Exhibitions

Design for Eternity: Architectural Models from the Ancient Americas
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
26 October 2015–18 September 2016

The small but exciting exhibition Design for Eternity was precisely targeted to the topic of architectural models in ancient American art. Rather than focusing on regional styles or time periods, it displayed fifty-six objects solely on the basis of their status as small-scale representations of architecture, along with a few other materials to help contextualize them, including photos of archaeological sites and textiles. Made of clay, wood, stone, and metal, the artworks were products of various ancient American cultures, including Cupisnique, Moche, Chimú, Nazca, Inca, Nayarit, Teotihuacan, Maya, Aztec, and Mezcala. Highlighting the relationship of the models to real architectural space, the two side entrances to the gallery were decorated with motifs from Inca masonry walls, which are known for the incredible skill with which they were built.

The exhibition was curated by Joanne Pillsbury, who provided extensive information on the forms, decorations, and motifs of the objects, especially in terms of how they related to the lives of ancient American peoples. The main questions guiding the exhibition concerned what these models meant to the people who created them and what modern visitors to the museum could learn through them. Despite research into Maya hieroglyphs, Aztec and Mixtec codices, and even Inca quipus (knotted strings believed to record documents), the material objects from burial and other archaeological sites are often the primary resources through which we can understand ancient American traditions, ceremonies, and daily life.

The first object encountered in the exhibition was an architectural structure familiar to modern audiences: a model of a house, made out of clay (Figure 1). This image of a Nayarit house warmly greeted visitors to the exhibition by depicting a number of people gathered together for a feast inside the house itself. These human figures also served to introduce the activities of daily community life, allowing viewers to analyze the actions of the individuals, their interactions, and their surroundings.

The rest of the objects in the exhibition were organized with equal thought and care. After the Nayarit house, various types of Moche and Cupisnique ceramic house models were prominently displayed. The grouping of six Moche vessels gave a clear sense of the sophisticated characteristics of the Moche style, even to viewers who were not familiar with the distinct traditions of pre-Columbian art. The placement of the vessels together on one large pedestal also allowed viewers to compare the different shapes of houses used in Moche culture and to try to understand the specific functions of each house based on shape and decorative motifs. This display epitomized the exhibition’s effortless way of educating and enlightening viewers, even novices to the subject.

The next section of Design for Eternity displayed various types of Mezcala...
architectural models, mostly from the Guerrero region in southwest Mexico. These objects, generally made of stone and occasionally precious greenstone, were created around 500 BCE. Their minimalistic forms showed the basic shapes of houses and sometimes associated figures in seated or reclining positions. The well-carved, polished Mezcala greenstone house models were probably valued by the Aztec, who used them as offerings at the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan, the capital city of the Aztec culture between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.

A Chimú architectural model that was included in the exhibition portrayed a ritual performance in the palace courtyards at Chan Chan, the capital city of the Chimú culture that flourished between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. Inside the courtyard, the ceremony was narrated by the aligned positions of the human figures, each of whom carried a specific musical instrument, a chicha (a fermented maize beer) container, and body paraphernalia of hats, shirts, and loincloths decorated with small inlaid Spondylus (thorny oyster) shells and mother-of-pearl. These figures, located on the lowest plaza in this maquette, were described as servers who presented offerings to mummies, which were located in the higher position. This organization communicated a ritual hierarchy, including two carefully wrapped mummies located on the highest pedestals on either side of the model. The clear provenance of this object from the archaeological excavations in the Huaca de la Luna site also helped to explain its possible significance.

Design for Eternity succeeded in its aim of introducing the daily life, religious activities, and social systems of ancient American cultures through miniature architectural models. Carefully orchestrated through the selection of the objects, their organization in the gallery space, and the inclusion of thoughtful didactic resources, the exhibition communicated its message to all levels of audience. The object labels, in particular, were noteworthy for not just naming the objects but also describing their imagery. For example, the label for a “Bottle, Throne with Figures” from the Chimú culture identified the object’s function as a vessel while highlighting the importance of the fact that it was shaped into the form of a throne. Another important resource included by the curator was a video addressing the special function of Lambayeque ceramic vessels as whistling musical instruments. In the video, an animated sequence clearly revealed how the vessels, created between 800 and 1300 CE, made whistling sounds with the movement of air. Several additional artifacts also complemented the architectural miniatures, including two photographs of the site of Chan Chan (taken by Edward Ranney in 1942) and two Chimú shirts made out of camelid fiber and cotton. Displayed in connection with two Chimú architectural models, these items helped viewers understand the decorative motifs on the surfaces of the models and contextualize them within the material culture of full-size architecture and clothing.

The exhibition gave general audiences a rich education in pre-Columbian culture, life, funerary practices, and religious rituals, all reflected through the singular theme of small-scale architectural models. The exhibition catalogue is also a valuable resource, presenting advanced scholarship on these unique and important objects.

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Related Publication


Architectural Master Drawings from the Albertina

Tchoban Foundation Museum for Architectural Drawing, Berlin
12 March–10 July 2016

It began, quite rightly, in Rome. Consisting of thirty-eight meticulously selected works from the architectural drawings collection of the Albertina in Vienna, the exhibition filled both of the Tchoban Foundation’s exhibition rooms. The bringing together of exquisite, and in some cases paradigmatic, individual works amounted to an exhibition that was itself an artistic achievement. It began with a delicate study of a Gothic tower on parchment from Pisanello’s workshop. Although this work originated in Rome as part of a sketchbook, as an ideal study and as the product of an international court culture, it was not bound to any particular place. Next was a drawing by Maarten van Heemskerck completed about a hundred years later, immediately after the Sack of Rome, the greatest crisis of the Roman High Renaissance. With his view of Saint Peter's Square, Heemskerck, using a sharp perspective, plunges down into the very soil of the Eternal City, offering a thoroughly down-to-earth angle on two epoch-making—and unfinished—architectural projects: Pius II’s Benediction Loggia and the loggias commissioned by Julius II (Figure 1).

The opposite wall displayed an anonymous pan of the Pantheon stemming from Sangallo’s circle and an impressionistic perspective view of the south side of the Colosseum by Gianmaria Pomedello. This pairing showed not only the buildings that had the greatest impact on early modern Europe but also the broad formal possibilities of architectural drawing in the Renaissance, ranging from informal plan sketches with simple annotations and measurements to strikingly composed vedute.

Further drawings offered highly distinctive angles on the reception of Roman High Renaissance culture. A 1534 design by Giulio Romano for the Porta del Té in Mantua represented the immediate transmission within Italy of the ideas of the first generation of Renaissance architects, while the nearly contemporaneous drawing of illusionistic façade murals for the Nuremberg house of the patrician Stark von Röckenhof family represented the unorthodox hybrids emerging from the Renaissance culture of northern Europe. Two drawings by Francesco Borromini of the church of Sant’Ivo alla Sapienza—a plan with a synoptic projection of the dome, and an elevation of the lantern—are among the most important fruits of the renewed seventeenth-century appreciation of the formal vocabulary of the antique. Close to seven hundred Borromini drawings form one of the core collections of the Albertina, and these two works, displaying multiple layers of the design process, alone justified a visit to the exhibition.

After this brilliant prelude, the rest of the first room served as a demonstration both of the gravitational pull of the Roman epicenter and of the wide spectrum of objects represented in architectural drawings. Sketches by Gian Lorenzo