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Brittain-Catlin, Timothy (2012) Robert Adam. National Theatre, London.

### DOI

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## Robert Adam

Georgian architecture has more to it than the neat, homogenous, rectilinear style those words first bring to mind. It is true that from the arrival in Britain of the first George in 1714 until somewhere in the 1830s, in the middle of the reign of that plump and convivial monarch King William IV, the dominant style here was Neo-Palladian, a severe, pared-down version of Italian Neo-Classical architecture that suited both the Whigs and England's many aesthetic puritans. But during the second half of the eighteenth century, the Scottish architect Robert Adam provided an alternative: a light-hearted, feathery, whimsical style of decorating that is seen at its best in the luxury interiors of large country houses.

Born in 1728 in the town of Kirkcaldy in Fife and educated in Edinburgh, Adam was the son of a prolific architect who was himself Scotland's leading designer at the time. His older brother John also became an architect of distinction, whilst his younger brother James eventually became his professional partner. Robert Adam realised at an early age that Scotland provided too small a stage for his talents. In the spirit of the era of the Grand Tour, he spent two years in Rome in his late twenties, and on his return he established an architectural practice in London. If the details of his decorative style – the festoons, the flowing lines of beads and stems, the lunettes, urns and attenuated figures – seem Etruscan in origin, it is likely too that Adam was inspired by the ruined state in which he found Rome's great monuments. Perhaps the secret of an Adam interior is the feeling it evokes that one has entered an ancient pagan temple covered in mysterious and inexplicable ornament.

At Osterley Park, to the west of London, Adam converted an Elizabethan manor house into a showpiece of his style for the Child banking family. The resulting combination of good old red English brickwork and sash windows with almost fantastical decoration, eventually brought to a luscious climax in an Etruscan dressing room, is one of the most exciting creations of its period. Perhaps Georgian aristocrats had tired of the dull interiors of Neo-Palladianism, because Adam soon found himself in demand across the country. The library he created at Kenwood House in Hampstead is perhaps his most splendid surviving interior: it is a long room painted in a pale blue and pink, delicately ornamented in white and gold, and terminated at either end with a pair of apses separated by screens of Corinthian columns – the luxury room *par excellence* of the reign of King George III. Here and there across England, Scotland and Wales, Adam's sparkling touch enlivened many a dull provincial mansion.

Not surprisingly, Adam could turn his hand to other styles too, designing for example a circular drawing room for Horace Walpole's Gothick Strawberry Hill in Twickenham – recently restored – and a large castle, albeit a genteel, symmetrical one, for the Earl of Cassilis at Culzean on the Ayrshire coast. Although Adam lived long enough to see in the Regency period, dying as a bachelor in 1792, he failed to win major public commissions, and the few institutional buildings he did design were not executed as he intended or were demolished or mutilated. His architecture suffered in the nineteenth century

because few people appreciated it during the Neo-Gothic era; a whole lot more came down in the early twentieth century as the whole scale of London changed in the period before and after the First World War, and the town houses of the rich in Mayfair and St James's were replaced by blocks of offices. In fact one of the most notorious architectural scandals of the 1930s was the demolition of most of the Adelphi, the Adam brothers' speculative residential development near Charing Cross which from 1772 had also housed their professional practice. The street fronts of Robert Adam's Fitzroy Square in Marylebone, one of his last projects, do however survive.

One of the great unresolvables for anyone who loves architecture is the fact that it is often hard to know whether a fine but forgotten interior is best restored or should be left in its shabby or half-mutilated state. On the one hand there is the satisfactory completeness of a work of art looking the way its creator intended; on the other, one can experience a powerful sense of what John Ruskin called a 'twilight melancholy' on confronting in a ruined space the powdery traces of magnificence. About 30 years ago I visited Blair Adam, part of the estate that the Adam family built for itself in Kinross-shire, well before its exemplary restoration by the Adam descendants who live there now. At the time it was scarcely possible to make out, through what might appropriately be called its Stygian gloom, the fine structure of the barrel-vaulted room that Adam's father William had built at the side of the house, inspired by the monuments of Rome and evoking in that rural spot, and amongst its dusty packing cases and discarded broken furniture, the unspoken tragedies of a fallen empire. Would I remember the room so well today had it been tidied, cleaned, in good repair? What great architects do is to make a building about so much more than just themselves and their client; and what the Adam family did was to create spaces that spoke of a luscious and decadent past. They could do this as well in a Scottish factor's house or a London dressing room as they could on a monument or a bridge. The buildings that last forever are the ones that go on telling a story whether or not the decorators have been in recently to smarten them up.

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