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AN ADAM WHITE MARBLE FIRE SURROUND

A neo-classical white statuary marble fire surround in the manner of Robert Adam, the breakfront frieze carved with anthemia alternating with flower motifs and with an oval patera at either end, the aperture frame with acanthus carved border and flanked by scroll side supports carved with classical ewers above trailing foliage.

Height of aperture: 42½ in (108 cm)

Width of aperture: 47¼ in (120 cm)

Literature:

Cf Eileen Harris, 'The Genius of Robert Adam – His Interiors', 2001.

This magnificently executed chimney-piece exemplifies Robert Adam's masterful command of neo-classical decoration that he derived from Roman architectural ornament. The design, incorporating a stepped cornice above an unbroken frieze with scrolled volute jambs, was clearly considered by Adam to be one of his most adaptable and successful. It is reused by him, with certain variations, in the 1760's and 1770's for projects that

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included the

‘Musick Room’ and the Gallery at Gawthorp (later Harewood) House, Yorkshire in circa 1765.

Sir John Soane’s Museum in London possess two drawings for fire surrounds of this form by Adam. The earlier of the two, dated 1771, is inscribed Chimney Piece for the Great Dining Room at Lord Chief Baron Ord (Chief Baron Orde, for 8 Queen Street, Edinburgh.) The later one, dated 1766, is inscribed Chimney Piece for the Anti room at Shelburne House. The former is the more elaborate design, having a carved and fluted surround to the aperture and seated sphinxes raised on pedestals flanking the base scrolls of the jambs at either side. It is the latter, however, that is so close to the present example and which was the finished design for a fire surround supplied to one of Adam’s most important patrons, William, 2nd Earl of Shelburne, (1737-1805), later 1st Marquis of Lansdowne, for Shelburne (later Lansdowne) House in London.

The design of 1776 is almost identical to the present fire surround in proportion, outline and detail. They share the same frieze pattern with its carved adornment of alternating anthemion palmettes and flower-head scrolls, flanked by a patera at each end. The classical ewers on a ground of radiating flutes within the scrolls of the stiles and the loosely flowing foliage below are all taken directly from the drawing. The only differences occur in the cornice where there is dentil carving rather than the foliate pattern of the drawing and in the order of the carved palmettes alternating with scrollson the frieze. The success of the design relies on its elegant simplicity as well as the purity of the highly expensive white statuary marble it is carved from. The subtle, three-dimensional effect is created by the contrasting light and shade falling on the crisp, shallow carved bas-relief, an effect Adam took directly from classical architecture.

Almost certainly, this particular chimney-piece was carved by Thomas Carter Jr. (d.1795), who is known to have executed several of Adam’s designs. Based at Hyde Park Corner Yard, Carter and his uncle Benjamin had already established themselves as ‘the first statuaries of the Kingdom’. A carved white statuary marble chimney-piece of similar proportions and profile but with different decoration to the frieze and volutes was also designed by Adam and executed by Carter for the ‘Cube Room’ at Lord Shelburne’s Wiltshire house, Bowood in 1764. He is known to have carved further chimney-pieces for Lord Stanley at Derby House in Grosvenor Square and for William Drake at Shardeloes in Buckinghamshire.

Lansdowne House, now the Lansdowne Club, stands at the southwest corner of Berkeley Square in London’s Mayfair district. It was a private palace in one of the city’s most fashionable and swiftest developing areas in the mid 18th century. Designed by Robert Adam, it was begun in 1762 for the 3rd Earl of Bute but later completed for the 2nd Earl of Shelburne, later 1ST Marquess of Lansdowne. Adam was also employed by Lord Shelburne for the remodelling of Bowood, his house in Wiltshire. Lansdowne House was to have been Adam’s very first complete commission, being responsible not only for all the plans of the mansion itself, both inside and out, but also for its furnishings. However, by the time the Shelburnes moved into the house in 1768 it was

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still incomplete. Adam was also deeply involved in the speculative and much disputed Adelphi development in London. Lord Shelburne was among the objectors, thus bringing to an end their ten-year relationship.

The chimney-piece of which the present example is the virtual twin, was designed for the anteroom at Lansdowne House, which gave access, in the original plans, to the dining and drawing rooms. As well as the two chimney-piece drawings previously mentioned, Sir John Soane's Museum also possesses an elaborate wash drawing, also from 1766, for the proposed ante-room showing the fire surround surmounted by a large rectangular mirror and flanked by tall panels of neo-classical plasterwork, creating a carefully themed group. This is shown in a photograph of the 1920's, at that time still in the ante-room which by then had become known as the Front Drawing Room.

Much of the original contents of this notable Adam masterpiece were sold following the death of the 1st Marquess of Lansdowne in 1805. In 1930, the Adam drawing room and dining room were acquired by American Museums, the former by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the latter by the Metropolitan Museum in New York. In 1935, upon the conversion of the building into the Lansdowne Club, the remains of the original interiors were lost. Parts of the ante-room were incorporated into the new club bar. However, the fate of the magnificent white marble fireplace is unknown.

Under the influence of the Adam style, the new classicism swept began to sweep aside the frivolities of the Rococo era and, in its place, designers embraced antiquity and the Greek and Roman orders. The movement quickly spread to France but Adam's highly personal interpretation of the classical manner always held a peculiarly British identity, being lighter and more delicate than its French counterparts of the Louis XVI period. He would occasionally weave decorative motifs of the passing rococo among the classical elements in a uniquely Adam manner. His stated aim was 'to transfuse the beautiful spirit of antiquity with novelty and variety'.

Adam's furniture was highly sophisticated, finely proportioned and delicately detailed. Great emphasis was made on the classical ornament. He would employ anthemia in abundance, classical urns, medallions, swags and fans, ram's heads and cloven feet, and many more from the vast repertory he had gathered while in Italy. Elegantly draped female figures would support marble topped consoles, and sphinxes and griffins might surmount mirrors flanked by pilasters with Corinthian capitals. All would reflect his interior architecture and the decoration of a room.

One of the greatest showplaces of his genius is Osterley Park in Middlesex, where he transformed a 16th century building into a fashionable villa for the Child family between 1775 and 1776. Osterley is probably the most complete survival of an Adam masterpiece, retaining not only his original interiors but also the furnishings designed specifically for them. An example is the Etruscan Dressing Room, one of his visionary inventions where the decoration of the walls and furniture is drawn from early pottery amphorae with warm, terracotta

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tones combined with black and composing a complete scheme.

Sadly the interiors of Lansdowne House have not been similarly preserved but it is fortunate that the Soane Museum possesses so many of the original drawings for it. The design of the Ante Room, where the splendid white marble fireplace provided the centrepiece, typifies a great Adam room and every element plays an integral role. Although that very fireplace may be lost, we are extremely fortunate to have the opportunity today to offer its very close relative, which was clearly intended for an interior of equal importance.
England, circa 1770

Height: 59.8 in (152.0 cm) Width: 78.0 in (198.0 cm)

Location: New York

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