William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain
Bard Graduate Center, New York
20 September 2013–9 February 2014

Victoria and Albert Museum, London
22 March–13 July 2014

It is always a matter for celebration when the Victoria and Albert Museum brings architecture out of its small, dedicated display area on the upper floors and places it center stage in the main exhibition halls. The tercentenary of the Hanoverian accession has stimulated public and media engagement with all things Georgian, and this interest, in combination with American funding, meant that hopes were high that this exhibition might do for eighteenth-century architecture what the Pugin and Morris shows of the early 1990s did for nineteenth-century visual culture, or what the more recent high-profile “isms” exhibitions on art nouveau, modernism, and the like have done for the public profile and understanding of twentieth-century design. The choice of William Kent as a subject in this anniversary year seemed a promising one. Kent remains a relatively shadowy figure, certainly compared to his patron Lord Burlington, and even to some of his architect contemporaries such as James Gibbs in the early to mid-eighteenth century who participated in the turn away from high baroque toward the more reproducible Palladianism. Add to this his role as the first interior designer, pioneer of the Gothic as well as the English landscape garden, and there are many interesting strands to explore in relation to this multifaceted and dynamic designer. Sadly, in the case of this exhibition, applause for the V&A’s showcasing of architecture must remain muted.

The exhibition provided a basic run-through of Kent’s early life, travels to Italy, and collaboration with Burlington before going on to present a sequence of building types and interiors with which he was involved, principally royal projects, country houses, and landscapes. The show was also conventional in presentation, focusing on drawings, selected items of furniture, and three fairly rudimentary silent slide shows of Houghton, Holkam, and Kent’s landscape designs. It had none of the visual richness or interactive elements of its evidently better-funded predecessors at the V&A, and it seemed as if the priority in the budget was less the display and more the catalog (of which more later). Much was made of Kent’s pioneering of the integrated interior uniting all art forms, later developed by Robert Adam. However, the display policy of setting isolated pieces of furniture against bare walls with drawings and smaller objects in separate cabinets demonstrated not Gesamtkunstwerk but rather the staccato principles that Rudolf Wittkower ascribed to Anglo-Palladianism. While one cannot expect the kind of expenditure associated with the museum’s previous blockbusters, even with a fairly conventional presentation one might have hoped for more depth and analysis, such as that achieved by the similarly displayed...

The problem with the exhibition’s approach was that it fell between two stools, satisfying, I suspect, neither the general public nor the specialist. On one hand, the exhibition missed the opportunity to present its professed theme of “designing Georgian Britain” to a broader public, something that one can see addressed far more convincingly in the V&A’s own galleries. On the other hand, those with knowledge of the exhibition’s subject will have struggled to find much new information or interpretation. The selection of drawings did little to go beyond the well-known, and—given the predominance of the two-dimensional—offered little analysis of Kent’s range of illustrative techniques, which might have provided one avenue for discussion. The coverage throughout was far too generalized and never went beyond introducing different types of schemes without singling out a few for more in-depth discussion. Given the interest the Houghton Hall Revisited exhibition at Houghton aroused last year, the relationship between political influence, wealth, and architectural display in London and East Anglia might have been one possibility. Nowhere were such connections and interconnections addressed at more than a superficial level. Even the astonishing Stone Hall at Houghton and the staircase at 44 Berkeley Square—two indubitable showstoppers—passed almost without comment and, in the case of the latter, minimal illustration.

The exhibition catalog is an unusually lavish and large-scale production, even by Yale University Press’s generous standards, and seems to be packed full of interesting new analyses of Kent, as well as wonderful photographs. It is a great pity that some of those images did not find their way into the exhibition itself, which desperately needed some color and visual excitement. Kensington Palace, for example, one of Kent’s most accessible surviving interiors, was represented only by a few small prints from William Pyne’s Royal Residences (1816–19). It is hard not to conclude that some of the new research and enormous effort expended on the catalog should have translated through to the exhibition itself. A small free or inexpensive pamphlet should also have been made available to complement such a weighty tome. Some of the new thinking is revealed on the V&A website, which includes an excellent video presentation of Frank Salmon discussing the Parliament House designs of the 1730s. Why exclude this or similar material from the exhibition? Sadly, the powers that be may well have deduced from the Kent show that design do not sell. While it might never hope to match the crowds attending the adjacent Italian Fashion exhibition, an excitingly presented and more compelling event could have pulled in the crowds, as the British Library did with its Georgians Revealed exhibition earlier in the year. Architecture has always been notoriously difficult to display, but, surprisingly for an exhibition cocurated by the V&A, William Kent represents a step back rather than forward, not least in its eschewal of the possibilities of interactive interpretation. One hopes that the incoming curator of design at the museum will rise anew to the challenge of producing displays that are both scholarly and enticing—or at least, if not both, one or the other.

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Related Publication

The Architect’s Library: Notable Books on Architectural Themes in the Vassar College Library

Vassar College Library and Art Center
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Over the past several years a combination of serendipitous discoveries and systematic searching has revealed that Vassar College has an extraordinary collection of rare architectural books from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries. It includes early editions of canonical works by Vignola, Alberti, Palladio, Piranesi, and other Italian Renaissance and baroque architects, theorists, and printmakers; a rich collection of titles from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including a full set on the Gothic Revival with the major works of Augustus Pugin (Figure 1), John Ruskin, William Morris, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, and many other lesser-known figures; nineteenth-century American treatises and pattern books, including works on domestic and landscape architecture by A. J. Downing, Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Calvert Vaux, and Gervase Wheeler; and a wealth of original editions of canonical works of the modern movement, including books by Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Walter Gropius, among many others. This unusually rich collection derives from a series of donations going back to those of the college’s founder, Matthew Vassar, and extending through the gifts of Professor John McAndrew, who taught at Vassar from 1931 to 1937 before becoming director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition displayed a selection of these holdings in four locations on the Vassar campus: the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, the Thompson Library’s main gallery and Special Collections room, and the Art Library. A beautifully designed and generously illustrated catalog includes helpful interpretive essays by the exhibition’s curator, Professor Nicholas Adams, and his colleague Professor Brian Lukacher, detailed entries by Vassar faculty, students, and alumni on more than ninety authors, and an expanded list of almost four hundred titles in the college’s holdings.

The exhibition and the accompanying catalog sparked insights into our assumptions about the role of the book as the primary means of sustaining, altering, and renewing Western architectural discourse over the past five centuries. This exhibition made vivid what we know but do not often see: that books as a medium for conveying ideas have changed markedly and progressively in terms of their size as printed volumes, format, paper quality, binding, image production and reproduction, typographic choices, signs of ownership, methods of distribution, and venues for their collection. The sight of these books opened to their title pages or other representative images suggested many questions about the changing scope of libraries for architects, builders, patrons, and clients;