



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Michael Burden, 'Robert Adam,
De Louthembourg and the Sets for *The Maid
of The Oaks*', *Adam in Context*, Georgian
Group Symposium, 1992, pp. 65–69

ROBERT ADAM, DE LOUTHERBOURG AND THE SETS FOR *THE MAID OF THE OAKS*

Michael Burden

Outside Adam scholarship, it is little known that Robert Adam designed two spectacular temporary structures for occasional events. The first was an illumination and transparency at Buckingham House erected at the instigation of Queen Charlotte for George III's birthday in 1763. The second was a pavilion designed for the *fête champêtre* given to celebrate the approaching marriage of Edward Stanley, later 12th Earl of Derby, to Lady Elizabeth, the only daughter of the Duke of Hamilton and Brandon. What is perhaps even less well known, is that Adam's design for the second event influenced a group of sets painted for David Garrick's Drury Lane Theatre by the scenic artist, Phillip James de Louthembourg.

The *fête champêtre* took place on June 6, 1774, at "The Oaks", in Surrey, a house later purchased by Derby but at that time apparently occupied by General John Burgoyne (1722–1792).¹ The flavour of the event was captured by the *London Magazine*:

There were groups of shepherds and shepherdesses variously attired, who skipped about . . . many persons habited as peasants . . . who occasionally formed quarees to dance quadrilles. The day closed with dancing and the night opened with a display of a suite of grand rooms erected on the occasion . . .²

In a letter to Sir Horace Mann, Horace Walpole commented:

. . . and this month Lord Stanley marries Lady Betty Hamilton. He gives her a most splendid entertainment tomorrow at his villa in Surry, & calls it a *fête champêtre*. It will cost five thousand pounds. Everybody is to go in masquerade but not in a mask. He has bought all the orange trees around London, and the hay-carts, I suppose, are to be made of straw-coloured satin.³

The events of the original gathering were organised by Burgoyne, whose diverse activities included the surrender during the American Revolution of Saratoga, managing the impeachment of Warren Hastings, a career as a successful playwright, and adapting Andrew Gretry's opera *Richard Coeur-de-Lion* for the London stage. Burgoyne's involvement on this occasion was probably a result of a family connection, for he was Stanley's uncle, having eloped with Lady Charlotte Stanley in 1743.

Among the events which took place during the day was a "sylvan masque" written by Burgoyne, with music by the French violinist and composer, Francois Hippolyte Barthelemon (1741–1808). Burgoyne later absorbed the masque into a play for Drury Lane, apparently at the request of Garrick,⁴ and persuaded Barthelemon to produce a revised and expanded score. After all the alterations and additions, the entertainment was entitled *The Maid of the Oaks* and as well as the masque, it included events which had taken place during the original *fête champêtre*.

The Drury Lane production was a grand spectacular, and it ran for 45 performances before it was altered in 1782 from a five act drama to a two act afterpiece.⁵ The play did not meet with universal approval. Horace Walpole wrote unkindly, but unfortunately not unjustly:

I have nothing to tell Lady Ailesbury, but that I hear a deplorable account of the opera. There is a new puppet-show at Drury Lane, as fine as scenes can make it, called *The Maid of the Oaks*, and is as dull as the author could not help making it.⁶

However, not even Walpole disliked De Louthembourg's sets. Born in Strasbourg in 1740, the artist had arrived in London in 1771 on a short visit from Paris, where the family had lived since 1755. Well respected, he had been elected to the Paris Academie in 1767, and the Academie de Peinture et de Sculpture de Marseille; he had been employed by Garrick at Drury Lane since 1773, and on this occasion had been assisted by Pierre Royer, John French, and Thomas Greenwood the elder.⁷

De Louthembourg's inspiration for the sets of *The Maid of the Oaks* was Robert Adam's "suite of grand rooms"; they were also to influence the dramatic plan of Act V. The playbook states that:

This scene is also a representation of the temporary saloon, as designed by Mr Adam, and erected at Lord Stanley's.⁸

and the *Gentleman's Magazine* tells us that at "The Oaks"

The noble visitors were first conducted through a beautiful and magnificent octagon hall, with transparent windows, painted suitable to the occasion: at the end of the great room hung superb six curtains, supposed to cover the same number of large windows . . . Colonnades appeared on each side of the room, with wreaths of flowers running up the columns . . . the company amused themselves with dancing minuets . . . [until] a signal [was] given for the curtains . . . to fly up and exhibit to the company a large supper-room . . . then the ladies seemed tired of this . . . luxury, the band were heard tuning its instruments in the octagon hall. This was another signal for the company to leave the supper-room and adjourn to the ball-room. No sooner was the above chamber cleared, when again, to the astonishment of all present, down flew the large curtains and made the ball-room appear in its first state of elegance.⁹

These rooms were part of the temporary garden pavilion built by Adam, and were the largest rooms he ever designed or decorated; the supper room was around 4,000 sq ft, while ball-room stretched to some 4,200 sq ft. Rykwert and Rykwert have suggested that the construction was of wood and that the interior may well have been painted on canvas.¹⁰ Lord Stanley commissioned two oil paintings of the pavilions to commemorate the event, showing elegantly attired nobility in the midst of an imaginary entertainment; these were later engraved (Fig. 1) and together with a floor-plan of the pavilion, were included in *The Works in Architecture . . . of Robert and James Adam* published in 1822.¹¹ The floor-plan elucidates the position of the vestibule mentioned by the *Gentleman's Magazine* (the "octagon hall" through which guests entered), the arrangement of the supper tables, and their relationship to the ballroom. The ballroom itself shows a dance in progress in the centre, while in the colonnade groups of guests are engaged in remonstrance, conversation and gossip. On the left of Adam's illustration, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the supper room in the outer semi-circle. Pierglasses and girandoles formed part of Adam's rich decoration, in contrast to the supper room, where he employed urns, sculpture and paintings. The supper room occupied the outer perimeter of the colonnade. The floor plan does not show the position of the curtains mentioned and nor do the illustrations include them, but it is probable from the description of their function that they hung over the five apertures leading from the colonnade into the

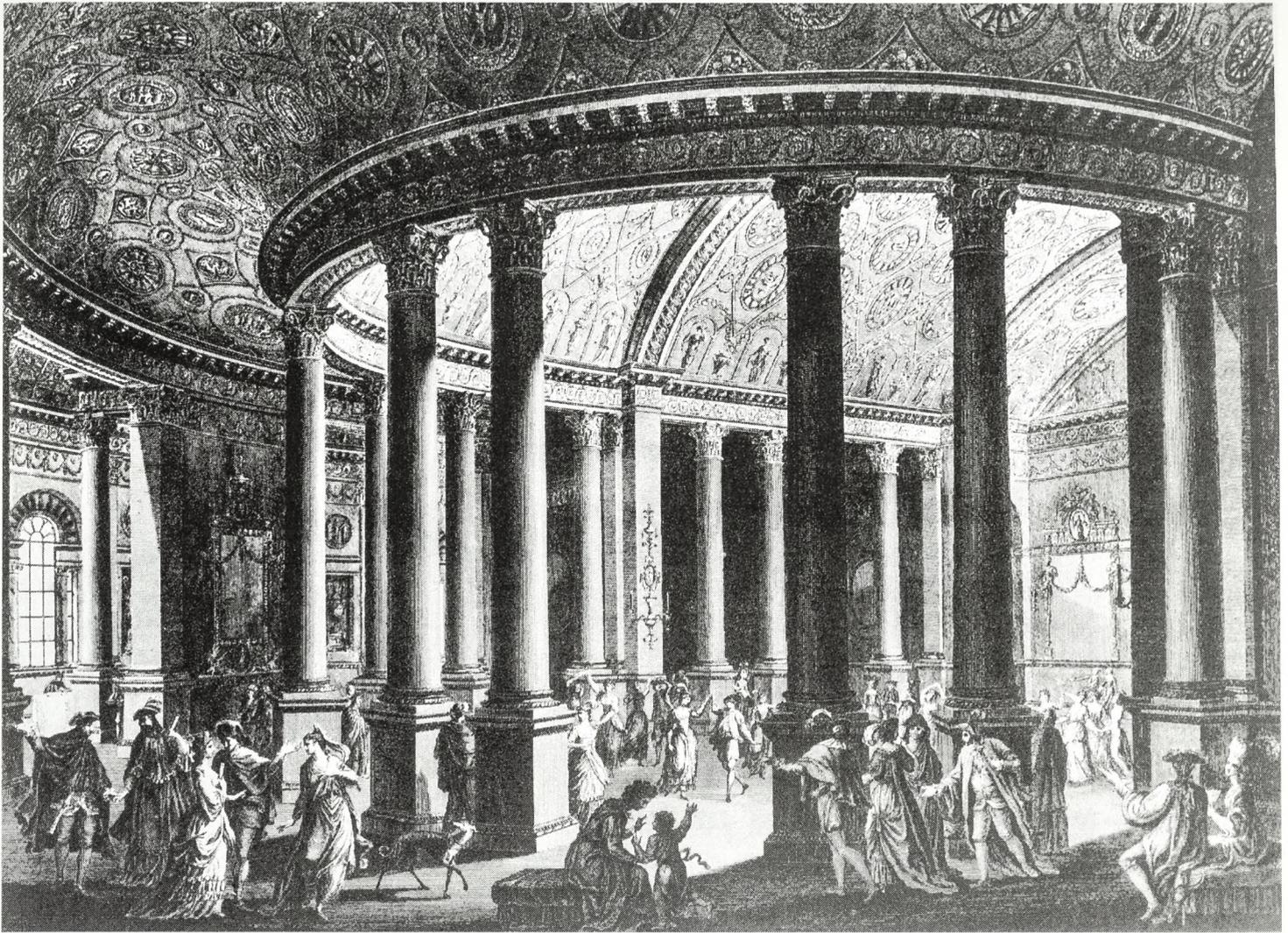


Fig. 1. View of the ballroom and part of the supper room of the pavilion in the garden of "The Oaks" in Surrey from the *Works*.

supper room.

Turning to the play, Act V in "The Saloon" with a backdrop based on Adam's design for the ballroom; later in the act, after a song from Folly, we catch a glimpse of the supper room when after

A slow symphony – all the company retire to the wings on each side; the curtains of the saloon are drawn up, and discovers the company at supper.¹²

The audience, however, is not allowed much time to admire De Louthembourg's set, for the scene soon "breaks away, and discovers the PALACE OF CELESTIAL LOVE",

one of the most beautiful scenes ever exhibited, representing a celestial garden, terminated by a prospect of the Temple of Love, in which the statue of the Cyprian goddess appears in the attitude of Venus of the Medici's. The background is illuminated by the rays of the sun, which have a most splendid and astonishing effect.¹³

Robert Adam's influence on the sets for this production may not have stopped at these scenes. The opening scene of Act I is described in the libretto as "Part of an ornamented farm" and by the *London Magazine* as:

. . . Mr Oldworth's mansion, which we are informed is taken from a view of Lord Stanley's house and improvements . . .¹⁴

The house at this time was actually still owned by the Lambert family, and did not finally pass into the possession of Lord Stanley until 1788 when, by private act of parliament, William Lambert, infant, sold the estate for £4,550.¹⁵ “The Oaks” was altered by Adam for Stanley sometime during the 1770s; the Adam scholar David King dates the alterations to around 1777, but the description in the libretto suggests that Stanley was identified with the house and may have already started work.¹⁶

There is another possible Adam connection in Act IV, for in the 1774 playbook, De Louthembourg acknowledges as his source a separate portico in which King believes that Robert had a hand:

The painting of this scene is taken from the Portico in the Gardens of Lord Stanley as illuminated at his entertainment last summer.¹⁷

Again, a description can be found in the *Gentleman's Magazine*:

The company were highly entertained with illuminations in the gardens, which had a fine effect from the front wing of the house. Facing the temporary room [Adam's pavilion] was erected a large Ionic portico, supported by four large transparent columns of a bright pink colour. On a scroll on the pediment were the following words “Sacred to the propitious Venus”. In the center of the pediment was a shield, with the Hamilton and Stanley arms quartered, the whole supported by a band of Cupids, who appeared to great advantage by the assistance of four pyramids of lights.¹⁸

Further reference to the “transparent portico” and other details of lighting can be found incorporated into Act II of the drama. Unfortunately, no designs appear to exist for this temple, but the title page of the score published in 1774, had on it a small round temple which almost corresponds to the description given in all three sources.¹⁹ The columns are Ionic, and are wreathed in foliage, but it has no motto and no pediment. It does, however, convey the air of mystery introduced by the druid of “The Oaks” who appears in both the original entertainment and in the stage adaptation. The engraving also includes a somewhat fanciful illustration of a *fête champêtre*, which resembles a debauched bacchanalian feast.

The Act II scene between the architect and the workmen mentioned above takes place in front of “an outside building” and, in view of the later effects in Act IV, it is unlikely that the temple was used for Act II. It seems from the rubric to Act IV – “After the Song, the Scene opens and discovers The Gardens illuminated” – that De Louthembourg's work also incorporated the illuminations used at “The Oaks”.

De Louthembourg seems to have paid more than a passing interest in his Adam-style designs for a review in the *London Post* in 1776 complains that his scene for the fairy palace in *Selina and Azor* was too similar to those of *The Maid of the Oaks*; it is possible that some of them were re-used.²⁰

We can trace specific Adam influences then on the sets for Acts IV and V and interesting possibilities for Act I. As the remaining settings – Act II scene i “Some Oaks”; scene ii “The Garden Gate”; scene iii “The Flower Garden”; Act III scene i “A Grove”; scene ii “Arcades of Flowers” – almost certainly used unimportant stock scenery, it is possible to visualise this 18th-century extravaganza as a series of Adamesque designs.

NOTES

1. F. J. Huddleston, *Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne*, London, 1927

2. *The London Magazine* XLIII, 1774, 299.
3. *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, Oxford, 1967, XXIV, 14.
4. John Burgoyne, *The Maid of the Oaks: A New Dramatic Entertainment*, London, 1774; the *Preface*, 4. In this self-congratulatory passage, he declares that after Garrick had examined the outline of the first two original acts, he thought he had "discovered in the writer some talents for the higher species of comedy, and encouraged him to extend his plan". We have little evidence concerning Garrick's role in preparation of the drama; Little and Kahl suggest that Garrick was present at The Oaks during the preparations for the original entertainment. (See *The Letters of David Garrick*, ed. David Little and George Kahl, Oxford, 1963, III, 959.) He certainly consulted Frances Abington on the character of Lady Bab Lardoon (*The Letters*, 962) and was later to claim that he had persuaded Burgoyne to make a small character a very considerable one" for her sake (*The Letters*, 988). He also suggested alterations to her epilogue which she apparently accepted (*The Letters*, 967).
5. The two versions are the text included in *A Collection of the Most Esteemed Farces and Entertainments*, Edinburgh, 1787 – "Altered to an Afterpiece of Two Acts by a gentleman of the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh" – and *The Maid of the Oaks*, London, 1788 – "a new dramatic entertainment in two acts as it is performed at the Theatre-Royal, Covent Garden". *The London Stage* V, 492 wrongly connects the second libretto with the Drury Lane performances of the two act version of 1782, for which no specific libretto appears to survive.
6. *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, Oxford, 1974, XXXIX, 211.
7. *The London Stage* IV, November 5, 1774.
8. Burgoyne, *op. cit.*, 60.
9. *Gentleman's Magazine*, XLIV, 1774, 264.
10. Joseph and Anne Rykwert, *The Brothers Adam*, London, 1985, 163.
11. Robert and James Adam, *The Works in Architecture of Robert and James Adam Esquires*, London, 1822, III, pls. 20–22.
12. Burgoyne, *op. cit.*, 63.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *The London Magazine* XLIII, *op. cit.*
15. Huddleston, *op. cit.*
16. David King, *The Complete Works of Robert and James Adam*, London, 1991, 222.
17. Burgoyne, *op. cit.*, 58.
18. *Gentleman's Magazine* XLIV, 1774, 265.
19. See [GBLbD. 292. (1)]
20. Sybil Rosenfeld and Edward Croft-Murray, "A checklist of scene painters working in Great Britain and Ireland in the 18th century" (3), *Theatre Notebook*, XIX, 1964–65, 108.