

Robert and James Adam: The Grand Tour Correspondence and Writings 1754-63

The first-hand experience of ancient Roman architecture was the catalyst of the Adams' remarkable new style. The letters and journals they wrote on their Grand Tours form an extraordinary resource – one which is now being turned into an open-access digital edition, write **Adriano Aymonino** and **Colin Thom**

We are pleased to announce the launch of a new art and architectural history project – the creation of an open-access, digital critical edition of all the known Adam brothers' Grand Tour letters and writings, hosted on the website of Sir John Soane's Museum, with publication scheduled for 2022–23. This material constitutes one of the last great collections of unpublished 18th-century documents, capturing a seminal moment of transformation in European art and architecture. Its online publication will constitute a major resource for historians of the period. This is a collaborative venture between Colin Thom of the Survey of London, at UCL's Bartlett School of Architecture, and Dr Adriano Aymonino of Buckingham University's Department of History and History of Art. It has the support of a Digital Project Grant from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

The Scottish brothers Robert (1728–92) and James Adam (1732–94) defined the British architectural style of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The success of their innovative brand of Neoclassicism rested upon the free and inventive way in which they adapted the architecture of the classical past to the cultural and political aspirations of Britain's ruling classes. The new decorative language they forged in British country and town-house commissions such as Syon House, Kedleston Hall and Osterley Park in the 1760s and 70s put them at the forefront of dynamic changes taking place in European architecture. And their influence was widespread, the Adams being among the few British architects whose work made an impact abroad, not only in Europe but also in Russia and North America.

One of the great sources of the 'Adam Style' was the vast repertoire of ancient Roman architectural, decorative and

figurative details that Robert and James had gathered on paper while residing in Rome. A thorough understanding of this formative period, as it emerges from the brothers' correspondence, is hence vital in order to shed light on Neoclassical architecture and decoration as a whole.

In October 1754, Robert Adam left Dover on the first leg of a Grand Tour. His prime destination was Rome, where he resided until May 1757. Rome was at the time the artistic capital of Europe, flooded with visiting architects, artists, dealers, connoisseurs and collectors, whose antiquarian interests and activities helped define the emerging Neoclassical style and the birth of archaeology as a discipline. The first-hand experience of ancient Roman architecture transformed Adam and was the catalyst of his remarkable new style – a revolutionary form of classicism, aimed at an enlightened British clientele, most of whom had experienced the Grand Tour. This metamorphosis was something that Adam was aware of at the time and is catalogued in many of his letters from Rome. At first he wandered the city for several days in a haze, awestruck by the majesty of its ancient remains: 'Here are Amphitheatres, Triumphal Arches, Fragments of Temples, And other antiquities, So grand, So noble & awful that it really fills the Mind with a reverential fear & Respect'. Then came a realization that here was the opportunity for him to become 'the Man I may be', and develop 'a Taste much Superiour to what I ever thought of before I saw Rome'. The impact on Adam can be seen in the many imaginative sketches and capricci of classical ruins that he made in Rome, combining and reusing elements from Roman monuments, reinterpreting and reshaping antiquity in a way that would later



inform his creative process as an architect. Adam was quick to realize his deficiencies as a draughtsman and then worked supremely hard to overcome them, and he saw the potential for his architect brothers John and James to enjoy the same benefits. Robert's younger brother and architectural partner James eventually followed his example and undertook his own Grand Tour in 1760–63.

The letters and journals written by the Adams at this time form an extraordinary resource, which remains mostly unpublished. They offer first-hand information not only on the activities and aspirations of the brothers at the start of their independent careers, but also on the culture of the Grand Tour, on the difficulties of travelling and the practicalities of trading in antiquities and art in mainland Europe, and on the artistic melting-pot that was Rome in the mid-18th century.

Replete with references to the leading artists and theorists whom they encountered – such as Clérisseau, Piranesi, Winckelmann, Mengs, Cavaceppi, Gavin Hamilton and Allan Ramsay – the Adam brothers' Grand Tour correspondence provides invaluable insights

into the world of mid-century European art and architecture. Robert Adam's relationship with Piranesi was fruitful enough for the great Venetian printmaker to dedicate his *Il Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma* (1762) to Adam. When Robert wrote from Rome in July 1755 to tell his brother James of this proposal, he said that Piranesi was also 'just now doing Two Drawings for me, which will be both

Singular & Clever'. The letters and journals are also rich in information on the Roman political milieu of the time, such as the Papal courts of Benedict XIV (r. 1740–1758) and Clement XIII (r. 1758–1769), the exiled Stuarts in Rome, or the activities of diplomats and cardinals. The best represented is Cardinal Alessandro Albani, Winckelmann's patron, from whom the Adam brothers bought for King

Below Robert Adam, *Capriccio of capricci*, c.1757, pen, brown and grey washes, Soane Museum, Adam vol. 56/59. All photographs by Hugh Kelly. © Sir John Soane's Museum, London, unless otherwise stated



Above Nicolas François Daniel Lhuillier, *Frieze from the Aula Regia in Domitian's Palace*, c.1763, red chalk, Soane Museum, Adam vol. 26/131

Right Robert Adam, *Capriccio of a vaulted and coffered hall*, c.1756-7, pencil, pen, brown and grey washes, Soane Museum, Adam vol. 56/145





Left Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Capriccio*, c. 1745-50, red, black chalk, ink, brown wash, Soane Museum, Adam vol. 56/146

Below Robert Adam, *Capriccio for a vast symmetrical building (detail)*, 1757, pen, pencil and grey wash, eight joined sheets, Soane Museum, Adam vol. 28/001b. Heritage Partners. © Sir John Soane's Museum, London

George III the 'Paper Museum' of Cassiano dal Pozzo, the very first attempt at a visual encyclopedia of the world, produced in the mid-17th century. The correspondence is also filled with informative descriptions of the social and material life of mid-century Italy, such as the religious festivities, the Carnival, or the day-to-day practicalities of the various foreign communities of travellers residing in the papal capital.

This correspondence is of course well known to historians of art and architecture from John Fleming's pioneering 1962 volume, *Robert Adam and his Circle in Edinburgh and Rome*. Written shortly after the discovery of the

largest surviving collection of Adam letters, Fleming's study remains one of the finest books on the Adams, but it is not without its shortcomings. Naturally he had to be selective, using extracts from the letters to tie his narrative together, but that narrative tended to emphasise the social aspects of the Adams' activities, rather than the architectural, so that the bulk of the collection and many important facets of the brothers' Italian tours remain to be investigated and understood. Fleming also took the decision to modernise spellings, capitalisation and punctuation, which, though understandable, distances us somewhat from the character

of the original documents. Furthermore he rarely provided dates for his quotations, or proper references, making it difficult for readers to follow up any interesting leads.

Based on new and accurate transcriptions, this digital edition will bring together for the first time all known 238 Adam letters of the period, as well as various additional related writings, preserved today in various repositories. The foremost collection of 206 letters is that belonging to the Clerk family of Penicuik, currently on long-term deposit with the National Records of Scotland at Register House, Edinburgh (class GD18), and we are delighted to have the full backing and support of Sir Robert Clerk and the NRS. Scans of the original letters and writings will be displayed online, alongside the transcriptions. Introductory essays by the project leaders, based on new research, will provide historical background and perspective; scholarly footnotes and annotations will offer a parallel commentary on all aspects of the Adam brothers' lives and works, their family, and on Rome in the 1750s-60s. The edition will also contain a bibliography and browsable index, as well as a full-text search facility.

As custodian of over 9,000 Adam drawings as well as books and objects collected by the brothers, the Sir John Soane's Museum remains at the centre of Adam studies. The Museum will act as the host institution



for the digital platform that will house the database and content for this critical edition. This will allow for easy interaction with the Soane's online catalogue and images of the brothers' Grand Tour drawings, enabling researchers to enhance their understanding of the letters via the drawings and vice versa.

Work has already begun with the image capture and transcription of many of the letters in public repositories. Editing and annotating will take place in 2021, to be followed by text enrichment and encoding,

and the construction of the database. We currently have a project website at <https://adamgrandtour.online>, which provides further information and will offer periodic updates as the project progresses, and we would be delighted to hear from anyone who has information that may be of interest to us. We can be contacted at editors@adamgrandtour.online.

In addition to the academic institutions and individuals already named, the following are also offering support as

project partners: Victoria and Albert Museum / RIBA Drawings Collection and Archive; The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (Yale University); London Metropolitan Archives / City of London. ■

Above Robert Adam, *Capriccio showing the remains of a circular temple and an urn*, c.1756-7, pen, brown and grey washes, Soane Museum, Adam vol. 56/91