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A very sharp & mechanical man

by Benjamin Riley

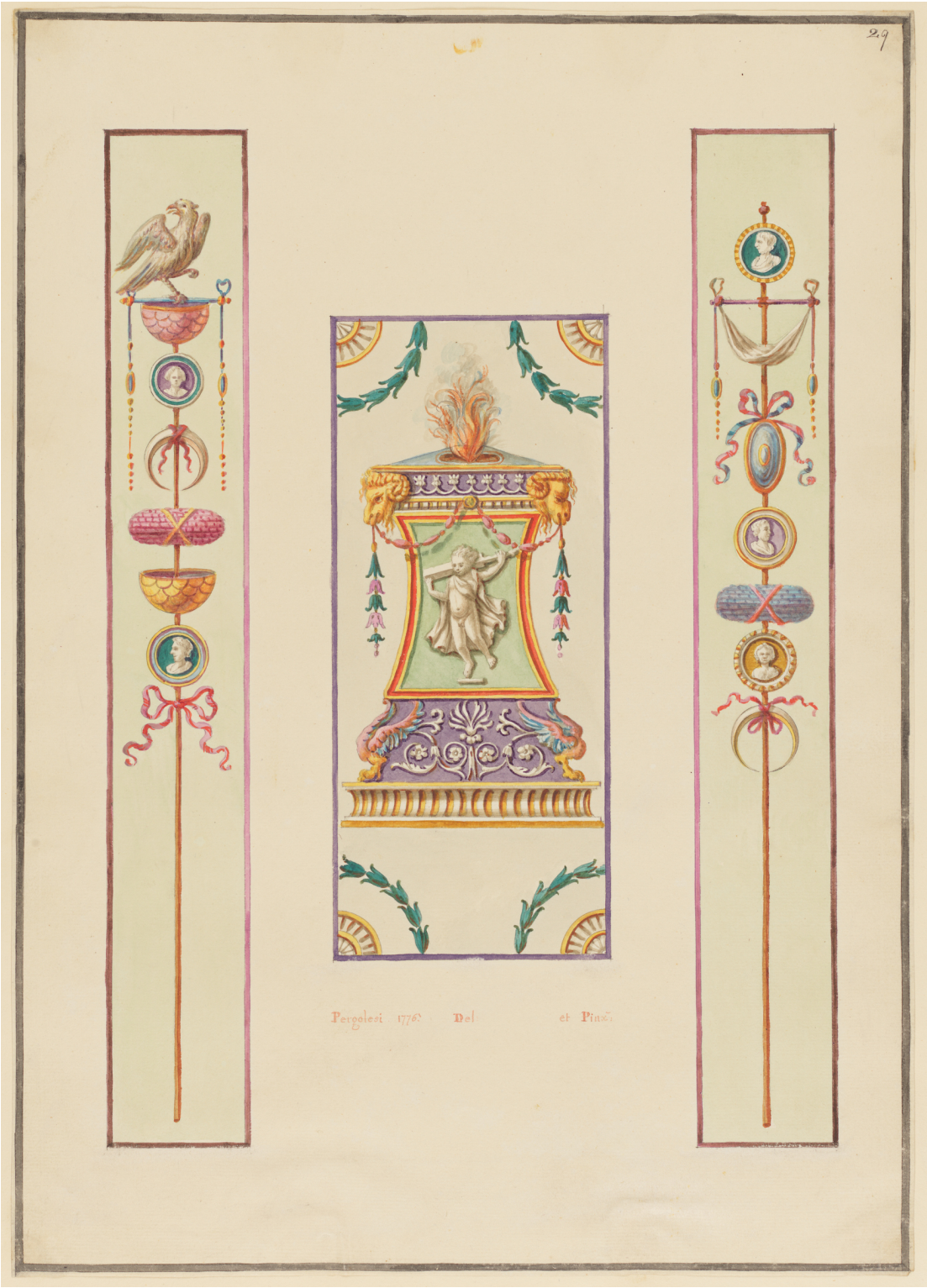
On "Mr. Pergolesi's Curious Things: Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain" at the Cooper Hewitt.

In 1760, James Adam, the third son of William Adam—Scotland's "universal architect" of the early eighteenth century—was in Venice. Though possessed of a sharp tongue similar to that of his brother Robert, who had completed his grand tour three years earlier, James lacked Robert's keenness of perception. To wit, one of James's contacts in Venice was Joseph Smith, the British consul there, now and even then famed for his collection of paintings and drawings. Smith received James "with much flummery," and James even thought of buying the Smith collection. The consul "ought to sell, if vanity would allow him," James thought, "but he is literally eaten up with" the art. Solace came to James from the fact that Smith was "devilishly poor and should he live a few years longer, which he may do, will die a bankrupt." Two years later Smith sold his collection to King George III for £20,000.

Another Adam contact was the painter and engraver Antonio Zucchi, working under James on his brother Robert's production of *The Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro in Dalmatia*. Zucchi, whom James later called "a worthy honest lad, a most singular character in this degenerate country," was one of the essential members of James's "great family" of traveling draftsmen and engravers who followed him around Italy as he continued his studies in the antique, though with less determination than his brother had done a few years before. While Robert had made many worthy contacts on the Continent, his primary purpose had been to brush up his architectural skill. James, meanwhile, was tasked with finding able men to work in the Adam office, which Robert was then busy establishing in London.

Zucchi, both talented and trusted, was a desirable candidate. That trust was no small thing, both Adam brothers having a vitriolic, if typical for the age, suspicion of Italians. Robert had written to his sisters a few years earlier that "this country abounds in vermin of all ranks who, when they have no stranger to steal from, rob one another." But Zucchi, alas, was eager to return to Venice. (He later did join the Adams in London, working famously on Kenwood House and eventually marrying Angelica Kauffman; his splendid 1763 portrait of James Adam was jointly purchased by the Victoria & Albert and the National Galleries of Scotland in 2019.) So James hired three other draftsmen to go to London, one of whom he complimented as "an arabesque painter, paints in oil

and guazzo, a very sharp and mechanical man." John Fleming, whose 1962 account of the Adam brothers' grand tours remains the essential source regarding their early careers, suggests that this "very sharp and mechanical man" could "have been M. A. Pergolesi, who later worked for Robert in the long gallery at Syon House." But Fleming had his dates confused. Michelangelo Pergolesi can't have been sent by James Adam from Italy to London in 1763, because he was already in London.



Michel Angelo Pergolesi, Ornament Design, Roman Altar Dedicated to Mars and Roman Standards, ca. *1776, Pen and ink, brush and watercolor over graphite on laid paper, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. Photo: Matt Flynn © Smithsonian Institution.*

Pergolesi is now the subject of a one-room show, "Mr. Pergolesi's Curious Things," at New York's Cooper Hewitt museum.[1] Why this obscure artist should receive a show of his own is a question that might fairly be asked. The Cooper Hewitt itself seems a little dubious on the importance of Pergolesi, making the case that Pergolesi's publication of neoclassical ornaments at the end of the eighteenth century inspired the Beaux-Arts architecture that graces the Cooper Hewitt, which was built as a house for Andrew Carnegie by Babb, Cook & Willard from 1897 to 1902. That's true enough, though Carnegie specified that he wanted the "most modest, plainest, and most roomy house in New York," and the resulting Georgian Revival structure displays little of the whimsicality of Pergolesi's designs after the antique. A more ambitious show might have explored the role of pattern books in the dissemination of neoclassical ornament, using Pergolesi's publication—and its complicated production history, on which more later—to make a point about the ways in which the Adam style was disseminated throughout the United Kingdom and the United States. As it stands, the show is content to give us a large number of Pergolesi's original dry-brush watercolor designs, which were then worked up into the engravings that he later published between 1777 and his death in 1801.

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In London, Pergolesi would have found a vibrant Italian community of artists and artisans. As the art historian Camilla Murgia has documented, the eighteenth century saw Italian artists descend upon London in greater numbers than ever before, owing primarily to contacts made between British grand tourists and native Italians. Continental Europeans, and especially Italians, were much in evidence in the first Adam office on Grosvenor Street, just behind Buckingham House. Here toiled what Robert Adam called his "myrmidons," after the warlike followers of Achilles but meaning by the eighteenth century, according to the oed, "faithful follower[s]," having also a sense of "slavish." Adam had remarked of the Italian Agostino Brunias and the "Liègois" Laurent-Benoît Dewez in 1757 that "I really would not have the courage to settle in London without them—that is saying much." Here was a moment of candor free of the usual Adam puffery, which had earlier led him to describe one assistant as an "Italian lad who does all the drudgery business of putting things in proportion from sketches, but I hold him in no esteem but as a daily slave at one shilling per day" and another as a "beegle [sic] who is the most worthless dog I ever knew but draws ornaments to perfection." When Robert wrote to his brothers from Italy suggesting to bring Brunias and Dewez back to London to establish an office, John and James balked at the cost. But Robert was certain of the benefits of having two Continental European draftsmen on staff: "I can't help thinking both Jamie and John the most pinching animals I ever

saw. . . . John will repent this a thousand times. . . . He doesn't consider that at London there is not one that knows my manner of drawing nor would learn it in two years. And then the very name of bringing two Italians will do more than he is aware of." Even as early as 1756, Robert was cognizant of the esteem the British would have for Italian artists. From the arrival of Brunias and Dewez, more Italians followed, Pergolesi among them. Indeed, Pergolesi must have been one of the first of Adam's imported Italians to join the office. As the Adam scholar A. A. Tait has written, "the transient draughtsmen kept alive the link between Italy and Italian drawing" in the Adam office, a link furthered by the expansive collection of antiquities and Italian paintings and drawings that the Adams had acquired on their respective grand tours, all displayed in the Grosvenor Street office.

Michel Angelo Pergolesi, Ornament Design, Two Panels and Urn with Vulcan, *1776, Pen and ink, brush and watercolor over graphite on laid paper, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. Photo: Matt Flynn © Smithsonian Institution.*

Whether Pergolesi worked officially in the Adam office or served as an outside contractor is not certain. What is certain is that Pergolesi had been employed by Robert in his redecoration of the interior of Syon House, the Duke of Northumberland's seat on the Thames just outside of London. Account books record that Pergolesi was paid three guineas each for the carving of sixty-two pilasters on the wall of Syon's famous Long Gallery. On display at the Cooper Hewitt is an

engraving of the gallery that was featured in the final volume of Robert and James's landmark publication, *The Works in Architecture*, which appeared posthumously in 1822 (Robert had died in 1792, James in 1794). Those pilasters are hardly the main attraction in the room, though they are elaborate. Employing a style of stemlike decoration known as "rinceau," the thin, flat decorative columns echo the scrollwork that fills the geometric ceiling panels. Robert Adam had been engaged in the early 1760s by the Duke of Northumberland when the duke

> came to the resolution of fitting up the apartments of Sion House, in a magnificent manner. He communicated his intentions to me, and having expressed his desire, that the whole might be executed intirely [*sic*] in the antique, he was pleased, in terms very flattering, to signify his confidence in my abilities to follow out his idea.

See past the sycophancy to the important point, namely that the entirety of Syon was to be remodeled on antique, which is to say Greco-Roman, lines. The decorative scheme not only included the delicate paintings and carvings that adorned the Long Gallery, but also the "proper mixture of . . . vaults and coved ceilings . . . capable of forming such a beautiful variety as cannot fail to delight and charm the instructed spectator," all leading to what John Fleming called "the most opulently Augustan of all [Adam's] interiors." It was not just the pilasters that Pergolesi worked on at Syon, however. He also seems to have been responsible in some capacity for the design of a "closet" or small room. A preliminary sketch for that room, part of the Morgan Library's permanent collection, is included in the show. The wall decoration takes the scrolls of the pilasters and elaborates them into figurative panels flanking a window, with further panels atop, all inspired by Roman wall painting, just then beginning to be excavated at Herculaneum.

In a way, the work at Syon may have been the highlight of Pergolesi's career. The next notice of the Italian comes in June 1777, when he advertised in the public press a series of prints depicting various forms of ornament: rinceau panels, wall niche carvings, ceiling panels, and much more. Sixty-seven watercolor sketches of these designs are part of the Cooper Hewitt's permanent collection, and these form the bulk of the exhibition's objects. These highly colored sheets are enchanting objects, well displayed along a bright wall. One of the labels points up Pergolesi's "lighthearted sensibility," evident in both the designs themselves and the colors used. Pergolesi's palette was a bit outside the run of typical Georgian coloration. While his rusts, reds, and creams call to mind the "Etruscan" style that Robert Adam had observed in Italy and cribbed himself from Piranesi, Pergolesi's repeated use of washed-out purples marks his style as singular. It's a shame that Pergolesi was limited to producing black-and-white reproductions of his sheets, for the color is what grabs the eye. The designs themselves are often slightly too soft to be plausible, though they sharpened up once engraved. Pergolesi intended to release sixty prints a year, at a rate of five a month, which could be bound up by individual collectors. In the event, the project continued until his death in 1801, at which point only sixty-seven total plates had been produced. The language surrounding them betrays a slide down the social scale. While in 1777 Pergolesi had dedicated the prints to the Duke of Northumberland, by 1794 he was reduced to advertising not only the prints but also instruction, noting that he

> continues to teach Ladies and Gentlemen every branch of ancient and modern Ornaments, Designs, Paintings, &c. &c. on very reasonable terms, in a manner which . . . has gained him the patronage of many of the Nobility and Gentry of England.

The intended market had also shifted from collectors to artisans:

> The Publisher [Pergolesi] flatters himself, that these Designs will give Pleasure to the Noblemen and Gentlemen, and will be of great Utility to the Architect, Painter, Sculptor, Modeller, Carver . . . , &c., or any person concerned in those branches of the polite Arts, where taste and ornament are required.

Pergolesi had ended up just another practitioner of what Horace Walpole derisively called the "Adamitic mode." Still, we can be glad to see such a mode on view at the Cooper Hewitt.

1. "Mr. Pergolesi's Curious Things: Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain" opened at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York, on October 1, 2022, and remains on view through January 29, 2023.

Benjamin Riley is managing editor of *The New Criterion*.

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