

JAMES "ATHENIAN" STUART, 1713-1788  
*The Rediscovery of Antiquity*

November 16, 2006 – February 11, 2007

The Bard Graduate Center  
Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture







## JAMES "ATHENIAN" STUART, 1713–1788

### *The Rediscovery of Antiquity*

From November 16, 2006, to February 11, 2007, The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture is presenting *James "Athenian" Stuart, 1713–1788: The Rediscovery of Antiquity*. One of the most compelling figures in the history of English design, Stuart was crucial to the development of neoclassicism, although his contributions remain largely unknown and overshadowed by his contemporaries.

This comprehensive exhibition, the first devoted solely to Stuart, and its accompanying catalogue (produced by the Bard Graduate Center and Yale University Press) finally bring attention to the life and extraordinary work of this important



architect and designer. The assemblage of 150 works is unprecedented and comes from a variety of public and private collections in the United States and Great Britain, most importantly including the Morgan Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, Royal Institute of British Architects, Royal Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, National Trust, and Sir John Soane's Museum.

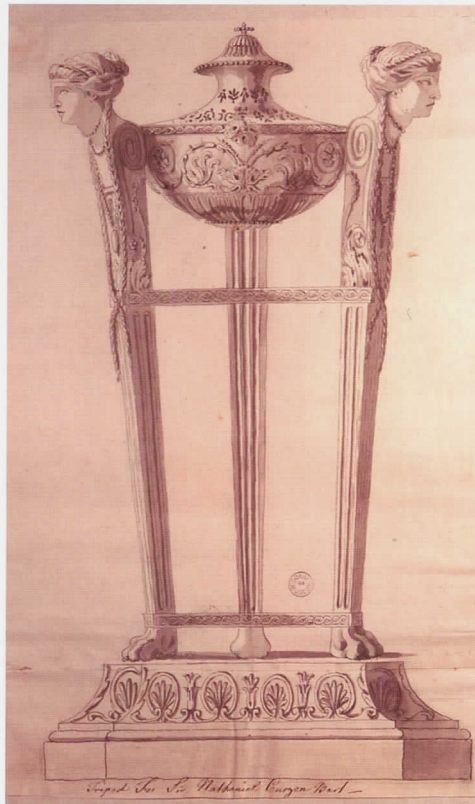
The curator of the exhibition is Dr. Susan Weber Soros, Founder and Director of the Bard Graduate Center and a specialist in British design. After opening at the Bard Graduate Center, the exhibition will travel to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.



## BACKGROUND

James “Athenian” Stuart played a key role in the development of neoclassicism. Enormously talented and active as a draughtsman, architect, and designer of furnishings, interiors, and metalwork, Stuart enjoyed a career that paralleled and even rivaled that of the better-known Robert Adam. However, it was said that he was less interested in money and the work associated with making it than in living the good life, which kept him from realizing his full potential. Still, although his architectural output was relatively small, it did include several major buildings, including the Doric temple at Hagley (1758), the earliest Greek-revival style building in Europe. Stuart’s publications included the widely celebrated and hugely influential *Antiquities of Athens*, initially published with Nicholas Revett. The first volume appeared in 1762, followed by volumes in 1789 and 1795. *Antiquities* eventually was translated into French, German, and Italian, and it continued to serve as a principal neoclassical source book well into the 19th century. As Stuart himself stated, the primary purpose of the work was to expand the classical repertoire of architects and designers and to “contribute to the improvement of the Art itself, which at present appears to be founded on too partial and too scanty a system of ancient examples.”

But it is for his work in interiors and the decorative arts that Stuart is best known today. His designs for neoclassical furniture, in particular, have established him as a major figure of the period, and superb examples are included in this exhibition. His innovative manner of decoration is best observed in Spencer House (1756–1766),



where his major contributions were a suite of private first-floor rooms and the amazing suite of public rooms that includes Lady Spencer’s Dressing Room, the Great Room, and the Painted Room. Spencer House, a pioneering example of neoclassical architecture, was the first building in London to feature the application of accurate Greek detail to interior decoration. The rooms designed by Stuart have been described as “the most magnificent domestic interiors of 18th century London, unsurpassed for the dazzling quality of the fittings and the unity of architecture, furniture and decoration.”

Stuart was born in London and showed an early interest in classical antiquity, going so far as to teach himself Greek and Latin. Early on he showed a real talent for drawing and painting, both of which he exercised throughout his life. Between 1751 and 1753 he and Revett painstakingly surveyed the buildings of ancient Greece in preparation for *The Antiquities of Athens*. (The trip was not without interesting adventures. One person pulled down a house so that Revett and Stuart could get a better view of the Tower of the Winds. On another occasion, Stuart narrowly escaped murder by some Turks he fell in with on his way to Constantinople. And he got into a fight with a Greek consul that, fortunately, was overlooked by the authorities.)

Although his architectural commissions fell off after the 1760s, Stuart continued to produce designs for Wedgwood and other manufacturers and to be active in other fields ranging from metalwork to book frontispieces and funerary monuments, all of which are represented in the exhibition.





## EXHIBITION

The exhibition is arranged both thematically and chronologically, with a particular focus on Stuart's early travels and the relationships he formed with important patrons throughout his career. It begins with a brief biographical section that explores Stuart's early training and features a selection of portraits of Stuart, including a self-portrait he executed as a young man. A gallery devoted to Stuart's travels throughout Italy and Greece follows and includes his one surviving sketchbook. This sketchbook was created during one of Stuart's Italian journeys and provides valuable insight into his interest in antiquity and Roman architecture. The highlight is an in-depth study of Stuart's landmark work, *The Antiquities of Athens*. On display are editions of this publication (including a rare subscription edition in a binding designed by Stuart) as well as many of Stuart's original gouache views of Greece, on loan from the collections of the Royal Institute of British Architects and never before exhibited at one time.



The remainder of the exhibition includes the designs for interiors that Stuart completed for Spencer House and Kedleston Hall, along with original drawings of the interiors, photographs, and select examples of furniture. Some of the original furniture Stuart designed for Spencer House is on loan to the exhibition from the Victoria and Albert Museum. In addition to private home interiors, Stuart was commissioned to design garden structures and public works. These projects are represented in *James "Athenian" Stuart* by photographs produced specifically for the exhibition and by original architectural plans and drawings executed by Stuart.

# BGC

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## CATALOGUE

The accompanying catalogue, published by the Bard Graduate Center and Yale University Press, presents more than a dozen essays by international scholars of British architecture, design, and decorative arts as well as an appendix on Stuart's craftsmen by Geoffrey Beard. Contributing authors are curator Susan Weber Soros (Bard Graduate Center), Kerry Bristol (University of Leeds), David Watkin (Cambridge University), Frank Salmon (Paul Mellon Centre), Christopher Eimer (London), Alexander Marr (University of St. Andrews), Richard Hewlings (English Heritage), Julius Bryant (Victoria and Albert Museum), Matthew Greg Sullivan (Victoria and Albert Museum), Michael Snodin (Victoria and Albert Museum), and Catherine Arbuthnott (London). The essays are richly illustrated with color images of the pieces shown in the exhibition; an object checklist and complete bibliography round out this scholarly publication.

## RELATED PROGRAMS

An array of lectures, panels, and other offerings will be presented in conjunction with *James "Athenian" Stuart, 1713–1788: The Rediscovery of Antiquity*. For further information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail [programs@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:programs@bgc.bard.edu).

## EXHIBITION TOURS

Group tours of *James "Athenian" Stuart* may be scheduled Tuesday through Friday between 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., and on Thursdays until 7:00 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. For further information, please call the Bard Graduate Center Gallery at 212-501-3013 or TTY 212-501-3012, or e-mail [galleries@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:galleries@bgc.bard.edu).

The Bard Graduate Center is located at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue, in New York City. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Thursday from 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Admission is \$3 general, \$2 seniors and students (with valid ID), and free on Thursday evenings after 5:00 p.m. For further information about the Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit our website at [www.bgc.bard.edu](http://www.bgc.bard.edu).

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## UPCOMING EXHIBITION

Spring 2007 *Bruno Mathsson*