

The New York Sun

A Mind Full of Roman Greatness
Art Fairs

By PAULA DEITZ
February 26, 2008

Celebrating its 20th anniversary, the "Works on Paper" fair at the Park Avenue Armory, opening on February 29, offers visitors an intimate connection with artists through drawings and prints that get to the quick of perceptions translated from mind to hand. While drawings may ultimately serve as the basis for more finished or complex work, they satisfy through an immediacy often suggested by an economy of strokes. The viewer may also derive vicarious pleasure from being on the scene with the artist, especially in exotic locations.

Of the many artists represented at the Armory, this show will provide the rare occasion to view — at the Lori Bookstein Fine Art booth — approximately 40 evocative travel sketches by the architect Louis I. Kahn (1901–74) that ultimately served as the taproot of his elegant brand of modernism subsumed by the forms of classical humanism. Blessedly, Kahn knew nothing of cameras, but he was ever ready with a variety of materials to record scenes on his voyages: a trip to Europe in 1928–29, travels in America and Canada in the late 1930s, and finally, while he was a resident architect at the American Academy in Rome in 1950–51, a grand tour to Italy, Greece, and Egypt that changed his life as he absorbed the forms themselves into his architectural style.

When Kahn's travel sketches were first exhibited in 1978–79, his drawings of ancient ruins in brilliant pastels were a sensation, with his emphasis on color to render the bulk of the stone structures and the Mediterranean light that scorched them in contrast with deep shadows. In his introduction to that exhibition catalog, Vincent Scully calls this period "the moment when the first monumental architects of the Mediterranean world broke through to him and set him on his way." Thereafter, architecture itself commandeered Kahn's life, and drawing was for the purpose of design.

To view these sketches chronologically, then, is to be present during the evolution of one of the master architects of the 20th century, whose buildings have enriched our culture because they represent a continuity with the past, not precisely in form but in spirit. Even early on, as in his 1928–29 watercolor of Bay Houses on the Amalfi Coast, Kahn exhibited his penchant for solid, rounded masonry forms with dark aperture cut-out voids that emphasize the thickness of walls. Traces of his beaux-arts training at the University of Pennsylvania are evident at that same time in a sketch in pencil, graphite, and ink of a courtyard with deep-set archways in the Palazzo Communale at Piacenza.

But emerging during this period is a vertical massing of shapes with the angularity of Art Deco that appears closer to the cubist aesthetic. Using graphite, Kahn obtained this effect both in a landscape along a cliff road in Capri and in a stepped-up street to the Chiesa Nuova in Positano, Italy. The blockiness of the configurations, achieved with the flat strokes of a carpenter's pencil, is also evident in his "Self-Portrait with a Pipe, Italy."

In Venice, he found the light so penetrating that San Marco, not unlike Monet's luminous façades of the church in Rouen, seems almost transparent in sketchy graphite strokes and watercolor. And in approaching the fortress-like convent of Saint Francis of Assisi across a vast landscape, he captured the monumentality in pastel with colored pencil that foretells what is to come.

No snob, though, Kahn obviously found equal pleasure in sketching the American scene on treasured vacations to New England and Canada and elsewhere on this side of the Atlantic.

Particularly striking are two somber streetscapes from Cape Ann in Massachusetts: The duskiess of charcoal contrasts in one with the glow of a white church in Rockport and, in the other, with a cluster of white peaked-roofed houses in Gloucester. His watercolors, often compared to John Marin's work, were a staple in that middle-1930s period, but Kahn's multi-color vegetation and rock formations against blue or greenish skies reinforced the chunkiness of the abstracted landscapes in a style all his own.

The black-and-white drawings of this period, in charcoal, brush ink, crayon, or pen and ink, possess all the charm of speed to preserve memory, like some Japanese suiboku painting, where the brush does not leave the paper until the work is complete. In this manner, he recorded three versions of a curvilinear cliff road on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. Without knowing the precise order of the drawings, one assumes each time that the sketch became more minimal until it was but a few lines with schematics of houses. More complex, but in the same style, is a view of a mountain in Woodstock, N.Y., with densely inked areas and crosshatching.

For all the beauty of this early work, only a massive dose of inspiration, perception, and, perhaps, isolation explains the quantum leap into the final period that led to his understanding of how to combine all the elements of his education, experience, and observation into a personal style of architecture. To begin with, pastels were integral to the equation, like small rocks themselves that featured deep velvety color with a distinctive surface substance.

In the massing of the large baths at Hadrian's Villa, Tivoli, that he drew in rusts and dark green, one can foresee the linear progression of Kahn's Salk Institute for Biological Studies, and Sher-e Bangla Nagar in Dhaka, Bangladesh. But before these buildings came the Yale University Art Gallery, with its iconic triangle set against the light in a glass-brick circle above the main staircase and the geometry of its tetrahedron slab ceilings, and the Trenton (N.J.) Bath House for the Jewish Community Center, with its five pyramidal roofs that float above a Greek cross formation. In his multiple drawings of the pyramids at Gizeh — three sheets will be on view — one can sense in the simplicity and interpolation of light and shadow, with bright orange touches of setting sun, the moment the key unlocked the door. In each case, they are set in progressions of three, varying the reflected light on the triangular surfaces.

Near the Bath House in Trenton, Kahn designed two open pavilions where day campers were sheltered during activities. These are supported by concrete colonnades, now resembling crumbling ruins themselves. But still they possess all the power that Kahn must have dreamed of when he drew the Acropolis from the Olympieion in Athens, the dark pink and blue buttressed walls and, at the left, the long colonnade of bright green and yellow Corinthian columns. In the book about the Kimbell Art Museum, "Light is the Theme," Louis Kahn captured a bit of the spirit of that time abroad when he wrote: "My mind is full of Roman greatness and the vault so etched itself in my mind that . . . it's there always ready." It took him longer than others, but these sketches show how he got ready and became monumental himself.