

ROBERT ADAM'S LONDON

FRANCES SANDS

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at Sir John Soane's Museum (30 November 2016 – 11 March 2017)

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Cover: Adam office, design for the ceiling for the glass drawing room at Northumberland House, 1770.
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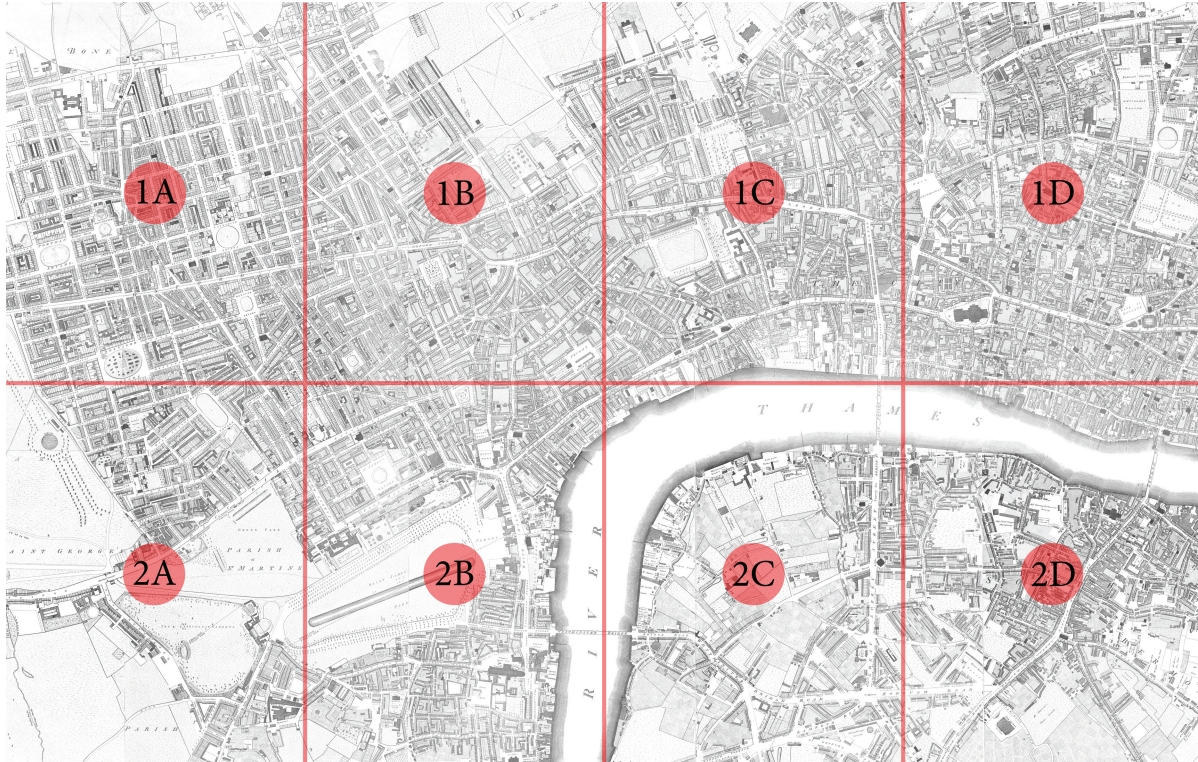
Foreword

To complement his ‘academy of architecture’, Sir John Soane acquired the 8,000-strong Adam office drawings collection in 1833. Complete with a further 1,000 drawings from the Adam brothers’ Grand Tours, this collection is thought to comprise over 80% of the surviving Adam drawings in the world, and has become an important focus for the study of eighteenth-century architectural history. Since 1998 the collection has been the subject of scholarly cataloguing projects. First, Alan Tait catalogued the Adam Grand Tour collection, and Frances Sands has been working on the Adam office drawings since 2010. This continuing project has resulted in the attribution of 1,500 previously unidentified drawings, contributing both to academic study and conservation works. The entire collection has been photographed, thanks to the generous support of the Leon Levy Foundation, and is available for consultation on the Soane Museum’s Collections Online website.

One of the most prolific architects in Britain, Robert Adam produced more designs for London than anywhere else. This book assembles the stories of a great many of his commissions and speculative projects in the capital city, and uses the Adam drawings to illustrate the architect’s intentions and achievements. The book is published alongside an exhibition at the Soane Museum of the same title. I would like to thank my colleagues at the Soane Museum for their work on both the exhibition and this book, particularly Frances Sands, who has made this project her own, Jo Tinworth, Sue Palmer, John Bridges, Lorraine Bryant and Helen Dorey. Moreover, I would like to express my thanks to Iain Gordon Brown for his support of the Adam drawings project in the capacity of consultant, and also to Colin Thom, Senior Historian at the Survey of London, who has been extremely generous with his time and expertise in reviewing this book.

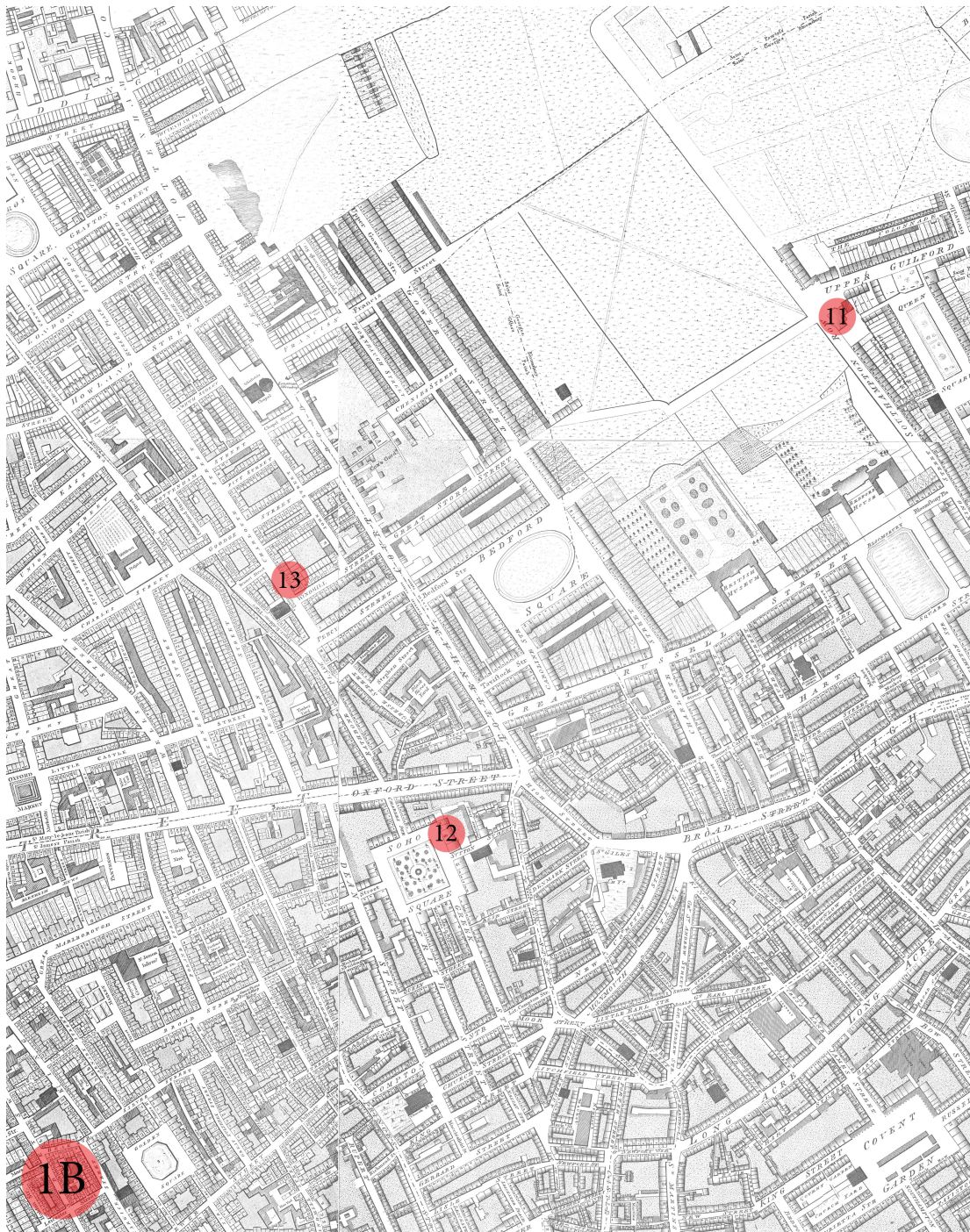
Bruce Boucher
Director, Sir John Soane’s Museum

Map of London

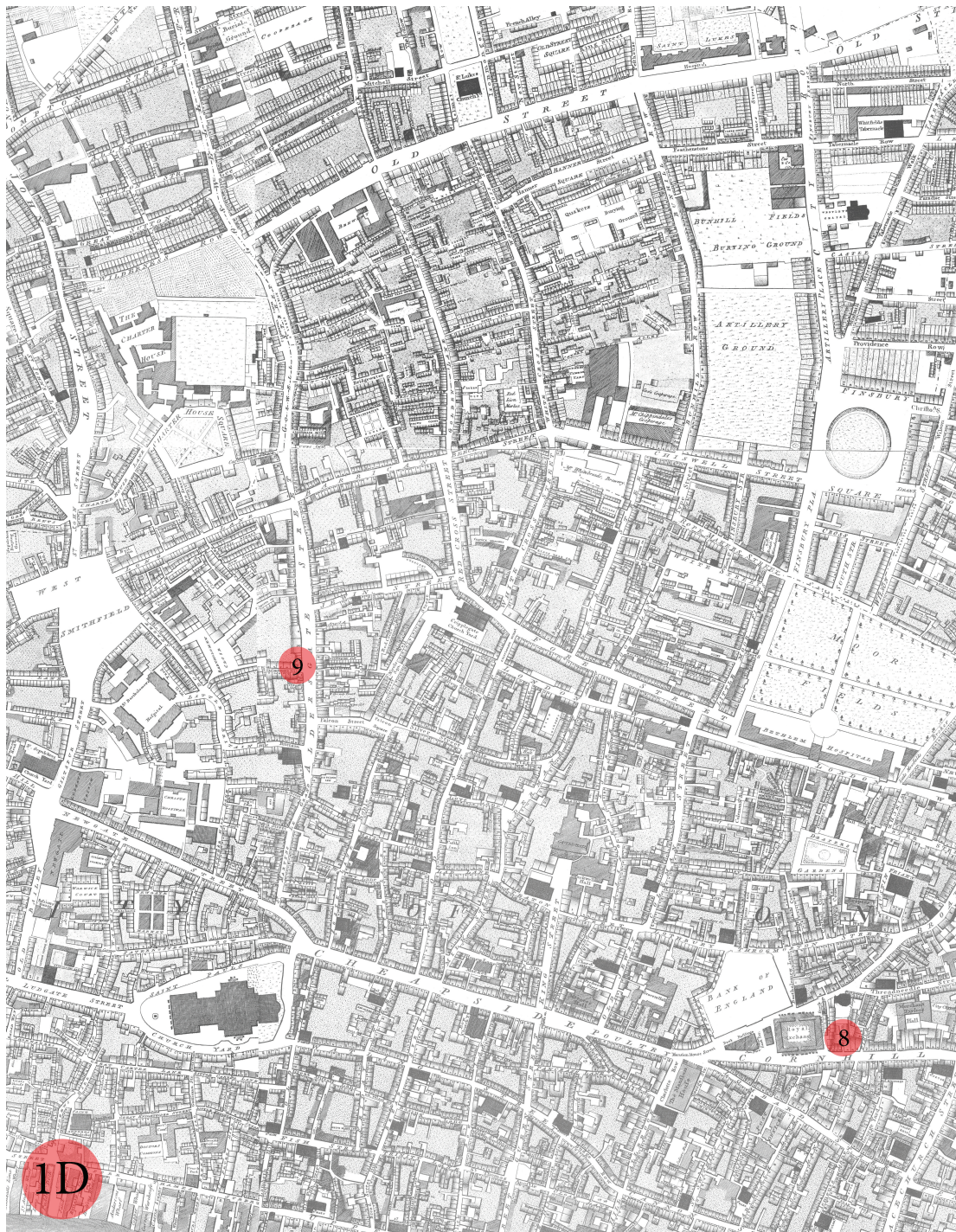


Richard Horwood, *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster the Borough of Southwark, and parts adjoining shewing every house*, 1792–99, detail. Reproduced from the London Topographical Society facsimile, 1966, by courtesy of the Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, Texas A&M University

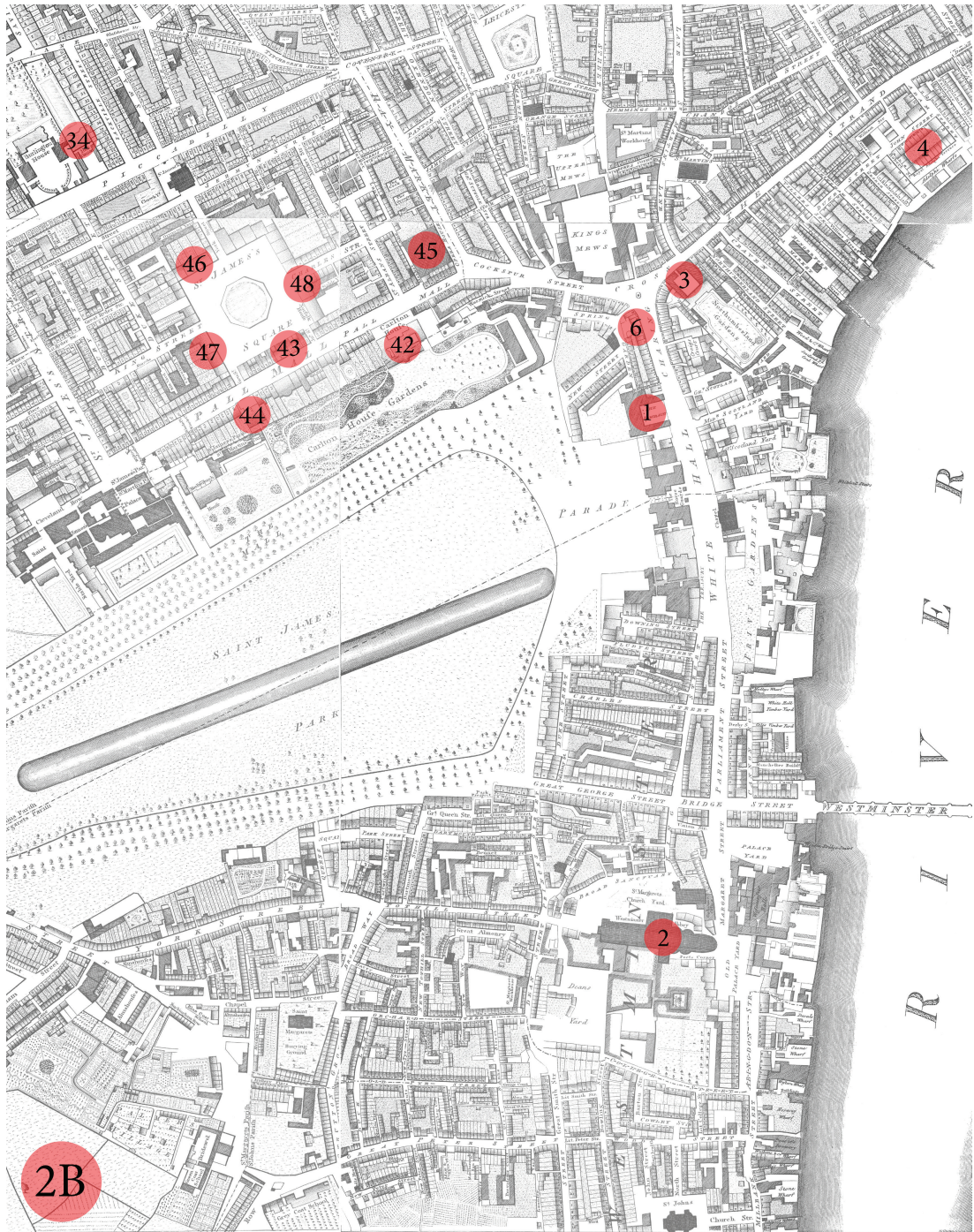
















Key to Map

1. Admiralty, Whitehall (2B)
2. Westminster Abbey (2B)
3. Northumberland House, Strand (2B)
4. Adelphi (2B)
5. Theatre Royal, Drury Lane (1C)
6. Drummond's Bank, Charing Cross (2B)
7. King's Bench Prison, Southwark (2D)
8. Lloyd's Coffee House, Freeman's Court, Cornhill (1D)
9. 152 Aldersgate Street (1D)
10. Lincoln's Inn (1C)
11. Bolton House, Southampton Row (1B)
12. 20 Soho Square (1B)
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46. 11 St James's Square (2B)
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48. 33 St James's Square (2B)

Introduction

There are few architects who have been the subject of such intense study as Robert Adam (Fig. 1). He was born in Edinburgh in 1728, the second son of the architect William Adam, and was brought up in comfort and wealth at the family estate of Blair Adam near Edinburgh, amid the intellectual environment of the Scottish Enlightenment.¹ According to his obituary, Adam was educated at Edinburgh University among some of the finest minds of his generation, only abandoning his studies in 1745 to join his father's architectural practice, and later assisting his elder brother John, who took control of the firm on the death of their father in 1748.² The Adam family's Edinburgh office was a burgeoning one, undertaking lucrative commissions such as Hopetoun House and the Hanoverian Highland Forts.



Fig 1. Attributed to George Willison, *Robert Adam*, c.1770–75. NPG 2953. © National Portrait Gallery, London

¹ H.M. Colvin, *A biographical dictionary of British architects: 1600-1840*, 2008, p. 44.

² Robert Adam's obituary, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, March 1792, pp. 282-83.

Even at this early stage of his career Adam was starting to show signs of exceptional talent and was regarded by his family as something of a prodigy. During his time in the family firm he earned a fortune of around £5,000, which enabled him to undertake a Grand Tour in 1754–8, travelling through France to Italy in order to continue his architectural education and improve his drawing under the tutelage of the French artist Charles-Louis Clérisseau.³ The drawing style that Adam cultivated in Italy was freer and less contrived than the conventional, old-fashioned manner he had learned in his father's office in Scotland, and under Clérisseau's guidance he developed an elegant sketch-like technique. It was this, combined with a new-found understanding of antique architecture and its decorative motifs that enabled Adam to establish himself as the country's leading neoclassicist after his return to Britain in 1758.

Adam was no wide-eyed tourist. Alongside the educational opportunities that his Grand Tour offered, he also undertook a project which was intended to propel him to celebrity. From Venice, Adam travelled across the Adriatic with a team of draughtsmen to Spalatro in Dalmatia (now Split, Croatia) in order to compile material for an architectural treatise, *The Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro in Dalmatia* (1764). Earlier architectural treatises in Britain, such as Robert Wood's *The Ruins of Palmyra* (1753), tended to focus on the public and religious architectural styles of the antique, while Adam's book provided the British public with their first in-depth taste of domestic antique architecture, albeit on a grand scale, in the form of an Imperial palace. Furthermore, the publication helped legitimise Adam's novel ideas for domestic planning and interior decoration.

It is significant that when Adam returned to Britain in 1758 he chose to set up his own architectural practice in Mayfair, London, rather than return to the family practice in his native Edinburgh, as originally planned. When he finally settled at 75 Lower Grosvenor Street, he filled the house with artworks, and carefully arranged pieces from his collection of antiquities (Fig. 2). Gradually he attracted a circle of wealthy patrons, who commissioned from him a diverse array of buildings and interiors. He was joined by his younger brother James in 1763 following his own Grand Tour and together, the Adam brothers built up their architectural office by employing numerous professional draughtsmen but never took pupils.⁴ They were dictatorial over design and only allowed schemes to be developed for which they had produced the initial concept, and for which they took ultimate credit. Preliminary sketches were dutifully copied out by the draughtsman as measured and often colour-washed finished drawings which were presented to clients, and working drawings were produced to instruct on-site craftsmen.⁵ The drawings were also recopied as office record drawings, resulting in a vast collection.

The Adam office promoted its designs as a deliberate contrast to the more severe Palladian style that had dominated Britain in the preceding decades. The brothers cleverly wielded a cache of neoclassical motifs alongside excitingly varied room shapes: their style was not based on dogmatic archaeological accuracy as the neo-Palladian style had been, but was rather a fusion of all they had seen abroad, merged with what they had learnt of architecture in Britain. With their distinctive, delicate interior decorative style and their bold, rippling architecture,

³ A.A. Tait, *The Adam Brothers in Rome: Drawings from the Grand Tour*, 2008, pp. 63-65.

⁴ A. Rowan, 'The Adam Brothers and Contemporary Office Practice' in G. Worsley (ed.), *Adam in Context: Georgian Group Symposium*, 1992, pp. 42-44.

⁵ F. Sands, 'Adam at work', *Country Life*, 2 April 2014, pp. 80-81.

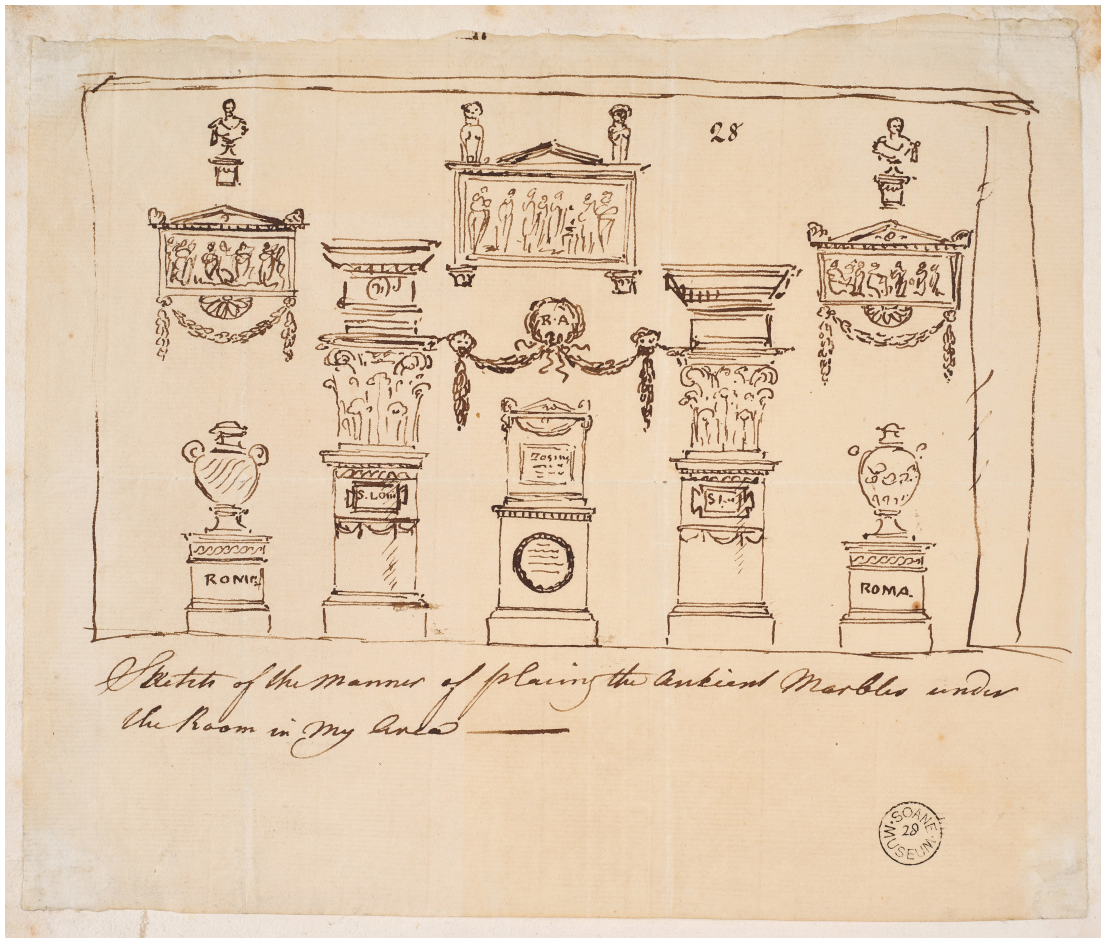


Fig 2. Robert Adam, an arrangement for marbles at 75 Lower Grosvenor Street, 1759. SM Adam volume 54/3/28. Photograph: Ardon Bar-Hama

the Adam brothers became enormously successful. Among their best-known surviving works are those at Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire; Syon House, Brentford; Osterley Park, Hounslow; Culzean Castle, Ayrshire and the Edinburgh Register House. Through such successes the brothers amassed considerable wealth, but it was not to last.

Late in 1767 Robert and James agreed to develop streets of houses on the Marylebone Estate of the Duke of Portland, at what became Portland Place; but soon after, in 1768, they also agreed, in partnership with their brothers John and William, to take a lease of ground on the riverfront near the Strand for another speculative development of houses, known as the Adelphi (see pp. 50, 19). Managing two such vast and expensive projects proved beyond the Adams' reach, especially as they had borrowed heavily in the expectation of securing higher prices for their

houses than they were ultimately worth. A crash in their fortunes was undoubtedly coming but was precipitated in 1772 when a run on the Scottish banks triggered a crippling recession. The brothers struggled to sell the Adelphi houses and only escaped bankruptcy by acquiring a private Act of Parliament to sell their properties via a public lottery.⁶ The family's finances were stabilised but their debts remained, and thereafter the Adams never managed to replicate their earlier successes, nor did they recover their former reputation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Robert died aged only 64 in 1792 followed by James in 1794.

The Adam drawings collection

Within ten years of Adam's death in 1792, fashion had changed to such an extent that there was little remaining interest in the surviving designs from his office. On James's death in 1794 the brothers' personal effects and drawings were inherited by their younger brother William and two spinster sisters, Elizabeth and Margaret, who had acted as Robert and James's housekeepers during their decades in London.⁷ After James's death in 1794, the remaining siblings were short of money and matters worsened in 1801 when William was declared bankrupt; the Adam company had never fully recovered from its debts following the Adelphi crash, and William continued the contracting business in much the same unrealistic vein as before.⁸

Desperation led William to sell his brothers' possessions at Christie's in 1818 and 1821. Happily, however, many of their works of art and antiquities were purchased by Sir John Soane and are accessible to the public at Sir John Soane's Museum, London (Fig. 3). William's attempts to sell the office drawings began as early as 1802 but interest was lacking; the Adam-style was now obsolete and not yet old enough to attract antiquarian interest. In an attempt to make the drawings saleable, William – with the help of a niece, Susannah Clerk, who had travelled to London in 1810 to care for her elderly relatives – dismantled the original rolls of office drawings which had been arranged by commission, heavily edited the collection and affixed what remained into typologically arranged folios.⁹ Unfortunately this process destroyed a large number of the drawings as well as the archaeology of the collection, stripping the identity of patron and place from thousands of designs.

William committed suicide in 1822 and Susannah inherited all he had – the newly bound drawings collection – which she took to Edinburgh following her uncle's death, residing with her bachelor brother Lord Eldin, the famous Scottish judge. She too experienced difficulties in selling the drawings and was even rejected by the British Museum. After several failed attempts to find a buyer, Sir John Soane was approached in 1833. He agreed to take the collection but only for the extraordinarily low price of £200.¹⁰ The drawings were delivered to Soane as deck

⁶ A. Rowan, *Vaulting Ambition. The Adam Brothers: Contractors to the Metropolis in the Reign of George III*, 2007, pp. 23-24.

⁷ A.A. Tait, 'The Sale of Robert Adam's Drawings', *Burlington Magazine*, July 1978, p. 452.

⁸ Rowan, 2007, pp. 39-40.

⁹ I.G. Brown, 'Robert Adam's drawings: Edinburgh's loss, London's gain', *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, new series 2, 1992, pp. 23-33.

¹⁰ Tait, 1978, p. 454.