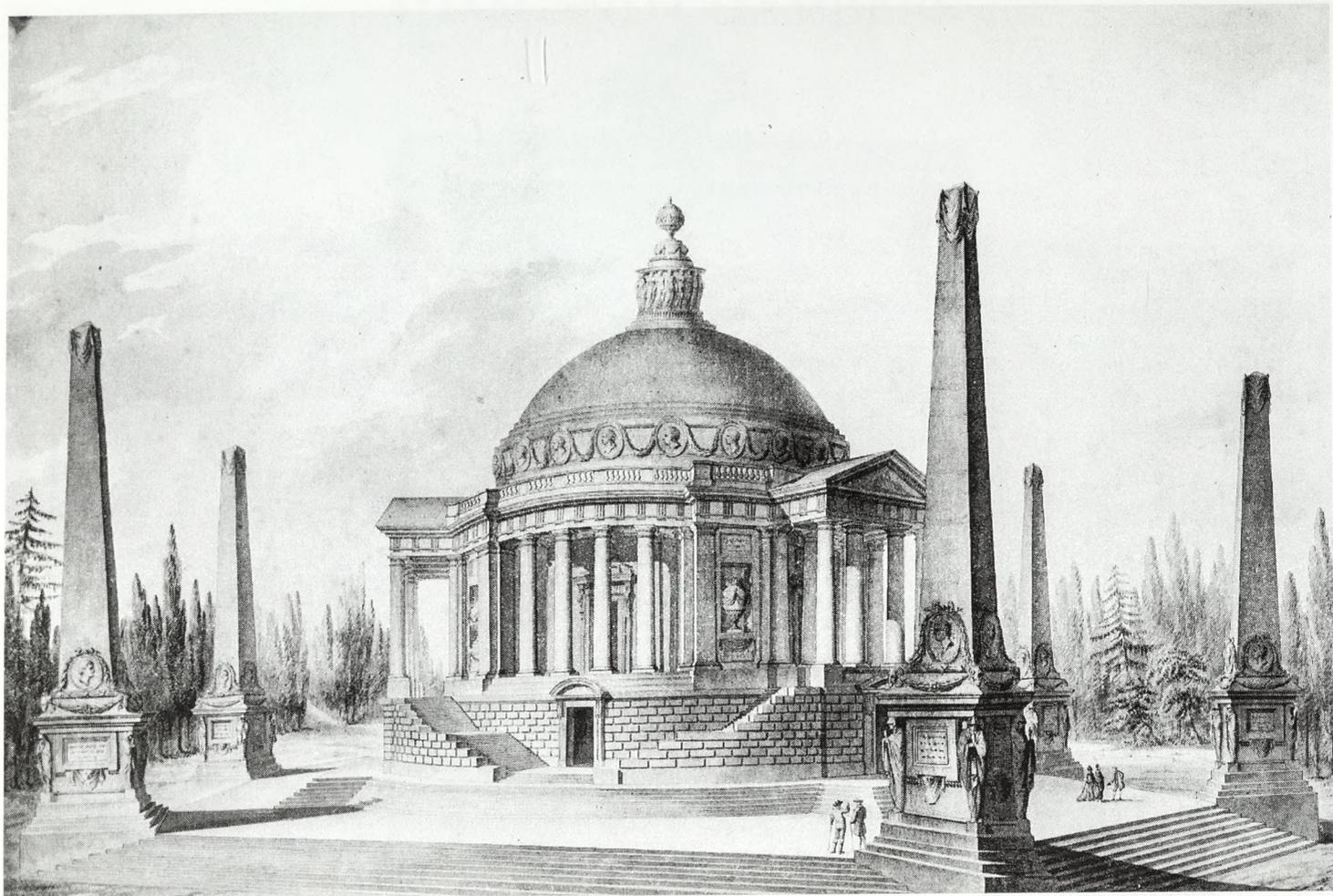


Fig. 2. Sir William Chambers, design for a mausoleum, 1752 (Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum).

he was in Rome in 1755–57. It would be rash to conclude from them that Adam had no interest in the palace facade at the Trevi Fountain, particularly in view of the possible relationship of the garden front at Kedleston to it. Nevertheless, the contrast between the records of the fountain secured by Chambers and by Adam gives food for thought.

Adam's own drawings, made while in Rome remained, for all his hard work, somewhat tentative in draughtsmanship, both his numerous sketches of antique buildings and the few extravagant design drawings made in the face of Clerisseau's disapproval. By contrast Chambers as early as 1751–52 showed complete mastery of presentation drawing style, as is witnessed by his designs for a mausoleum for the Prince of Wales. Designs for two different schemes survive, represented by a plan, perspectives and a section of one design presented as in ruin.⁸

Architecturally, as John Harris demonstrated 20 years ago, the connections of the mausoleum designs are not with mid-18th-century Italian idioms but with the proto-neo-Classicism developed at the French Academy in Rome in the 1740s, as manifested in particular in the designs for firework displays for the Festivals of the China which took place in Rome each year. The similarities between one of Chambers's mausoleum perspectives (Fig. 2) and Louis le Lorrain's design for the China of 1747⁹ are so close as to suggest Chambers's heavy dependence on the French designer. And this extends beyond architectural similarities to matter of technique, such as the boldly thrown shadows and the cloudscape.

So Chambers in Rome may, in spite of Adam's interpretation, have been more successful than Adam in making contact with architects and draughtsmen who could be useful to him. Chambers found favour with the establishment, if he had contact with Salvi's office and the French Academy, whereas Adam made himself attractive to more marginal figures in the

Roman scene, the Venetian immigrant Piranesi, and Clerisseau, a Frenchman alienated from his Academy.

Adam's principal objective in making drawings while in Rome was to record antique buildings and decoration; scores of drawings survive to show what he studied. Nothing comparable by Chambers has come down to us; but items catalogued at the sale of his prints and drawings in 1811 include a few such items, drawings of the vaults at Pozzuoli and of the Baths of Livia and Diocletian.¹⁰ The design for the mausoleum shown as a ruin mentioned above suggests Chambers' interest in making his own inventions challenge those of the ancients, and in the early years of professional practice in London he prepared finished drawings of his designs employing this conceit. The most directly comparable example is his section dated 1759 for York House, Pall Mall, where the staircase dome on a ring of columns also employs the architectural vocabulary of the mausoleum designs.

In the same frame of mind he presented several ceiling designs in the early 1760s in fragmentary form, as if they recorded antique plasterwork discovered in the catacombs. A good example is that of about 1762 for the second drawing room at Buckingham House for George III (Fig. 3), which was faithfully executed, as the relevant plate in Pyne's *Royal Residences* shows.¹¹ Presumably Chambers, like Adam, was familiar with Pietro Santoli Bartoli's

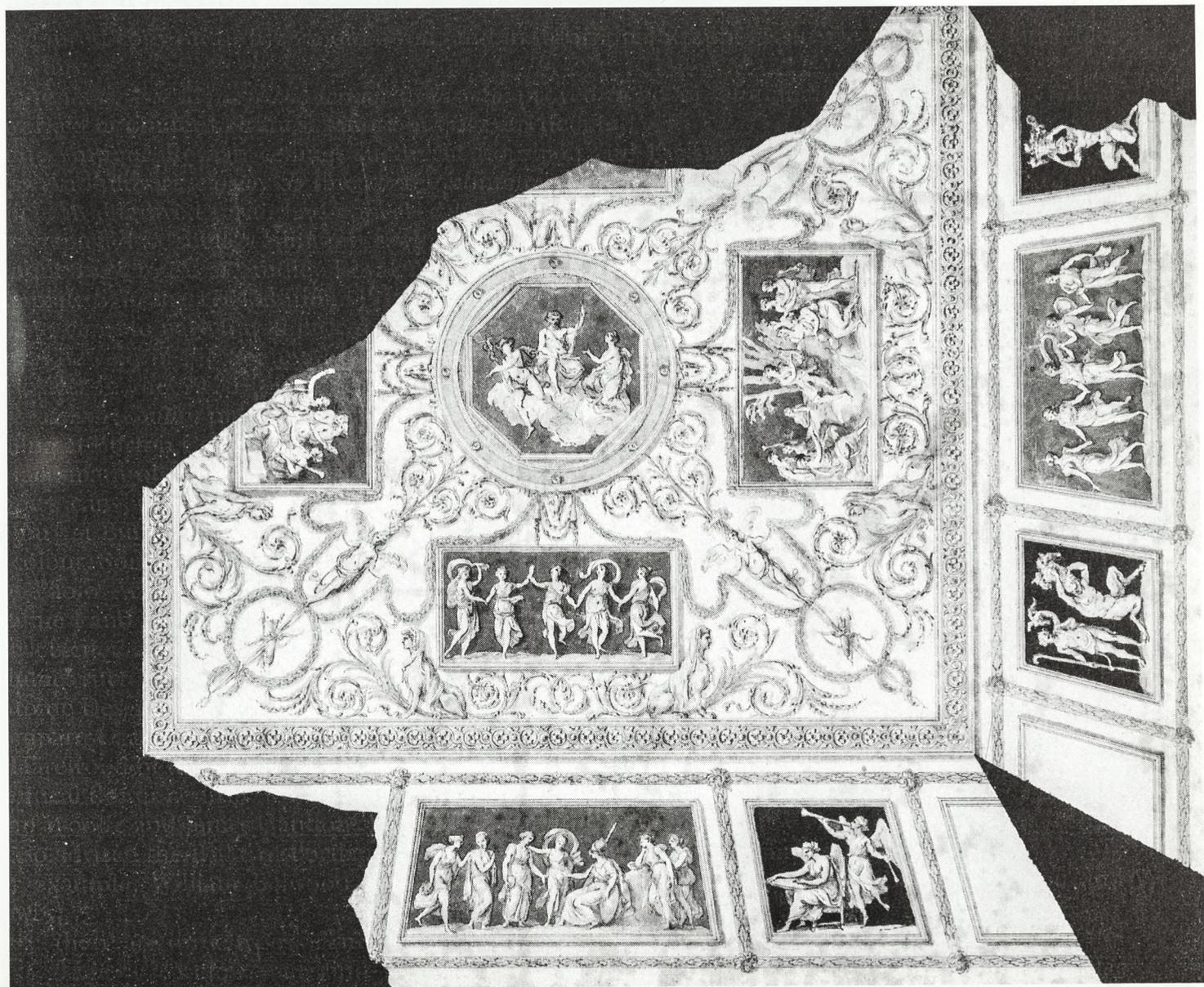


Fig. 3. Sir William Chambers, design for the ceiling of the second drawing room at Buckingham House, 1762 (British Architectural Library).

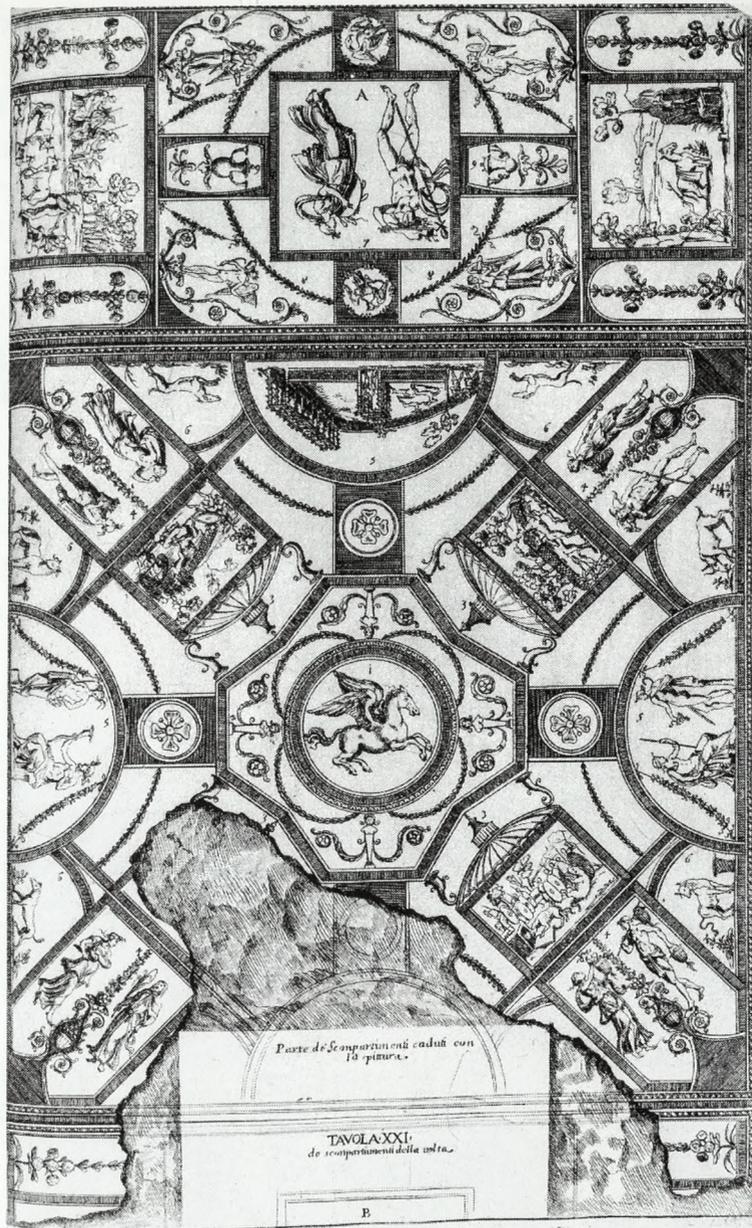


Fig. 4. Pietro Santi Bartoli, Engraving of an antique plaster ceiling from *Le Pitture Antiche delle Grotte di Roma e del Sepolcro de' Nasoni* (1706) (photo: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art).

engravings of antique plaster ceilings (Fig. 4), and while Adam found inspiration in the designs recorded by Bartoli, Chambers took his cue from the manner of presentation.

So architectural commissions could lead Chambers to produce presentation drawings, and this seems to have been characteristic of his output right from the start. Adam, by contrast, never exhibited drawings in public, so his drawings, however highly finished, were made strictly in connection with his architectural practice. In order to produce the scores of drawings which a single commission might require, many of which had to be of such a character and finish that they could be shown to a client, the Adam firm employed an office of highly skilled draughtsmen, Dewez, Brunias, Bonomi, Richardson, to name only the best known. These men were employed to prepare the clients' drawings and also the duplicates which remained in the office and now constitute the great collection in the Soane Museum.

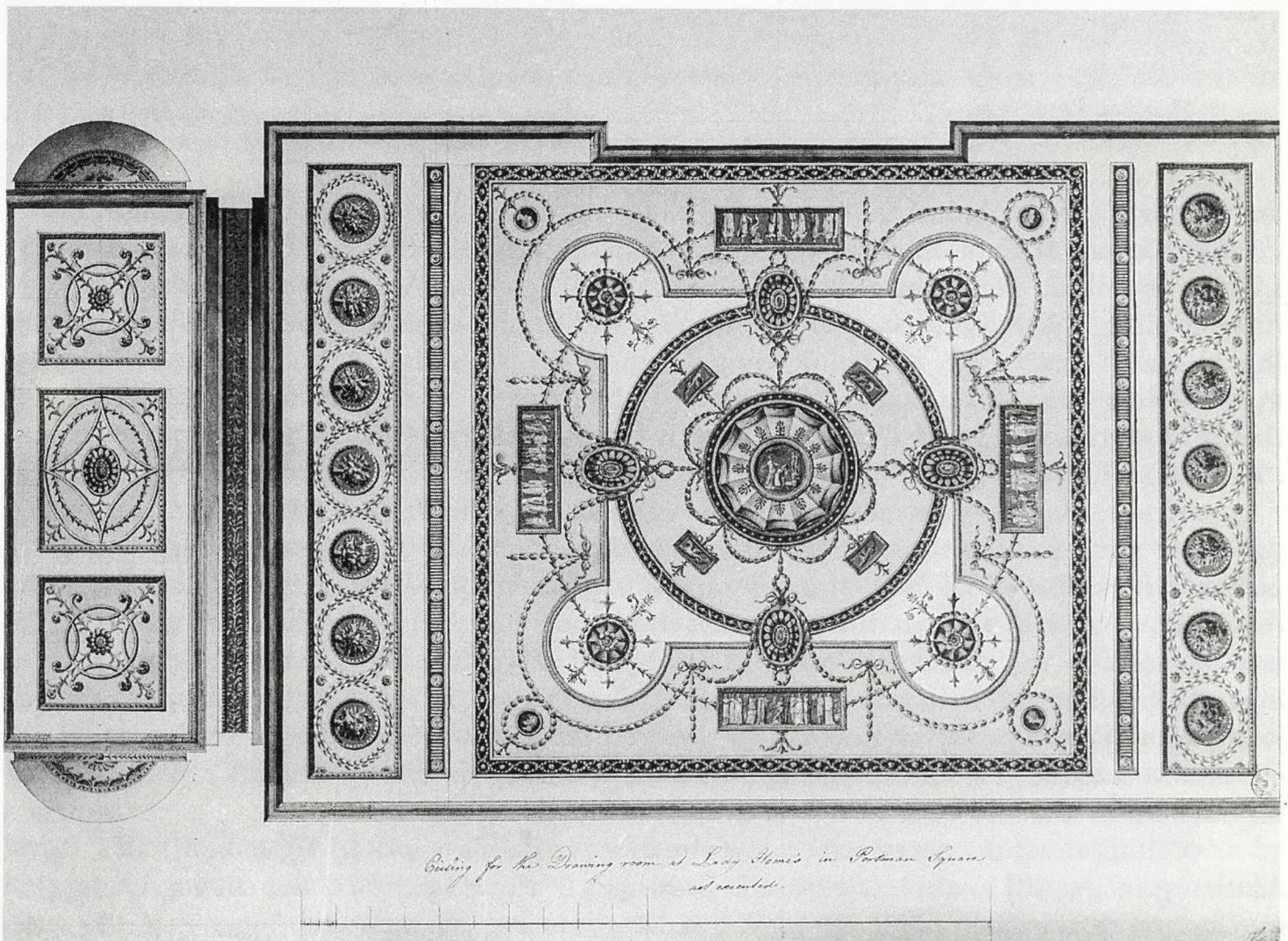
The extent of the duplicates among the Adam drawings is remarkable, as can be illustrated from the Adam building I know best, Home House, Portman Square, built for the Dowager Countess of Home in 1773–76. The well-known cross-section of the stairwell is a highly finished record of the penultimate design, presumably the final one set down on paper in this way, before a number of adjustments were made to the arrangement of the plaster-

work in the dome, consequent on the decision to enlarge the oculus, the only source of direct light into the stairwell.

Even alternative designs were preserved in finished coloured drawings, such as the ceiling designs made for the second drawing room at Home House. One was chosen, but both designs survive in equally highly finished drawings (Figs. 5,6). So, naturally perhaps, such drawings were retained in the office not as a record of work executed but as a record of designs made.

The contents of Chambers's office survive only fragmentarily. But the catalogue of the sale of Chambers's prints and drawings in 1811 suggests an accumulation of architectural drawings comparable in size to that of the Adams. The auctioneer broke the drawings up into lots, some of which related to a single building, while others were grouped by type. The only building where a complete accumulation of office drawings seems to have survived is Somerset House. Soane acquired the two large portfolios which formed lot 106 and consisted of around 500 drawings, probably the entire office production relating to his commission. The series includes several sets of plans covering the whole building even down to its smallest tax offices; but the coverage of "representational" designs, facades and interior decoration for the Strand block, is patchy and incomplete.

Among the finished drawings for Somerset House two types deserve special mention. First there are a small number of very highly-finished watercolours of parts of elevations. The full-height elevation of a single bay of the Strand front shows a design somewhat more elabor-



*Ceiling for the Drawing room at Lady Home's in Portman Square
not executed.*

Fig. 5. Robert Adam, rejected design for the second drawing room at Home House, 1775 (Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum. Photo: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art).

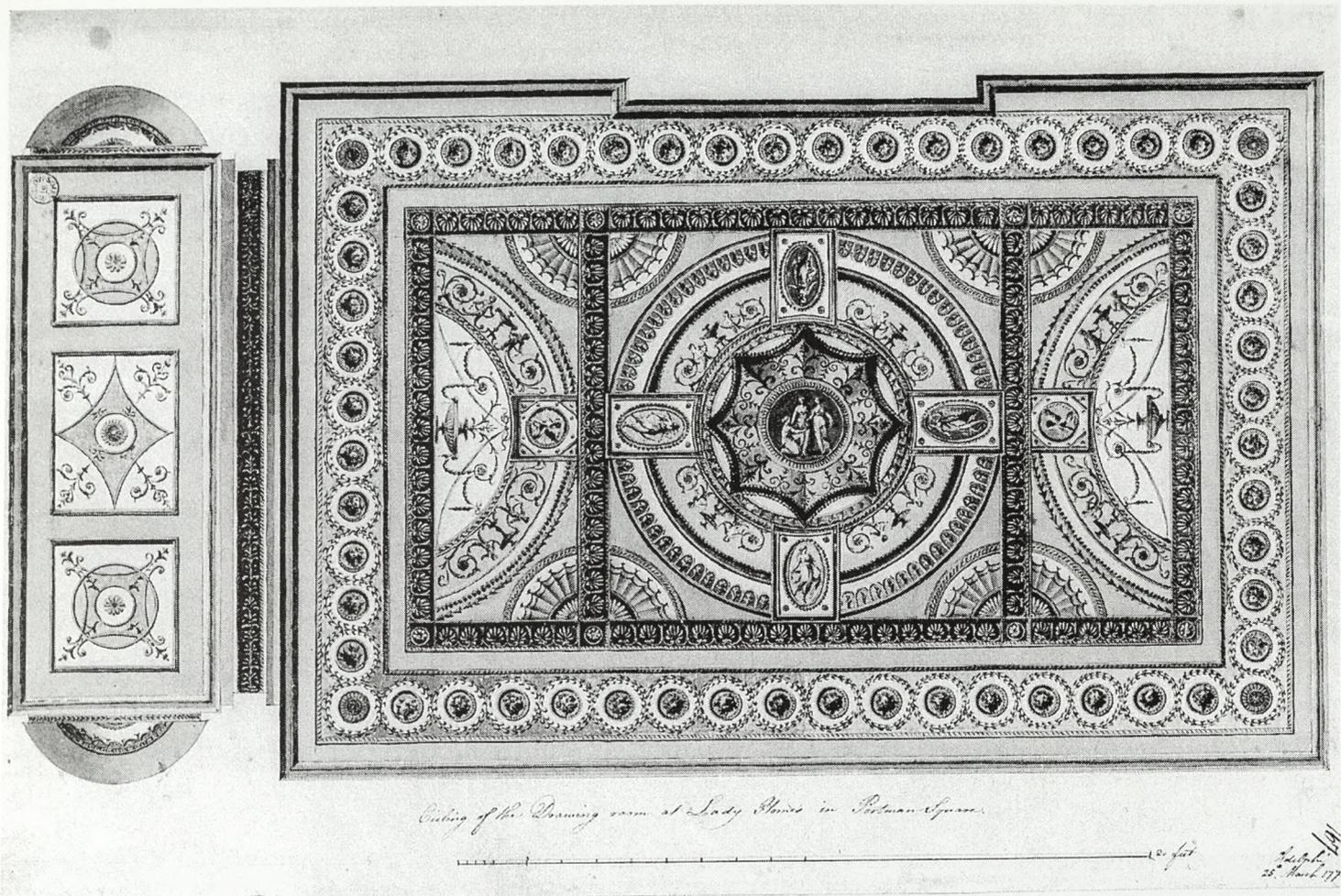


Fig. 6. Robert Adam, accepted design for the second drawing room at Home House, 1775 (Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum. Photo: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art).

ate than was executed, and there is a splendid watercolour of the Treasury Remembrancer's doorway as built, a feature of the building to which Joseph Baretti's guidebook of 1781 draws special attention. The purpose of such drawings is not obvious. Secondly, there are no finished designs for complete ceilings or wall elevations, only a number of exploratory drawings in which designs are still being worked out. By contrast, there are a number of drawings in Chambers's hand for details of joinery and plasterwork, together with finished versions of them. The guilloche band illustrated here is for the ceiling of the Royal Society's meeting room (Fig. 7).

When Chambers started work on Somerset House in 1775 he let the rest of his practice dry up, so that he could concentrate on his magnum opus. Up to that time he had been a regular exhibitor, first in 1761–68 at the Society of Artists and from 1769 until 1777 at the Royal Academy. Chambers's normal number of exhibits was four per year (though from 1772 the number sank in several years to one). The range of subjects is well exemplified by the drawings exhibited in the first year at the Society of Artists, 1761. They showed his ambition to execute public works (Blackfriars Bridge design), his domestic practice (town house, plans, elevations, sections, for an unnamed "person of distinction", triumphal arch at Wilton), and his fascination with the decorative arts (model of candlestick).

Ceiling designs figured in three of the first five exhibits sent by Chambers to the Royal Academy; in the 1811 sale catalogue the only class of drawings which the cataloguer singled out for praise was the ceiling designs: five lots, totalling 89 such drawings, were variously described as "beautifully coloured" and "very beautiful and highly finished". So the design of ceilings and their presentation in finely coloured drawings seems to have been close to

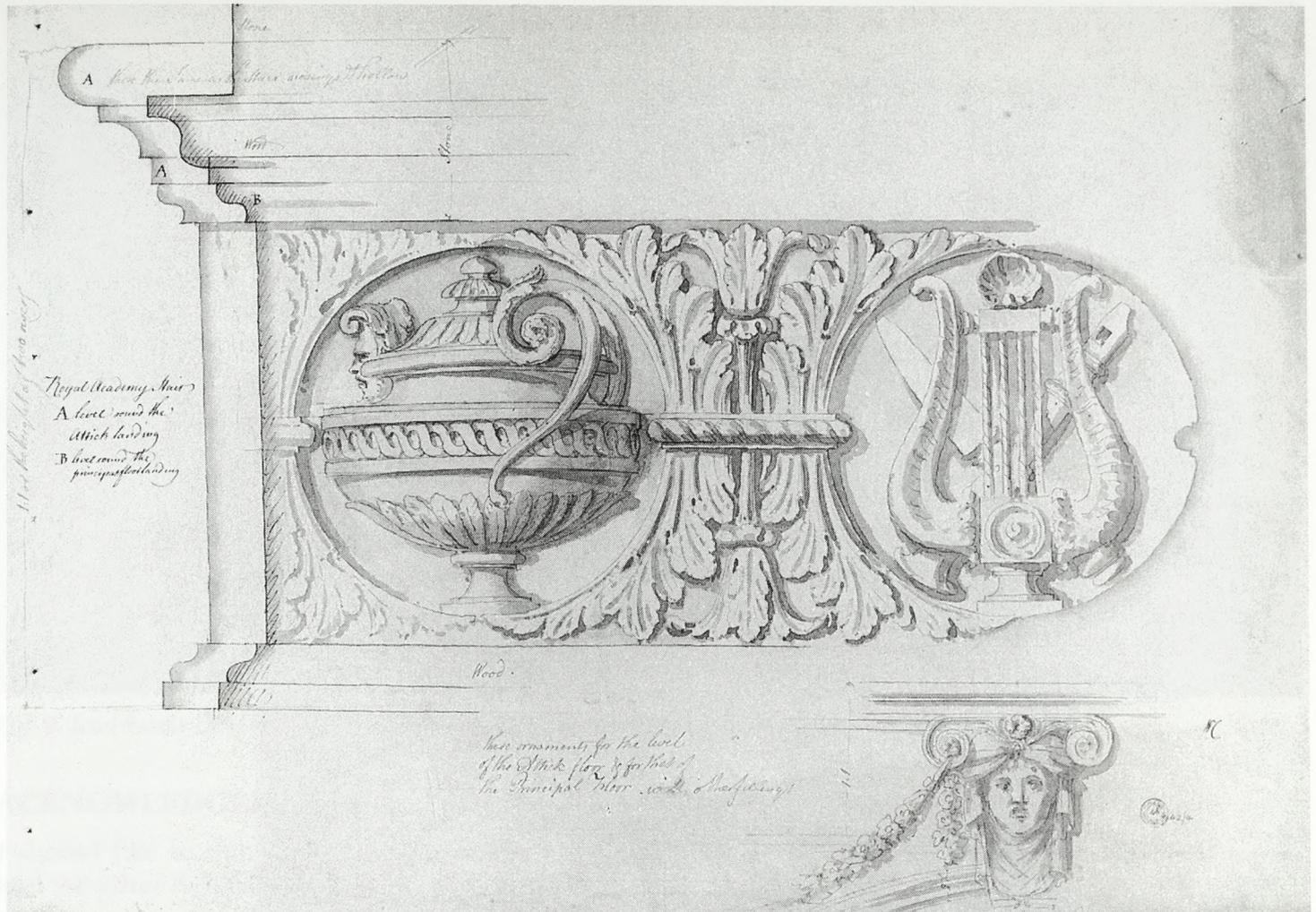


Fig. 7. Sir William Chambers, sketch design for guilloche band for the Royal Academy stair, Somerset House (Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum. Photo: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art).

Chambers's heart. The splendid drawing for the ceiling of the library at Woburn Abbey (Fig. 8) is evidence of this quality. This was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1770, and in 1985 was acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum after the sale of Sir Albert Richardson's collection.

Finally, there is the issue of the extent to which Chambers relied on assistants or specialists to prepare his presentation drawings. His own skill as a draughtsman was undoubtedly greater than Adam's; but there is evidence that he did make use of collaborators. The sale catalogue, for instance, specifies that the figures of the four designs for St Marylebone's church which comprised lot 90 were drawn by Cipriani. The pair of highly finished drawings for terms, now in the Soane Museum cannot be certainly identified with any exhibit, unless they are a version of the "two terms for Lord Gower's eating room at Whitehall", exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1767.¹² They are endorsed in an 18th-century hand "Cipriani" and "Yenn". Giovanni Battista Cipriani, who has been mentioned already, also executed decorative paintings for a number of Chambers's buildings, including Somerset House; John Yenn was a pupil of Chambers's and an extremely fine draughtsman, but in 1767 he was only 17 years old.

The three large drawings of Somerset House which the sale catalogue tells us were by "Despres", that is the brilliant French topographical artist Jean-Louis Desprez, are wholly exceptional. Two of these survive, one in the Soane Museum (Fig. 9), the other at the Yale Center for British Art.¹³ Neither shows the building as designed and built, but with a larger central dome and large side cupolas. The Yale drawing, which depicts the river frontage,

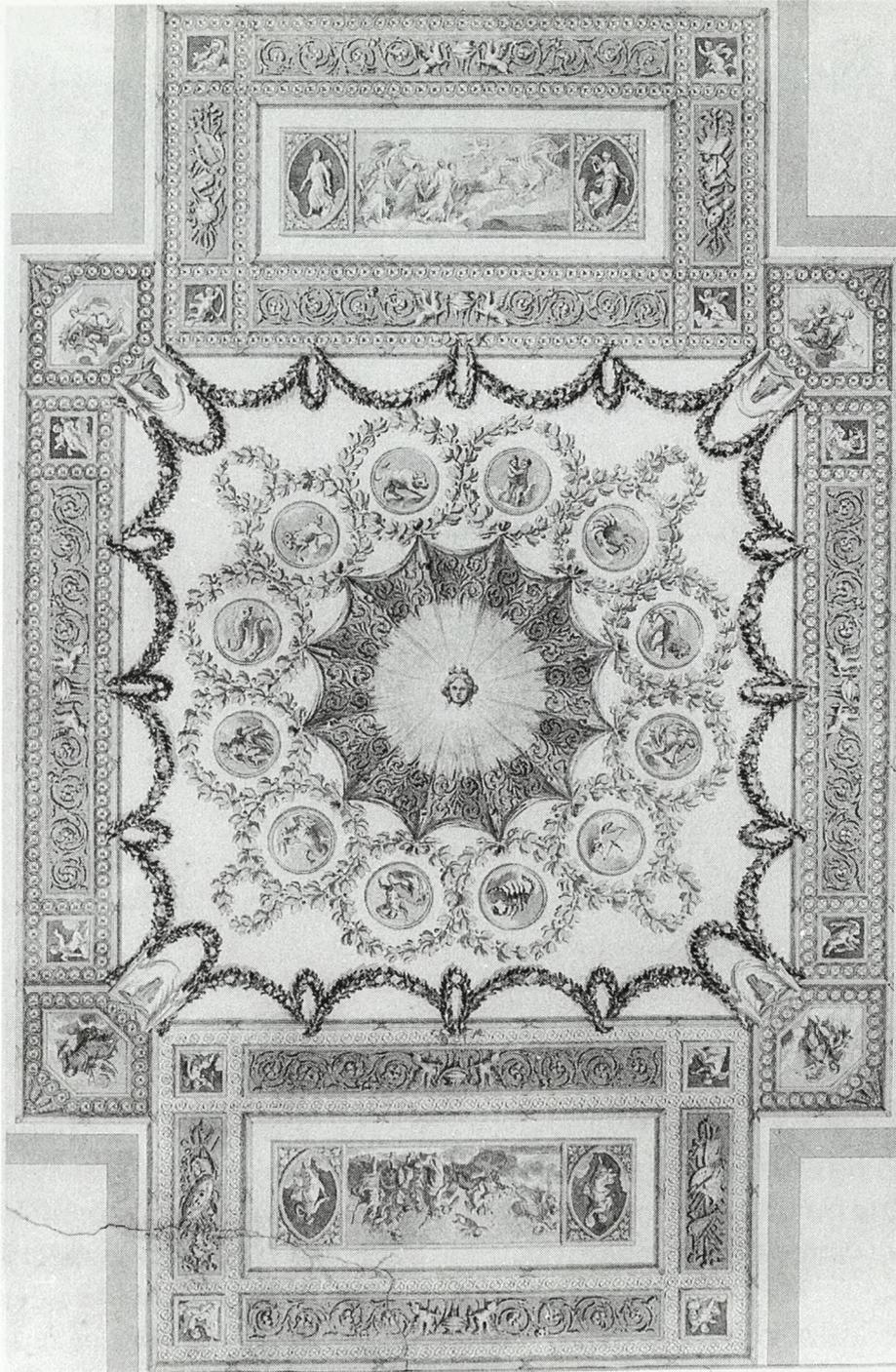


Fig. 8. Sir William Chambers, design for the ceiling of the library at Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire, 1770 (Photo: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art).

incorporates internal inconsistencies which suggest that Chambers had sent Desprez an insufficient set of elevations to work from. Nevertheless, Desprez's watercolours spectacularly anticipate the fantasy records which Soane would later employ J. M. Gandy to produce.

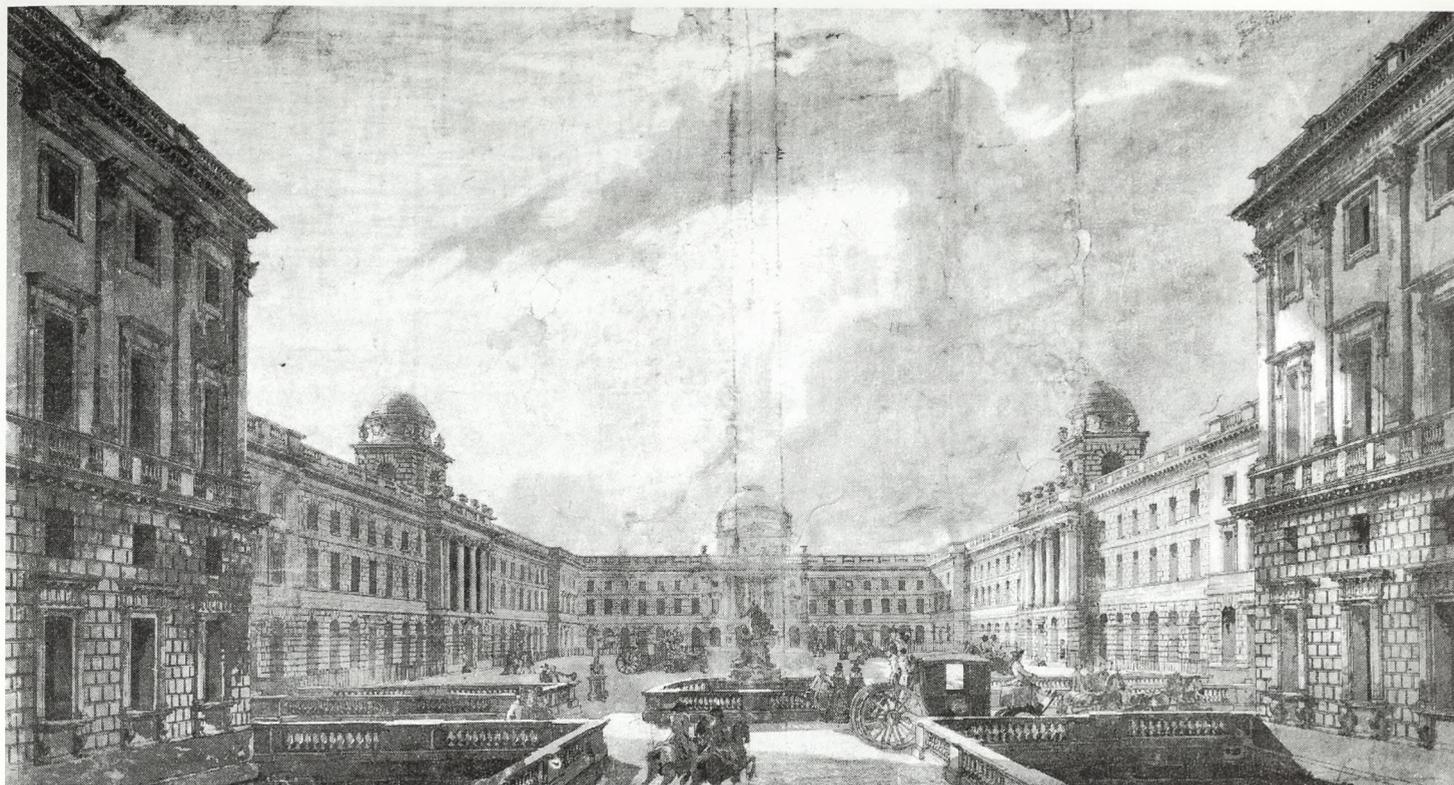


Fig. 9. Jean-Louis Desprez, View of the courtyard, Somerset House (Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank Margaret Richardson for pointing out relevant drawings at the Soane Museum and for other helpful information and suggestions.

NOTES

1. J. Fleming, *Robert Adam and his Circle in Edinburgh and Rome*, London, 1961, 160.
2. *Ibid.*, 138.
3. J. Harris, *Sir William Chambers, Knight of the Polar Star*, London, 1971, 22.
4. Sir John Soane's Museum, Drawer 22, Set 2.6.
5. A. T. Bolton (ed.), *Lectures in Architecture by Sir John Soane*, London, 1929, 88.
6. J. A. Pinto, *The Trevi Fountain*, New Haven and London, 1986, 83–89, 254–55.
7. *Ibid.*, 214 and Figs. 157–59.
8. In Sir John Soane's Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. See Harris, Fig. 1 and pls. 4, 6, 7.
9. Harris, pl. 15.
10. See Harris, 178–81.
11. W. H. Pyne, *Royal Residences*.
12. Harris, pls. 194–95 reproduce drawings of the same pair of terms in different settings.
13. Reproduced in J. Newman, *Somerset House, Splendour and Order*, London, 1990, 40.