Jean-Jacques Lequeu

The Architectural Imagination in the Age of Reason

Thursday, November 14, 7:00 p.m.

Lecture

Barry Bergdoll

Jean-Jacques Lequeu: The Architectural Imagination in the Age of Reason

Menil Drawing Institute

Organized in partnership with Rice University’s Humanities Research Center, Rice Architecture, and Rice Design Alliance

Date and Time:

October 4, 2019–January 5, 2020

The Menil Drawing Institute

The Menil Collection

Jean-Jacques Lequeu, The Tomb of Isocrates, Athenian Orator (Tombeau d’Isocrate, orateur athénien), 1789. Ink on paper, 18 ½ × 16 ⅛ in. (46.9 × 40.9 cm). Collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France

Jean-Jacques Lequeu, The Tomb of Isocrates, Athenian Orator (Tombeau d’Isocrate, orateur athénien), 1789. Ink on paper, 18 ½ × 16 ⅛ in. (46.9 × 40.9 cm). Collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France

Jean-Jacques Lequeu, The Draftsman’s Tools (Les instruments du dessinateur), 1782. Ink and watercolor on paper, 20 ¼ × 14 ½ in. (51.5 × 36.5 cm). Collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France

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physoigmatic studies of the transformations of his own face caused by particular emotional states. No doubt inspired by the work of Johann Kaspar Lavater, who, starting in the 1770s, had made physiognomy into a serious field of inquiry, Lequeu staged his identities, however, in an irreverent way: he shows himself alternatively yawning, pouting, winking, and sticking out his tongue.

A watershed moment in the rediscovery of Lequeu, who is now recognized as a first-rate architectural draftsman, was an exhibition of 18th-century French architectural drawings titled Visionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux, Lequeu curated by Jean Adhémar for the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 1964. Dominique de Menil brought the influential exhibition to the United States in 1967 and arranged its American tour, where it was shown at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, before traveling to several institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. There it influenced a number of young artists. Claes Oldenburg, for example, is known to have closely studied the fanciful and obsessive peculiarities of Lequeu’s work. Several of the drawings presented in Visionary Architects are included in the current exhibition at the Menil Drawing Institute.
Born in the city of Rouen, Lequeu trained as an architect in Paris, where he knew were most unlikely to be realized. His meticulousness and remarkable command of ink and watercolor enabled him to bring his designs to life on paper (note his occasional inclusion of people, smoke, and clouds). The artist’s devotion to the craft of drawing is manifest in his depiction of The Draftman’s Tools (Les instruments du dessinateur), 1782. This drawing, reminiscent of the didactic illustrations of the Encyclopédie by Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, shows how Lequeu reveled in depicting the implements of a skilled draftsman (including brushes, penholders, graphite, rulers, erasers, etc.) and adding explanations on how they should be used. It was thanks to his technical excellence that he made his daring conceptions visually engaging and palatable to the viewer’s sensory experience.

Most of Lequeu’s grand architectural ideas, such as his extravagant, gravity-defying project for the Orthography of the Tomb of Lars Porsena, King of Etruria (Orthographie du tombeau de Porsenna roi d’Etrurie, appelée le labyrinthe de Toscane), 1792, though minutely executed on paper, would have been impractical, if not technically impossible, to construct—so fantastic was the scale he envisaged for such monuments. In order to describe and explain the purpose, structure, and materials of his inventions, he often complemented his drawings with lengthy, careful annotations, as if to record his genius for posterity.

Early in his career, Lequeu, searched for geometric simplicity and explored radical ideas for pleasure gardens and grottoes, theater designs, as well as anatomical and physiognomic studies, and a few erotic drawings. As a whole, they attest to his keen sense of observation, eclectic interests, and prolific imagination. Born in the city of Rouen, Lequeu trained as an architect in Paris, where his career was drastically impacted by the tumultuous political context of the 1789 French Revolution and its aftermath, when the established ideals and styles of architecture were questioned and the traditional structures of patrician dispersed. Simultaneously, opportunities for pleasure gardens and grottoes, theater designs, as well as anatomical and physiognomic studies, and a few erotic drawings. As a whole, they attest to his keen sense of observation, eclectic interests, and prolific imagination.

LONG OVERLOOKED
French draftsman and architect Jean-Jacques Lequeu (1757–1826) is now considered one of the most inventive artists of post-revolutionary France. His posthumous acclaim came from the rediscovery in the mid-twentieth century of more than 800 detailed drawings that he bequeathed to the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 1825. Lequeu’s drawings range from actual government proposals to pure architectural fantasies, ideas for pleasure gardens and grottoes, theater designs, as well as anatomical and physiognomic studies, and a few erotic drawings. As a whole, they attest to his keen sense of observation, eclectic interests, and prolific imagination.

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