Adam Style in English Country Houses: Function and Decoration in the Georgian Era

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Introduction

This analysis was presented at the 2nd international colloquium, Seijo University on November 4th, 2010. I retouched the writing and put footnote to develop my studies, I would be grateful if this study contribute to history of art and architecture.

This essay looks at English country houses, which were originally the estates of rich important families, namely nobility such as dukes, marquesses, earls viscounts and barons. However, following the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, this definition changed because of the rise of another kind of rich important family, for instance, doctors, professors, and so on. Thus we find another new class holding country houses for the next two centuries. Based on this, I try to pinpoint one style at a certain point in the history of English country houses. The style was in a stream of Neo-classicism, named the “Adam style” after an architect and interior designer. The Adam style then came to assume an aspect of Romanticism which can be seen his ‘Castle style’ mainly in Scotland (fig. 1). Adam’s publication, the Works in Architecture of Robert and James Adam1 played a leading role in pioneering the ‘pattern book’ in decorative art2. In the Victorian era, which followed Romanticism via the Adam age, the Arts and Crafts Movement was led by their contribution. Therefore, to consider how Adam style developed is a valuable way to understand the nature of English Art and Architecture.

1. Adam Style and Grand Tour

Robert Adam was born in Kirkcaldy, Scotland in 1728. He was the second son of William Adam, whom he studied under before becoming a leading architect and interior designer in the latter half of the 18th century. He was involved in the planning of Scottish public buildings,
town houses in London, and English country houses. He often designed not only the houses themselves but also the interior furniture and furnishings such as fireplaces, carpets, doorknobs, pedestals, and looking-glasses. His Neo-classical style is referred to as ‘Adam Style’ or ‘Adamesque’. His furniture was often produced in collaboration with the cabinet-maker Thomas Chippendale. He collaborated on some of his interior designs with artists such as the decorative painter, Antonio Zucchi, his wife Angelica Kauffmann, and the plasterer Joseph Rose.

He based his characteristic, delicate and elegant decoration on things he had seen and experienced in Italy. Robert embarked upon his Grand Tour in 1754. He travelled to Rome, where he met Giovanni Battista Piranesi, and to Florence, where he met Charles-Louis Clerisseau, during the 1750s.

An example of Adam’s decorative style can be seen in the pale toned plastered ceiling and walls reminiscent of a Wedgewood cameo (fig. 2). Another characteristic of Adam’s style are the figures on walls or furniture inspired from ancient Roman grottos. These combined human, animal and foliage forms, known as ‘Grotesque’ (fig. 3). He often used floral motifs on furniture, called ‘anthemion’ (fig. 4). These were stylized flowers, based on the honeysuckle flower and leaves.

Robert Adam designed public buildings as well. For example, the Old College at Edinburgh University (fig. 5), and the Register House in Edinburgh (fig. 6), but his genius for interior design is peculiar to country houses. In the middle of the 1750’s Adam had finished his Grand Tour and was occupied remodelling country houses. The masters of country houses often embarked upon Grand Tours to the continent in their youth. They would improve their social manners in France and their knowledge of classical art, culture as well as developing an eye for antiquity in Italy. They collected antiques on their travels and therefore they needed space to show them. By remodelling their country houses in the fashionable Adam style, they were creating the perfect spaces to house their collections. Robert Adam had gained similar knowledge, skill and useful connections on his own Grand Tour. Another conspicuous effect on country houses at this time was the development of libraries, evidence of the nobility’s power and knowledge.

2. The arrival of library

By the 17th century, rooms known as libraries had begun appearing in country houses, but there had been neither many books nor paintings in the houses from the medieval period up to the 17th century. It had not been necessary to have the ability to study, read or write. Therefore, even in the 17th century, there had been no need for a specific room to keep books. They were kept in closets and small rooms off the long galleries (fig. 7).

The antique works and other evidence of the Grand Tours had been brought to country houses and they needed to have space to be stored. For large pieces, galleries were used, for small
pieces, cabinets or closets. The cabinets and closets stored anything the owners had: treasures, paintings, medals, books, documents, and other unique items altogether.

Increased collections meant cabinets and closets had become insufficient leading up to the development of specialist rooms like libraries. These new rooms required innovative redesigns of country houses. Robert Adam reconstructed Newby Hall in Yorkshire into a simple series of classical rooms so as to store and display William Weddell’s (the patron of Newby’s) collection of Greek and Roman sculpture (fig. 8). Adam was in charge of displaying the collection and designed the pedestals for the sculptures.

As I mentioned before, the library started as a personal space to store private collections. By the 1730’s, libraries and their collections were not only for the masters but also for their families and friends – a kind of public property.

Libraries had become more of a common space, although some masters in large houses still owned their own library. Now, the ‘common’ library has an aspect as a living room.

We can see that the development of English libraries was influenced by collections brought back from the Grand Tour and the expansion of private closets into more widely used areas.

3. Adam’s architectural theory, movement

The planning of country houses had been changed from classical symmetry into new planning.

We should pay attention to Robert Adam’s contribution to this new type of planning.

I have dealt with his architectural theory in cooperation with his brother, James, that is to say, ‘movement’, as we see in his publication, the Works in Architecture of Robert and James Adam. Volume 1 was partly published in 1773, volume 2 was done in 1779, and volume 3 was published after their death. These volumes were revolutionary and innovative in industrial design as there hadn’t been a commercial ‘pattern book’ until that point in England.

[Excerpt]

Movement is meant to express, the rise and fall, the advance and recess, with other diversity of form, in the different parts of a building, so as to add greatly to the picturesque of the composition. For the rising and falling, advancing and receding, with convexity and concavity, and other forms of the great parts, have the same effect in architecture, that hill and dale, foreground and distance, swelling and sinking have in landscape: That is, they serve to produce an agreeable and diversified contour, that groups and contrasts like a picture, and creates a variety of light and shade, which gives great spirit, beauty and effect to the composition.
As we find in his theory, Adam applied the word, 'picturesque' to his architecture. It might sound strange because ‘picturesque’ had usually only been used to describe landscape gardens.

I have struggled with this matter ever since my Master’s paper. As you know, there were some controversies amongst theorists and landscape designers including William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, Edmund Burke and Capability Brown. Yet, according to Adam’s theory, it seems to mean just ‘pretty like a picture’ as the original meaning. In Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (7th edition), we can find the word, and it is explained that ‘pretty, especially in a way that looks’. Then we could put ‘planning’ or ‘decoration’ for the word ‘composition’, instead.

So if he would assume ‘planning’ or ‘decoration’ as ‘composition’, how would he have described ‘picturesque’ on his planning?

For instance, ‘agreeable and diversified contour’ seems to have appeared in his circular planning reflected functions of the rooms. He achieved interior ‘movement’ by varying the sizes, forms and decoration of the rooms\(^{12}\). Then ‘variety of light and shade’ can be derived from top-lighted staircase (fig. 4), then pilasters, columns and sculptures also imply ‘advancing and receding (with convexity and concavity)’ (fig. 9).

To make my point in this chapter clearer, Adam’s credo made country house planning innovating which had been classical symmetry until then, especially a Palladian school’s one (fig. 10).

It means that Adam is positioned as an architect of Neo-classicism, which had made much of classical symmetry, but his theory, at the same time, had already tried to pioneer next Romanticism spirit, as the ‘picturesque’ in his composition proved.

In the next chapter, I’d like to compare how the library shows Adam’s scheme and how the drawing room does it regarding function and decoration.

### 4. Drawing Room’s function and decoration

The reason why the Grand Tour had become fashionable in the 18th century is because of the variety of transportation. The carriages had been improved with elaborate designs, that is, a lighter, downsized chariot, a carriage and pair and so on\(^{13}\). They made distant travel easier, especially for ladies. Then the reception at country houses which gentlemen used to dominate shifted to become more of a ladies’ one. More and more kinds of social life, increasing with another kind of party. There had been held either dinner or dinner with a ball since the 16th century. The latter one is to have dinner with music, then all the guests used to withdraw to the drawing room (or withdrawing room to the letter) to have tea or dessert, or to play with cards. The room at which dinner had taken place was varied to the period, saloon or hall etc. Yet the way the guests would have done the things in one room at the same time had stayed the same.

By the 18th century, social life had diversified. The ball had been developed into something
sophisticated, whose scale had become grand. The assemblies, masquerades, reception parties, open-air concerts and so on. Some of these had been already begun in the 17th century, but most of them had been particular to the 18th century.

As I mentioned before, Robert Adam’s diversified composition in planning, circular one, the base point was at the hall or saloon. By the middle of the 17th century, one would no longer have formal dinner at the saloon, which had now been replaced by the dining room. Therefore the importance of the saloon had been reduced, so the size of it could be free. Hence there had been no reason to put the saloon and the hall at the centre of the building. Where people had dinner changed, so then the manner of dinner and the functions of the rooms changed as well. That is to say, the decoration needed to change in a more suitable way. The dinner had been shifted from noon to evening, half past 4 or 5. The master and the guests used to have dinner including dessert in the dining room and then the ladies would move to the drawing room to have tea. On the other hand, gentlemen would stay in the dining room to drink liquor and smoke. Therefore, the dining room had to be decorated in a more sober, masculine style, and the drawing room in a delicate, feminine style. This kind of decoration was Adam’s genius. He made the dining room in this, sober masculine style (fig. 11). It has been done with his delicate colour scheme, pale toned alcove, but based on white plastered, mahogany furnished. Likewise, he often decorated the library in a similar style (fig. 12).

On the other hand, I’d like to pay attention to the point that he had decorated the drawing room in a feminine style with curved line furniture and silk damask covered walls (fig. 13).

That is why I tried to deal with Adam’s decoration. However, I still need to develop my subject with primary sources and organise them neatly in my study while also including Adam’s drawings, the concern to the Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris’s crafts and so on. Adam could be positioned at an important point within the whole of English Art and Architectural history as a pioneer for total interior designers.

* I am grateful to Ms. Louise Ayres, the former House Manager of Osterley Park, National Trust for her help to examine the manuscript and to Mr. Gary Young, my friend and teacher, for his help to proofread it with paying enough attention to my intention.

Notes

See also

2 Pattern books which contain samples of different patterns originally appeared for cloth, wallpaper and ceramic designs in the 18th century. The Adam brothers covered not only their designs and plans for the architecture but also the furnishings.


6 Ibid., p. 10.
7 Ibid., p. 14.
8 Ibid., p. 24.

10 The Architect John Soane was to say of Robert Adam in 1812: ‘Manufacturers of every kind felt the electric power of his revolution in art; The Adam office had little direct contact with manufacturers, since they designed for specific clients, and this ‘electric power’ therefore came mostly through the intermediary of the plates in the *Works*. The volumes were primarily a form of self-publicity, immodestly trumpeting the ‘approbation of our employers’ and the adulation in the form of imitation by other artists. The results, as the Adam brothers put it, was a transformation of the ‘whole system of this useful and elegant art’ which would afford ‘entertainment to the connoisseur, but also convey some instruction to the artist.

( Irwin, op. cit., p. 137.)

13 Girouard, op.cit., pp.48–49.
14 Ibid, pp.50–51.
15 Katagi, op.cit., p.73.
fig. 1  Culzean Castle, Strathclyde, 1770-90

fig. 2  Osterley Park, Entrance Hall, Middlesex, 1767-68

fig. 3  Osterley Park, Etruscan Dressing Room, 1775

fig. 4  Kenwood, London, Staircase, 1767-68

fig. 5  Old College at Edinburgh University, 1789
fig. 6 General Register House, Edinburgh, 1771

fig. 7 Osterley Park, plan, principal floor

fig. 8 Newby Hall, Yorkshire, Sculpture Gallery, c.1767-72

fig. 9 Syon House, Middlesex, anteroom, 1762-63
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fig. 10 Colen Campbell or James Gibbs, Haughton Hall, Norfolk, 1722-, plan

fig. 11 Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire, Dining Room, 1765-70

fig. 12 Kedleston Hall, Library

fig. 13 Osterley Park, Drawing Room, 1761-80
イギリス・カントリー・ハウスにおけるアダム様式
——ジョージア朝の機能と装飾——

原小百合

本論は、貴族の荘園に端を発するイギリスのカントリー・ハウスの歴史を踏まえ、新古典主義の時代に隆盛となった「アダム様式」の特色と、この様式がいかに建築における装飾の重要性を高めたか、そしてそれがいかに重要な貢献であったかを論じるものである。

第1章では、アダム様式の特色を述べ、スコットランド出身の建築家および室内装飾家であるロバート・アダム（1728-98）のグランド・ツアーがどのように彼の作品に現れているかを考察する。

第2章では、カントリー・ハウス史における書斎の出現から発展までを述べ、イギリス貴族の子弟たちがグランド・ツアーで得た骨とう品をいかに陳列し、カントリー・ハウスのコレクションとして重要視したかを論じる。

ロバート・アダムがカントリー・ハウス改装とともにその陳列を担った事例を考察する。

第3章ではカントリー・ハウスのプランニングの変化に注目し、ロバート・アダムおよび弟のジェームズの建築理論の貢献について論じる。その際、アダムの自己宣伝的出版物であるThe Works in Architecture of Robert and James Adam『アダム兄弟の建築理論』の序文を手掛かりとする。

第4章では、カントリー・ハウスの住人たちの交通手段の変化に伴い、18世紀には社交生活が多様化し、特にドローイング・ルームが女性にとって重要な部屋として確立することを確認する。その結果、ドローイング・ルームは女性のための部屋として、ダイニング・ルームや書斎は男性用に装飾されたこと、そしてアダムがこの種の装飾を得意としたことについて論じる。18世紀にアダム様式が担った装飾と機能の連動は、次世代のアーツ・アンド・クラフツ運動につながっていく。そのため、ロバート・アダムは、古典主義の要素を保持しながら、イギリス建築史において革新的な役割を果たしたと言えるのである。