

Stages and Scenes: Creating Architectural Illusion

The Courtauld Gallery

26 June to 27 July 2008

Stages and Scenes: Creating Architectural Illusion is the culmination of the first year of the new MA programme Curating the Art Museum, offered by the Courtauld Institute of Art. The exhibition, curated by the eight students on the programme, centres on the rise of the theatre as a spectacular display of wealth and power, which reached its height in 18th-century Europe. Artists used their mastery of perspective and Baroque ornament to extend the limits of the stage. This exhibition includes 30 prints, drawings, paintings and early books that investigate the links between theatre, architecture and art in these flamboyant times and show how creative approaches to the stage reached remarkable levels of invention and excess. The exhibition coincides with two significant events: the 75th anniversary of the Courtauld Institute of Art and the opening of *The Courtauld Cézannes* (26 June to 5 October).

The Courtauld possesses an outstanding collection of prints and drawings, upon which this exhibition draws. *Stages and Scenes* includes works ranging from **Giovanni Battista Piranesi's** (1720-1778) etchings the *Carceri d'Invenzione* (Imaginary Prisons), in which real architectural features are brought together with the imagined to create towering dystopian interiors, to the painted ceiling designs of **Peter Paul Rubens** (1577-1640) in which religious scenes are seen from below in dramatically heightened perspective.

An etching by **Jacques Callot** (c. 1592-1635) depicts a staged battle between Florence's two most powerful guilds to celebrate the festival of Saint James. The print, created as a souvenir for the event, captures an ephemeral moment of pageantry and performance. At the time when Callot was working, stage designs were beginning to depart from rigid classical models for comic, tragic and satiric performances. Later developments of the court theatre brought extravagant stage devices such as cloud machines and phosphorous lights. The fixed stage was reinvented as a versatile set of illusory architectural components that gave the impression of solidity and great depth. At the heart of the display is an ornately painted three dimensional stage model by **Giuseppe Valeriani** (1708-1761), its elaborate archways conveying the atmosphere of a Baroque palace. With works by Italian, French, German and Flemish painters, printmakers and draughtsmen, *Stages and Scenes* engages ideas of architecture and theatricality from the Renaissance to the 18th century.

The exhibition will also present important volumes from the Courtauld's Special Collections Library such as Vitruvius Pollio's *De Architettura*, Sebastiano Serlio's *Architettura* and Ferdinando Galli Bibiena's book *Direzioni* – all writers who discussed theatre and set design as a critical part of their theories of architecture as a whole – and will include a selection of photographs from the Conway Library of the famous *Teatro Olimpico* by Andrea Palladio, representing the 'fixed set' – the counterpart to the moving sets of the court theatre – at its most striking.

Artists and architects created designs for the court and nobility that evoke the grand, heavenly and sublime. Floating figures in ceiling designs, dark capriccios, and endlessly repeated colonnades recall bygone elements of performance. The dramatic nature of the exhibition space further enhances these enduring imaginative designs. *Stages and Scenes* champions the Courtauld collection and echoes the magnificent building in which it is displayed.

For further information about this exhibition, contact:

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and The Courtauld Gallery, please contact:

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FACT SHEET

- Exhibition title:** *Stages and Scenes: Creating Architectural Illusion*
- Dates:** 26 June to 27 July 2008
- Summary:** *Stages and Scenes: Creating Architectural Illusion* is curated by the students of The Courtauld's new Curating the Art Museum MA programme. It centres on rise of the theatre as a spectacular display of wealth and power that reached its height in 18th century Europe. With great ingenuity, artists developed their mastery of perspective and architectural trickery to extend the limits of the stage. *Stages and Scenes* explores the use of these techniques in the theatre and beyond, examining the links between the theatre, architecture and art. It includes works by Rubens, Piranese and the Bibiena family.
- Location:** The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2526, Fax. +44 (0)20 7848 2589
www.courtauld.ac.uk
- Opening hours:** Daily 10 am to 6 pm, last admission 5.30 pm
- Admission:** Included in admission to the permanent collection and the exhibition *The Courtauld Cézannes*:
Adult: £5.00, concessions: £4.00; free admission: Mondays 10 am to 2 pm. Free at all times for under 18s, full-time UK students and unwaged.
- Events:** A series of public lunch-time talks will take place every Wednesday at 1.15 pm. At each talk, two of the exhibition's eight curators will lead a 30-minute discussion exploring the concept of the show and key works.
For further information please contact: Education Department, education@courtauld.ac.uk
- Concurrent exhibition:** *The Courtauld Cézannes*, 26 June to 5 October 2008
- MA, Curating the Art Museum:** This MA programme, led by Martin Caiger-Smith, is aimed at art curators of the future. Its purpose is to extend and develop graduates' art historical interests, expertise and scholarship into the area of curatorship and active engagement with collections and exhibitions in the museum and gallery realm. It puts the physical object back at the heart of curatorial training and sets specialist knowledge firmly within the context of the modern museum and the expanding remit of the art curator in the 21st century.