their views out toward the city or the Bay of Naples when some neighboring property owner threatened them with a higher wall or expanded belvedere. Aristocratic nuns felt entitled to see out, but without being exposed to the view of others, and they exercised power to defend their interests, including calling to the cause all family connections. As Hills demonstrates, the cords of power relationships and aristocratic privilege—if not the eyes of neighbors—easily traversed monastic walls.

Readers will be grateful for Hills’s concrete treatment of the particular architectural form the aristocratic nuns’ sense of entitlement created. Here we can also see how the expectations of “lady nuns” could give shape to interior spaces. The convent church had to be both open to the public and at the same time visible to the nuns. It therefore formed a connector between the secular and spiritual worlds—to see without being seen. Hills gives much attention to grills (clerestory gelosie) and grates, including an impressively spiked one in the convent of Santa Chiara, but her exceptional contribution is the analysis of the elevated nuns’ choir, which received special attention in Naples. Traditionally located behind the high altar wall, the nuns’ choir assured privileged visual access, through grates, to the Eucharist, while at the same time separating the professed from the secular worshippers in the nave. In several Neapolitan convents (S. Gregorio Armeno, S. Maria Regina Coeli, S. Maria della Sapienza, S. Giuseppe dei Ruffi) the choir levitated above the clerestory. This afforded a commanding view of the church, if not the altar, while protecting against undesired exposure from below. Most spectacularly, since the vault of the choir was open to view from the nave, the sound of disembodied angelic voices easily resonated throughout the church, creating a mysterious and compelling spiritual effect to the advantage of nuns and laypersons alike. A further practical benefit accrued to the nuns, who now could enter the choir at the same level as their cells, without the inconvenience and risk of descending to the mundane world. Hills is effective in emphasizing just how such architectural arrangements added to the prestige of nuns, whose secular families, it should not be forgotten, were frequently in attendance below.

Here and there in the text the reader may wish for a more extended analysis of the visual and graphic material reproduced, which is frustratingly meager. The latter concern may be the result of an editorial limitation, and the interpretive astringency in the handling of the imagery presented is perhaps a principled commitment to avoid explaining too much. In that case Hills has left plenty to the reader’s imagination, making for a stimulating—if occasionally difficult—book.

More challenging for some readers will be the theoretical framework within which Hills fits her methodological arguments. Here she employs the concept of the babitus (from Pierre Bourdieu): “Architecture constructed the babitus which connected common interest groups” (7). A babitus is a social practice tacitly recognized by its adherents—in this instance the aristocratic consciousness of the nuns and their families as articulated in their treatment of the chaste female body. Hills sees this in convent architecture and makes a good case for it throughout the analytical sections of the book. Here architecture is the synecdoche of the masked female body as observed in the nuns’ dress and in the austere exteriors of convent architecture—thus, “invisible city.” Architecture is therefore material expression of the babitus of aristocratic nuns’ sexual identity.

Surprisingly, in the conclusion, Hills pulls back from the initially stated position and substitutes metaphor for babitus: “Convent buildings were a metaphor for the virginal upper-class female body” (174). Just when one is prepared to accept the analogy between social practice and social body as concretized in the physical realities of architecture, the argument takes a rhetorical turn. Still, readers will be appreciative of Hills’s persuasive combination of solid archival research and sociologically oriented interpretative strategy. It has produced an innovative study worthy of the best recent scholarship on the visual culture of female monasticism, one that unmasks the raw social forces that—scarcely hindered—operated through those famously porous walls of imagined enclosure.

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Olga Medvedkova
Jean-Baptiste Alexandre Le Blond, Architecte 1679–1719. De Paris à Saint-Pétersbourg

This solid book derives from an even more substantial two-volume thesis submitted to the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in 2000 and devoted more broadly to French influence on eighteenth-century Russian architecture. Its author, Olga Medvedkova, who came to Paris from Russia in 1992, previously coauthored with the historian Vladmir Berelowitch an excellent general history of St. Petersburg. Medvedkova’s new book, which she prefers to call a simple study of St. Petersburg.1 Medvedkova’s new book, which she prefers to call a simple biography rather than an art historical monograph lest she appear to exaggerate its subject’s importance (19), is a mature work of scholarship, one that combines the vigorous cataloging typical of Russian art scholarship with the edgy analytic verve of French cultural history. It is a delight to read, a feast of fresh detail and fine provocations.

The book’s title says much about its contents. Jean-Baptiste Alexandre Le Blond moved as a rising young architect from Paris to St. Petersburg and there died when only forty years old. What kind of legacy can he have left behind, and where? He worked in Russia for less than three years, helping Peter the Great create St. Petersburg (founded in 1703) and suburban Peterhof (1705), Peter’s Versailles on the Baltic. Most of the structures he designed in Russia—those that have not been obliterated—have been more or less radically altered,
although he did leave an extensive paper trail including voluminous correspondence with Peter himself and an unfinished treatise outlining a new, optical approach to architectural perspective. (Peter bought up Le Blond’s papers and books from his widow after he died, hence they remain in Russian repositories). Similarly, of Le Blond’s earlier work in Paris only two townhouses (bôtels particuliers) survive along with some formal garden traces; but here too there proved to be a paper trail, including a sizable number of engravings after his designs. From this mass of documents left by Le Blond and today found scattered in archives, libraries, and museums in both Russia and Paris, Medvedkova has resurrected what she considers a minor master of nascent French neoclassicism (a term she avoids, perhaps thinking it too restrictive).

My perspective on Medvedkova’s achievement is that of a general historian of Russia who has used architecture as a primary source for studying larger historical developments. In this light one must truly be grateful for the abundant material she has assembled, both verbal and visual, regarding the crucial transfer from France to Russia of architecture in the European Renaissance tradition—of “modern” versus “medieval” styles and techniques of building. She has demonstrated, really for the first time, that Le Blond was a key player in the creation of the modern Russian built world. My main reservations on this point concern the paucity of Medvedkova’s representation of pre-Petrine or Muscovite architecture—simplistically dismissed as “byzantine” (139)—and her resort to a tenuous semiotic solution to the question of Peter’s motivation (140–42 passim), incongruous surely in the discussion of so concrete a phenomenon as architecture and so hardheaded a ruler as Peter. A much fuller picture—literally and figuratively—of the Muscovite architectural scene is needed to appreciate the shock of rage (256), is itself quite maddening!

As for Le Blond’s earlier career in France, Medvedkova recounts persuasively his rise as a talented draftsman from an artisanal milieu of printmakers and others to a position of distinction in the Parisian architectural world sufficient to attract Peter’s recruiters. She shows (as she did in her thesis) that the youthful Le Blond coauthored with Dezallier d’Argenville the anonymously published La Théorie et la Pratique du Jardinage (1709)—“shows” being the operative word here, as much of her case rests on cognate drawings known to have been executed by Le Blond. He may thus be classified, she believes, as a pioneer of the influential eighteenth-century French landscape, as well as (on other grounds) rococo decoration and the new, more commodious Paris townhouse, all of whose designs he then replicated in St. Petersburg. But the publication in its entirety and in the original French of Le Blond’s unfinished treatise on perspective may be Medvedkova’s most useful contribution for specialists in French architectural history, indeed, cultural history of the period (appendix, 261–71). It is the centerpiece of her claim that Le Blond deserves a place in the great intellectual chain linking Descartes and Claude Perrault with the masters of eighteenth-century French thought and design, the latter to be seen as the makers of modernity, no less.

Be that as it may, it remains undeniable that Le Blond’s lasting fame remains that of “architect to the tsar,” as he was known at the time—to the greatest of the czars, in fact, and the founder of a city which, owing to their efforts (and those of countless colleagues and successors, Russian and foreign), became the architectural lynchpin of Russia’s European identity. Equally, the single most notable aspect of Medvedkova’s achievement is to have brought together the two halves of Le Blond’s career, previously only picked at separately by French and Russian scholars.

The publishers of this book appear to be new to the scholarly business, the cause perhaps of a number of flaws in their otherwise beautifully produced volume. There is no proper table of contents, no list of illustrations, no clear listing of the manuscript sources consulted, and the lengthy bibliography is unhelpfully segregated into works in Russian (coming last) and those in Western (primarily French) languages. Transliterations from the Russian—said at one point to follow “la translittération anglo-saxonne” (273), whatever that might be—are garbled.

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Notes
3. But Le Blond was not the key player, as might be deduced from Medvedkova’s text; at least as important was the Swiss-Italian architect Domenico Trezzini. For his contribution see the sumptuously illustrated exhibition catalog edited by Manuela Kahn-Rossi et al., Domenico Trezzini e la costruzione di San Pietroburgo (Lugano, 1994).

Susan Weber Soros, editor
James “Athenian” Stuart,
1713–1788: The Rediscovery of Antiquity

In the early 1740s, James Stuart (circa 1713–88), a lowly fan painter of undistinguished lineage and limited means, set out on foot from his native London for France and Italy. Some fifteen years later, he returned to England as the most famous archaeologist of his day. The experience, connoisseurship, and prestige that “Athenian” Stuart (as he was now called) had gained in Italy, Greece, and Turkey rendered him a successful designer and well-connected celebrity for the remainder of his days. This voyage and the remarkable personal transformation it engendered would reverberate...