

The Museum of Modern Art

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"...it is scarcely surprising that once again architects agree about very little concerning the nature of their art. Indeed, if there is one thing about which they do agree, at least enough to sign manifestos and march on picket lines, it is the necessity of preserving what is left of Beaux-Arts architecture wherever it may be found." -- Arthur Drexler, introduction to The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS FROM ECOLE DES BEAUX-ARTS AT MODERN MUSEUM

For the first time in this century an opportunity to re-examine the neglected or reviled architectural theories and principles of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the great French school which dominated the 19th century, is available in an unusual exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art. 200 drawings, of which 160 are by students at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, will be on view at the Museum from October 29 through January 4.

Selected by Arthur Drexler, Director of the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design, many of the drawings, some as large as 18 feet wide and astonishingly beautiful, had not been unrolled since they were submitted by students to their professors 80 or 100 years ago. In addition to class assignments and prize winners of the recurring competitions, two special groups are devoted to the design of famous buildings whose architects were once Beaux-Arts students; Henri Labrouste's Bibliothèque Ste. Genevieve and Charles Garnier's Paris Opéra.

The Beaux-Arts was a source of pioneering work by such American architects as H. H. Richardson and Louis Sullivan and a small section is devoted to

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photographs of major Beaux-Arts buildings executed in France and in the United States. These include Adler and Sullivan's Guaranty Building in Buffalo, Richardson's Allegheny County Courthouse, and the Public Library by Carrère and Hastings and Grand Central Station in New York City.

Pointing out that Beaux-Arts ideas as demonstrated in the show were more varied than generally recognized today, Mr. Drexler observes, "A more detached view of architecture as it was understood in the nineteenth century might also provoke a more rigorous critique of philosophical assumptions underlying the architecture of our own time. Now that modern experience so often contradicts modern faith, we would be well advised to re-examine our architectural pieties."

The exhibition, made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, will be shown at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris early next year. Collaborating with Arthur Drexler were David Van Zanten of the University of Pennsylvania, Neil Levine of Harvard University and Richard Chafee of the Courtauld Institute, London, co-authors of the forthcoming major book. A 40-page illustrated catalog has been published to accompany the exhibition.

A recurring assignment for students at the Beaux-Arts was to draw reconstructions of ancient ruins: temples, coliseums. Other assignments reflected the particular social and political concerns of the day: public granaries, palaces of justice, churches, railroad stations, casinos. Two central concerns which merit re-examination today, according to the Museum, are the recognition of the importance of a building's system of internal circulation in determining its architectural form, and the use of drawing

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as a flexible means of visualizing architectural form.

The component parts of all kinds of Beaux-Arts buildings were arranged around axial corridors. Symmetry was a logical outcome of this system but it was not the only possible arrangement. "The essential point," Mr. Drexler says, "was that the same organizing principle by which internal spaces were arranged applied equally to a building's exterior masses and finally to the entire urban complex. Structure, decoration, proportion, were all subordinate to this one overriding discipline."

Commenting on 19th-century reliance on architectural drawings, Mr. Drexler observes that in the present stage of modern architecture's evolution, a mode of conceptualizing buildings through models has so far replaced drawing that students are likely to think in terms of designing and constructing a model, rather than an actual building. "At its best drawing is an instrument of thought that is at once precise and far-ranging; and it can encourage infinitely subtle perceptions of built form."

Most of the drawings in the exhibition have been lent by the library of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

Additional material, catalog, black-and-white photographs and color transparencies available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York, NY 10019.
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