



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Ivan Hall, 'Adam and Carr', *Adam in Context*,
Georgian Group Symposium, 1992, pp. 29–33

ADAM AND CARR

Ivan Hall

In the Georgian period, those who indulged themselves in often costly publicity did not expect to see their chosen style called after them at the time. There was, for example, no “Adam style”, nor for his many so-called imitators, an “Adamesque”. These descriptions were to follow as posthumous fame during and since the middle of the 19th century. It was then that the revivers of various “styles” had to give them plausibly distinctive names: hence, revivals not only of the “Adam” style, but of those of their contemporaries, Chippendale, Hepplewhite and Sheraton. The key is almost certainly the fact that all four published beautifully engraved plates in their respective works such that an architect or craftsman could imitate them with ease. In the Adam brothers’ case, their *Works in Architecture* included not only elevations, but room interiors in perspective, and a wide choice of furniture and metalwork as well. Moreover, in a few select volumes, many of the handsome plates were published in full colour.¹ None of the brothers’ rivals could claim as much, and many, such as John Carr or James or Samuel Wyatt, never published anything on their own behalf. It is, therefore, not difficult to see how the Adams’ style established itself in their own day and subsequently.

The Adams’ cahiers of illustrations were preceded by essays upon architecture, both past and present, in which the brothers attempted to define their own style. In particular they claimed “novelty and variety”, which they certainly achieved, but, rather more dubiously, added, “We have not trod in the path of others, nor derived aid from their labours” – a claim that Piranesi might have queried.² They noted that others had imitated them “to such a degree, as in some measure to have brought about, in this country: a kind of revolution in the whole system of this useful and elegant art . . . a greater movement and variety, in the outside composition, and in the decoration of the inside, an almost total change! We, by no means, presume to find fault with the compositions, or decry the labours of other authors, many of whom have much merit and deserve great praise . . . but that we flatter ourselves, that we have been able to seize, with some degree of success, the beautiful spirit of antiquity and to transmute it, with novelty and variety, through all our numerous works.”

They go on to note that the light style of antiquity had been revived by “modern” Italians as different as Michaelangelo and Raphael, and “as a beginner” by Kent.³ Both Robert and James Adam had prolonged study tours to Italy, working their way as far south as Naples, Pompeii and Herculaneum.⁴

They also noted that, mistakenly, the Palladians had relied too heavily on the temple architecture of Antiquity whose massiveness of parts was essentially unsuited to the generality of modern domestic architecture.⁵ Moreover, the architects and decorative artists of High Renaissance 16th-century Italy had the advantage of seeing more of the decorative painting or stuccowork of Imperial Rome than was extant in the Adams’ own day. Fortunately for posterity, some at least of this decorative work had been recorded with varying degrees of accuracy, and published by P. Arringhi, or by Pietro Santo Bartoli, whose numerous volumes were brought out at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries. Most notably, an edition was published in Paris in 1757 by the Comte de Caylus, most of whose plates were in full colour.⁶

Adam, in his preface, does not dwell too much on the fact that many of the motifs and

arrangements that he found the most useful for his purposes were derived from the earliest Christian catacombs of very late Imperial Rome. These catacomb ceilings had survived while those of Pompeii or Herculaneum had not.⁷

With few exceptions, the catacomb ceilings – whether painted or stuccoed – were either based upon groined vaults or shallowly domed ceilings, and two distinct patterns emerged in consequence. In the former, the panels or ornament were symmetrical about the groin line; in the latter, the panels were regularly concentric or radial. Where room height permitted and finance was forthcoming, Adam employed shallow segmental groin- or barrel-vaulting. He illustrated one splendid example, the third Drawing Room in Derby House, in the *Works*, together with others from Syon House, Middlesex, 20 St James' Square and Kenwood House, Middlesex. When the ceiling had to be flat, the groin lines can still be sensed by the survival of the diagonals and the way in which panels of ornament are turned through right angles in simulation of the vaulted form (as in the Etruscan Room at Derby House, at Luton Hoo, Bedfordshire, or in a more complex form, the Long Gallery at Syon).

A second group Adam called “Mosaic Ceilings”, essentially an overall pattern of repeated motifs inside a regular grid of squares, hexagons or octagons. In the *Works* he illustrates one for 20 St James' Square, and another was intended for Burton Constable, Yorkshire. They are derived from the coffering patterns of the Basilica of Maxentius, but Roman paintings of similar character also exist. Typically, the Adam version has incomplete elements on the perimeter, an effective psychological device that allows the viewer to “complete” the motif, and in so doing, to enlarge the apparent size of the room. In published form, one may cite Desgodetz's plate of the coffered barrel vault of the Basilica of Maxentius, in which some elements are cut down almost to nothing.⁸

A much more elaborate version of the system survives at Newby Hall, Yorkshire in the former dining room, for there the major octagons flank an oval centrepiece. Four smaller square coffers set diagonally link either with the oval, or the two octagons, but their counterparts at the ends of the ceiling are cut down to less than half size. Because this would have too greatly curtailed the paterae that they enclose, these are scaled down even more. Finally, the longer side panels have their inner edges curved or straight, thus echoing the central shapes they frame. Nothing illustrates better Adam's ingenuity in setting out a ceiling, whilst each main and subsidiary panel encloses ornament different from that of its neighbour. This is in accordance with another Adam tenet, that through alternating ornament – whether major or minor – the eye is constantly entertained, a detail overlooked by most of his many so-called imitators.⁹

A final element is his use of colour. One should always bear in mind that reception rooms in particular were seen as much by candlelight as daylight. Thus, as the scale of their ornaments decreased, Adam recognised that it was essential for them to be picked out in colour. First, the ceilings or walls were so compartmented as to create a sequence of different coloured grounds, and to these he could add brilliantly coloured ornament. In the *Works* he singled out the “rainceau” for its special beauty, and in these he had each element differently coloured, not only leaf tip by leaf tip, but adjacent scrolls would display a different sequence of colours.

The whole added up to a brilliance of effect which few equalled and fewer still excelled. It is doubtful whether this concentration upon internal brilliance of effect would have been possible if Adam had been required both to build a great house as well as decorate it. Thus he knew exactly what he was doing in seeking to finish what others had begun. (This was clearly not the case with his London town houses.) He would not of course, turn away a full commission, but neither did he hesitate to supplant an incumbent rival.

One of the latter was John Carr, at Harewood – a prize for which several architects

competed. In the end, as the text of *Vitruvius Britannicus* makes clear, the seat was erected “from the designs made by Mr Carr of York . . . while the worthy owner has spared no expense in decorating the principal apartments from designs made by Mr Adam”.¹⁰

Carr had hitherto worked in a style partly Palladian, partly Rococo, but by the late 1750s he too was aware that fashion was moving toward a taste for Antiquity. Thus the details of an Order should be a transcription rather than a paraphrase, be Antique Roman or even Grecian rather than “modern Italian”. Once the new wave of publications had been bought, studied and digested, the spirit of Antiquity would henceforth have to infuse every aspect of the arts. Desgodetz’s work on the architecture of Imperial Rome had now been supplemented by Richard Wood’s volumes on Palmyra and Baalbek and Le Roy’s and Stuart and Revett’s on Athens, and the first of many volumes on Pompeii and Herculaneum. There were too, the series of volumes by English and Scottish architects illustrating their lawn works – Colen Campbell, James Gibbs, William Adam, James Paine and William Chambers – material enough to stock the library of an ambitious young architect. Carr, however, differed from Adam. He believed that no building was too humble to merit his attention, and that the possible internal decoration of a building should be the last among many factors to be considered. For Carr the more important elements were that a building should be well planned, well proportioned and well built. These three factors alone could render a building usable. Carr also believed that if a patron expressed uncertainty about his proposals, other artists should be suggested as possible designers of the item in question.¹¹

As a part of his system, he consistently sought true economy, that is, he never compromised on structural integrity but sought the best available means to secure his ends. Carr rarely delegated, while Adam typically sought the employment of a local architect as an executive on day-to-day charge.¹² No one was more adroit in his handling of every class of masonry, from the most random rubble work to the finest of polished ashlar, than Carr. Often several types of facing masonry would be employed in a single complex and its out-offices, such as Constable Burton, Yorkshire.¹³ During his long career he used damp-proof courses, developed a system of double glazing, was to utilise different types of metal glazing bars and sub-cills, and took care to ventilate his roof trusses.¹⁴

To maximise the spatial content within a building’s walls, his staircase halls could be so designed that they could double as a reception room if need be,¹⁵ while storage cupboard space was provided adjacent to the suites of principal bedrooms to make their day-to-day servicing easier.¹⁶ Where new work was added to an existing house, it was the staircase levels that were used to link any significant variations in floor levels,¹⁷ while at the Crescent in Buxton, the successive landings of the staircases were used to separate the different classes of guests in the lesser hotels and boarding houses.

In Carr’s Adamesque phase, he occasionally paraphrased his chief rivals’ work. At Newark, the ceiling of the Assembly Rooms is clearly inspired by Adam’s design for the library at Harewood. At Rokeby Hall, Yorkshire, the apse ceiling of the great dining room likewise owes much to that at Harewood. Since Barry subsequently destroyed the latter, it is interesting to see Carr’s variant of the Adam model.

The typical Carr Adamesque ceiling does not follow Adam types. Carr favoured a large circular motif, subdivided like a wheel, typically with a succession of diminishing anthemion inset into each subdivision, as, for example, at Farnley Hall, Yorkshire. The type was rarely used by Adam, nor did the latter share Carr’s fondness for reducing a square panel first into an octagon and then into a circle. The Yorkshire architect only occasionally alternated motifs to give that flickering variety so typical of his rival. Perhaps the most striking difference in ceiling types can be seen in Carr’s domes, in which numerous closely spaced ribs are joined at the base by half fans from the mid-points of which hang chains of husks, a novel mode which

owes more to the half domes of Santa Sophia than to anything further west. Such ribbed domes can be seen at York Assize Courts, Denton Park, Yorkshire and Norton Place, Lincolnshire, and here Carr probably relied upon an engraving of Grelot's for his model.

A closer link with Adam was the outcome of a friendship between George Richardson (for 18 years one of Adam's leading draughtsmen) and Carr. Richardson published his *Book of Ceilings* in 1776, and to it Carr had subscribed. Richardsonian ceilings can be seen at Denton, Farnley and Bolling Hall, Yorkshire.

In conclusion both Carr and Adam freely adapted Antique sources, but while Adam delighted in surface decoration, Carr understood the underlying solid geometry of Roman building and, through the use of a system of proportion, developed a practical grasp of Classical architectural theory. There is no doubt that while Adam's genius was as master of decoration, Carr's lay in adaptable planning and sound and meticulous building construction. Both men were highly prolific, but if a difference of temperament were sought, Adam's relationship with his patrons does not seem to have developed into friendship, while Carr the more readily made that transition.

NOTES

1. A coloured copy of the *Works*, unbound, and in its original wrappers, survives at Burton Constable, Yorkshire.
2. Piranesi's *Diverse Maniere D'Adornare i Cammini* proved to be a useful quarry of ideas, though Adam reworked or omitted Piranesi's more outrageous detail.
3. Kent's Antique Roman ceilings survive at Rousham and Kensington Palace, but neither of these copy Antiquity as closely as one of the contemporary painted ceilings at Narford Hall, Norfolk, which, in engraved form, had appeared in P. Santo Bartoli's *Gli Antichi Sepolcri*. The same author also depicted a "shell" ceiling apse which was again literally reproduced for the twin apses of the Banqueting House at Studley Royal, Yorkshire. The Narford version is plate 6, the Studley Royal one plate 8, in the 1704 edition.
4. Adam seems to have found little direct use for the excavation material of Pompeii or Herculaneum, but a drawing in the Soane Museum shows his knowledge of an Antique painting from Gagnano (also lost in the 79 AD eruption). It was to be illustrated in the first volume of *Le Pitture Antiche d'Greolano e Contini* published in 1757. Curiously, this design formed the basis of the dining room ceiling at Burton Constable after Adam's own "mosaic" ceiling of 1766 had been rejected.
5. In fact, many of the walls of Palladio's own villas have frescoes in the Antique Roman style.
6. Copies can be seen in the library of Trinity College, Dublin and in the Society of Antiquaries Library at Burlington House. The brilliancy of colour in this edition exactly mirrors Adam's choice of colour. Some, at least, of Bartoli's subjects had not survived into Adam's day.
7. See Paolo Aringhi, *Roma Subterranea Novissima*, Paris, 1659, 2 vols. Three of the engravings in volume I and 16 in volume II show Adam ceiling types of which 31-33, 39 and 85 (all in volume II) may be cited as typical, while that shown on page 135 was either known to Adam first hand, or from volumes such as Aringhi's. The Adam sketch includes his variants on the original theme.
8. Antoine Desgodetz, *Les Edifices Antiques de Rome*, Paris, 1682, 109.
9. Compare Carr's ceiling for the Assembly Rooms at Newark and Adam's design for the Old Library at Harewood of the previous decade, or Chippendale's side tables at Harewood whose guilloche has identical flower centres, while those on Adam's adjacent dado rails do not.
10. John Woolfe and James Gandon, *Vitruvius Britannicus*, London, 1771, V, 4.
11. He so advised the Duke of Portland when the latter sought a new chimney piece.
12. For example, William Belwood, who worked under Adam's instructions at both Harewood and Newby.
13. Here, there are three types of rubblework, the neatest just visible above an adjacent screen wall, the next grade just below that, and the coarsest nearest the ground level. One can study similar economies in the walling of the main house, where the least visible, the north side, is of coarsed rubble.

14. A slate damp-proof course is just visible in the stable block at Constable Burton. Double glazing was advocated for Sandbeck and still survives at Middleton Lodge, Yorkshire. Iron or steel glazing bars were used at Campsall Hall, Yorkshire, and Clifton House, Nottinghamshire, brass ones for Buxton Crescent and the Mausoleum at Wentworth Woodhouse, Yorkshire. Iron sub-cills also survive at Buxton Crescent and Clifton House, both the work of the Walkers of Rotherham. Such ventilation can be seen at Buxton Crescent.
15. For example, Norton Place; Middleton Lodge.
16. For example, Lytham Hall, Lancashire; Farnley Hall.
17. For example, Farnley Hall; Workington Hall, Cumberland; and Campsall Hall.