Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Julia A. Sienkewicz

exhibition review of

Thomas Jefferson, Architect: Palladian Models, Democratic Principals, and the Conflict of Ideas

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 20, no. 3 (Autumn 2021)

Citation: Julia A. Sienkewicz, exhibition review of *Thomas Jefferson, Architect: Palladian Models, Democratic Principals, and the Conflict of Ideas*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 2021), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2021.20.3.27>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

Thomas Jefferson, Architect: Palladian Models, Democratic Principals, and the Conflict of Ideas
Chrysler Museum, Norfolk
October 19, 2019–January 19, 2020

Catalogue:

Lloyd DeWitt and Corey Piper, eds., with contributions by Guido Beltramini, Barry Bergdoll, Howard Burns, Lloyd DeWitt, Louis P. Nelson, Mabel O. Wilson, Richard Guy Wilson, *Thomas Jefferson Architect: Palladian Models, Democratic Principles, and the Conflict of Ideals*. New Haven and London: Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk in association with Yale University Press, 2019.
200 pp.; 88 color and 86 b&w illus.; catalogue; index.
\$45.00 (hardcover)
ISBN–13: 978–0300246209

Two conflicting ideas meet one another as the central, competing lines of inquiry in the exhibit *Thomas Jefferson Architect: Palladian Models, Democratic Principals, and the Conflict of Ideas*. On the one hand, the exhibition seeks to celebrate Jefferson's role in guiding the development of architectural form suited to the political and national identity of the nascent United States. In an important collaboration between the Chrysler Museum and the Museo Palladio of Vicenza, Italy, the exhibition places Jefferson's designs and architectural ideals in the context of Andrea Palladio and neo-Palladian architectural ideas of the eighteenth century. On the other hand, the exhibition seeks to dig deeper into the ways in which "the institution of slavery fundamentally shaped the forms and functions of [Jefferson's] buildings."^[1] Although centered around two competing ideas, the exhibition ultimately coalesces around a single, if unresolved, truth: "Jefferson's architecture embodies the painful conflict between the harsh realities of the slave system he supported and the political ideas he advocated."^[2] Fascinating, innovative, and troubling, the exhibition leaves the visitor to reckon with the nagging question of whether it remains possible to celebrate Jefferson's designs while also critiquing their reliance on this "painful conflict." The Chrysler's exhibition seems to take the position that continued celebration of Jefferson and his peers is both possible and desirable. While sharing insights about enslaved workers and the impact of the institution of slavery on Jefferson's architecture and architectural ideals, the curators keep Jefferson firmly in the spotlight. On balance, the exhibition catalogue follows a similar vein, with the exception of essays by Louis P. Nelson and Mabel O. Wilson that work to

decenter Jefferson and to foreground in his place the stories of race and enslavement with which the buildings he designed are redolent.

Visitors to the exhibition first encounter Jean-Antoine Houdon's 1789 plaster bust of Jefferson, featured atop a pedestal and within a vitrine next to the introductory wall text of the exhibition (fig. 1). The first impression is celebratory and the underlying "painful conflict" is only presented to visitors who read through to the third paragraph of the introductory wall text. Having passed through this opening space, though, the visitor is confronted by one of the most interesting juxtapositions in the show (fig. 2). Gilbert Stuart's profile of Jefferson *en grisaille* (1805) is installed so that it faces a paneled door from Poplar Forest (constructed 1806–16), attributed to John Hemmings, an enslaved, skilled worker at Monticello.^[3] Citing "microscopic examination" of the door, the exhibition's wall text explains that the research team at Poplar Forest has attributed the object to Hemmings based on its creation by "the same hand-made tools as those used at Monticello." Most importantly, the curators explain "identifying the specific works of enslaved craftsmen can be very difficult because they are rarely if ever signed. The evidence from Poplar Forest is exceptional and their methods innovative."^[4] Through strategic installation, Stuart's *Jefferson* both looks at this paneled door and directs the visitor's eye to scrutinize it. The presentation invites viewers to reckon with such newly-exposed layers of knowledge about the insidious impact of slavery on Jefferson's legacy. Although Jefferson and his contemporaries sought to erase the identities of the enslaved laborers who brought Monticello, Poplar Forest, and other great architectural works of the Early Republic into being, innovative research methodologies can help viewers today to see such structures differently. Hemmings's door overpowers Stuart's profile in size, and its warm red-hued wood glows in the spotlight while the *grisaille* image retreats into the shadows. The visitor obtains a brief glimmer of a revised world order in which Hemmings is celebrated and Jefferson takes a back seat.

Fig. 1, View of installation entrance foyer with opening wall-text and Jean-Antoine Houdon, *Thomas Jefferson*, 1789. Plaster. New York Historical Society, New York. Photograph by the author.

[\[larger image\]](#)

Fig. 2, View of installation showing from right to left: Gilbert Stuart, *Thomas Jefferson*, 1805. Grisaille of aqueous medium on blue laid paper on canvas. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge; a door attributed to John Hemings, 1805–16. Poplar Forest, Forest. Photograph by the author.

[\[larger image\]](#)

Surrounding these two significant objects, the opening space of the exhibition seeks to underline for visitors the pervasive and insidious presence of slavery in Jefferson's Virginia (fig. 3). Josiah Wedgwood's *Antislavery Medallion* (after 1787) is positioned adjacent to Jacob Caleb Ward's oil painting *View of the Natural Bridge, Virginia* (1835) and a British engraving after William Goodacre (1850). This later work connects the dots within the installation. It features a central image of the natural bridge, a celebrated wonder of Virginia in the nineteenth century, with two vignettes representing enslaved workers. Although much of the antislavery imagery on which the curators draw postdates Jefferson's death, the purpose of this opening installation is to put slavery front and center in the viewers' minds as they proceed more deeply into the exhibition. Yet, after this provocative opening installation, the balance of the exhibition pays little further attention to slavery, turning instead to the Palladian tradition, the Classical tradition more broadly, and Jefferson's architectural interests. Similarly, as discussed below, the published catalogue treats race as a topic to be bracketed within two discrete chapters and set aside through the bulk of the book. The curators perhaps rely on the visitor to remember the "painful conflict" that connects these two competing themes within the exhibition, but some further interconnection would be desirable to develop these as related, rather than separate and unequal, themes of the exhibit and catalogue.

Fig. 3, View of installation looking back toward entrance with: Josiah Wedgwood, *Antislavery Medallion*, after 1787. Ceramic. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg; and Jacob Caleb Ward, *View of the Natural Bridge, Virginia*, 1835. Oil on paper. Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk. Photograph by the author. [\[larger image\]](#)

Most of the exhibition is arrayed within a single, large gallery space. The perimeter of the gallery unfolds roughly to follow themes and milestones of Jefferson's life with respect to his architectural education and ideals. The exhibition proceeds from Jefferson's youth in Virginia, through the broad context of European influence on travelers and writers from the United States, and on to Jefferson's domestic and public designs for the young United States. Themes directly related to Jefferson's own design history include areas dedicated to: "Makers and Design," "Capital Cities and Public Buildings," and the "University of Virginia." The objects presented include a satisfying variety of media. Neoclassical furniture, book plates, oil paintings, and watercolors are installed alongside one another, offering a rich sense of the depth to which the neoclassical aesthetic pervaded life in Jefferson's era, especially in elite circles in Europe and the United States. Of special interest in this collection of works are several watercolors and sketches by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, most on loan from the Maryland Historical Society. These well-known images are rarely lent and it is satisfying to see them in this exhibition, especially since Latrobe's influence on the architecture of the young United States is important to the context of understanding Jefferson's designs. Although Latrobe's significance is evident through the number of works present in the exhibition, his relationship to and influence on Jefferson is not dealt with in any depth.^[5] Indeed, here, Jefferson's influence on architecture is given outsized emphasis and Latrobe's legacy is sidelined.

At variance from the perimeter, the central area of the gallery is set off by ceiling-height dividers in order to create a distinct exhibition space (fig. 4). This portion of the exhibit is dedicated to bringing Jefferson into dialogue with Palladio. As Erik Neil comments in the catalog, "It is a well-established fact that Jefferson held a particular affection for Palladio, although he never actually visited a structure built by the Renaissance master" (3). Importantly, Palladio's influence is understood here as a launching point for understanding much of the neoclassical viewpoint of architectural design in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus, while Jefferson's own engagement with Palladio is of central interest to the exhibition, so is his broader study of and interaction with the Classical

tradition of design. The curators work to introduce visitors to the Palladian tradition—both through its buildings and through associated architectural publications. The latter are of particular importance, as Jefferson was a consummate bibliophile. Examples of publications that Jefferson owned, or that he may have read, are displayed throughout the gallery. These books emphasize the central role played by reading in Jefferson's architectural education. In addition to never visiting a building by Palladio, Jefferson never traveled to Rome. From this exhibition, visitors can gain a rich understanding of the books and visual culture that shaped Jefferson's understanding of the Classical and Renaissance traditions of architecture.

Fig. 4, View of installation with central displays of models and vitrines related to Andrew Palladio.
Photograph by the author. [\[larger image\]](#)

Of principle interest in this central exhibition space is a fascinating collection of architectural models, in media including wood and plaster. This large collection of models is one of the most significant features of the exhibition and reflects the Chrysler Museum's collaboration with the Museo Palladio. Some of the models are drawn from Palladio's designs and constructed buildings—including the stunning wood model of the Villa Barbero Tempietto (1971).^[6] These Palladian models are displayed alongside models of Jefferson's own designs, themselves created for the Palladio Museum collection. One such comparison curated within the gallery is between the Villa Barbero Tempietto and Jefferson's Rotunda for the University of Virginia, the later present in the form of a model designed by Simone Baldissini and constructed by Ivan Simonato (fig. 5).^[7] Hung on axis with these two models is Hubert Robert's *Landscape with a Temple* (ca. 1765–1800). The three objects together make a tidy visual point about the significance of Rome's Pantheon as a factor both in the architectural tradition and on Jefferson's designs for the democratic context in the United States. Although few of the models after Palladio are included in the plates of the exhibition catalog, the models after Jefferson are reproduced.

Fig. 5, View of installation with models of Palladio's *Villa Barbero* and Jefferson's *Rotunda* for the University of Virginia. On the wall behind the models is Hubert Robert, *Landscape with a Temple*, ca. 1765–1800. Oil on canvas. Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk. Photograph by the author. [\[larger image\]](#)

The concluding space of the exhibition consists of a small room with two interactive displays. A computer and projected screen invite visitors to explore digital content related to the exhibition online. Adjacent to the digital display, a mound of white Legos of different shapes and sizes lies on a long table (fig. 6). A sign in the center of the Lego pile invites visitors to “design a structure that reflects the ideas and values Jefferson and other architects communicate in their plans,” and a series of wall brackets offer visitors the opportunity to pose their own architectural models above an array of predetermined words (all of which represent positive, community-building ideals such as “family,” “pursuit of happiness,” “inclusion,” etc.). Visitors wishing to present a more critical perspective regarding architecture’s ideas and values will not find a space for their contribution. This positive and community-centered approach is also taken in the audio guide, called “community voices,” which features community members’ responses to objects and issues highlighted in the exhibition.^[8]

Fig. 6, View of concluding room of exhibition with interactive Lego and digital displays. Photograph by the author. [\[larger image\]](#)

In the accompanying exhibition catalog, *Thomas Jefferson Architect*, the two conflicting ideas established in the exhibition are again treated as separate and unequal lines of inquiry. Of the seven substantive essays in the catalog, five engage with different facets of the European architectural tradition, Palladianism, and Jefferson's architectural training. The two remaining chapters address the topic of race in the examples of Jefferson's Virginia statehouse and the University of Virginia. Surprisingly, although the richness of the exhibition's thought-provoking commentaries on race depends on examples drawn from Monticello and Poplar Forest, none of the chapters within the catalogue build on these specific objects. Limited attempts are made to connect the essays focused on race with those concerning the influence of Palladio—with the ultimate result being that the wound of the "painful conflict" rends the catalogue in two. With this concern noted, the catalogue offers seven scholarly essays, aimed at the educated general public, but with an array of research and methodologies for approaching Jefferson and his architectural context that also presents fresh perspectives for scholars. Given the large body of literature concerning Jefferson and his architecture, these contributions can be celebrated, even while noting the unresolved tensions with respect to race and Jefferson's legacy that are palpable within the volume.

A particularly successful synergy between the exhibition and the catalogue can be found in Barry Bergdoll's essay "Books, Buildings, and the Spaces of Democracy: Jefferson's Library from Paris to Washington." Bergdoll builds on the exhibition's collection of books and plates taken from books in order to consider the significant role that reading played in Jefferson's European travels and perspectives on architecture. He asserts that Jefferson "was one of the earliest Americans to understand architecture as not only the science of building, but also an intellectual discipline, a body of knowledge and practice with a role in the formation of citizens in a new form of political life" (66). By amassing a large collection of architectural publications and reflecting on their significance, Bergdoll further concludes that Jefferson conceptualized architecture as "not only a record of the historical evolution of humanity but also an agent of progress, even of enlightenment," an assertion on which Bergdoll builds a deep and fascinating teleology of how this concept can be understood in the transatlantic context of the Revolutionary era (68–69). Viewed within the catalog's competing current of race, though, the reader might wish that Bergdoll had also weighed how such progress, enlightenment, and evolution of humanity might look if pressured by the realities of enslavement and race relations.

Guido Beltramini's essay "The Palladians" is a valuable resource on the international context within which Jefferson's approach to architecture may be situated. Here Jefferson is not so much the exceptional intellectual and political leader in the United States, but only one among an international community of "educated gentlemen or scholarly architects" who benefitted from Palladio's "translation" of ancient Roman architectural ideas into "a living language for architects" (37). In a tantalizing, if underdeveloped, comment, Beltramini also refers to the role that Jefferson and other Palladians played as a fulcrum in transporting these ideas and forms in unexpected ways to global communities. He cites, "the moving example of a tacit memory of Palladio . . . when freed American slaves returned to Africa . . . and built from memory the mansions of their former masters using local materials" (40). For Beltramini, this example is moving in its testimony to the global legacy of Palladio, but it might also be seen as a significant moment in which the European intellectual tradition is reclaimed for the uplift and celebration of the African diaspora.

Three other essays join Beltramini and Bergdoll in positioning Jefferson's architectural education within the context of contemporary architectural traditions in Europe. Howard Burns's "Thomas Jefferson, the Making of an Architect" offers an overview of Jefferson's architectural education, as well as building out the fundamental concepts of the exhibition concerning Jefferson, Palladio, and the intellectual tradition of architecture. Perhaps most interesting here is Burns' consideration of how Jefferson worked both with the physical site of his architectural projects and also with the larger socio-political site of his work within "a still underdeveloped but vast country, lacking in easily available building materials . . . in architects, skilled craftsmen, and financial resources" (29). Burns insists that while Jefferson is a ready target for his amateur training in architecture and his views on slavery, these "limitations do not cancel out his enormous achievements, as a statesman . . . and also as [an] architect" (30). In his essay "Jefferson and England," Richard Guy Wilson explores the buildings and landscapes that Jefferson toured in England and considers how this travel would have matured and revised the design ideas that Jefferson had previously developed only through reading. Much more attention has traditionally been paid to the role of France in Jefferson's travels and intellectual development, but here Guy Wilson underlines that "many English interpretations of Palladio's works played a key role in his architectural thought" (50). In the essay "What He Saw: Thomas Jefferson's Grand Tour," Lloyd DeWitt positions Jefferson's travel in Europe between 1784 and 1787 within the context of the European Grand Tour. DeWitt makes the important point that Jefferson's tour was not traditional, but rather was shaped by his political and personal obligations. Indeed, though he travelled to a limited degree in northern Italy, Jefferson complained to Maria Cosway that he got a mere "peep into Elysium" (57). Ultimately, DeWitt celebrates the foundational role that these European travels played on "the development of the mature Jeffersonian style, whose influence has persisted in the United States for centuries" (65). By contrast, DeWitt makes only the briefest mention of Sally and James Hemings who traveled to Europe with Jefferson, without pausing to consider the impact and legacy of these travels on these enslaved workers and their communities.^[9]

The catalogue concludes with two essays that focus on race in a concerted fashion. Mabel O. Wilson reconsiders Jefferson's design for the Virginia statehouse in her essay "Race, Reason, and the Architecture of Jefferson's Virginia Statehouse." Louis P. Nelson grapples with the impact of slavery on the design and landscape of the University of Virginia in his essay "The Architecture of Democracy in a Landscape of Slavery: Design and Construction at Jefferson's University." Wilson seeks to reconsider the role of race in Jefferson's architectural legacy, asserting "Jefferson's designs for the Virginia State Capitol reveal the mutually constitutive relationship between race, reason, and architecture" (84). Building on the accepted understanding that Jefferson sought to educate and shape the taste of his fellow citizens in the young United States, Wilson highlights the fact that Jefferson's buildings relied on enslaved labor for their construction and also sought to elevate a "culture of taste" that relies on "interdependence between the formation of a new white American culture . . . and the enslavement of African peoples, justified by their presumed innate mental and physical inferiority" (89).^[10] So, the literal "high ground" and the "white-columned Neoclassical buildings" could be seen as "idyllic beacons of democratic values overlooking sublime nature, unsullied by the presence of those spaces where unsightly slaves toiled to make . . . the lives of white citizens comfortable" (96). By contrast, Wilson argues "black bodies and

blackness” were to Jefferson “impenetrable . . . to reason” and therefore outside his sightlines of advancing civilization in the United States (96).

Nelson, similarly, posits that Jefferson’s design for the University of Virginia’s “architecture of democracy depended explicitly on a landscape of slavery” (100). Further, he takes on the celebratory historical tradition concerning Jefferson and his contemporaries’ views of democracy, asserting “[the architecture of democracy and slavery] are inextricably linked, and to see one and not the other is the propagation of myth, not the writing of history” (100). Nelson goes to remarkable lengths to uncover individual names and other traces (including handprints, photographs, and chalk notations) of the enslaved workers who constructed, lived, and worked at the University of Virginia. Through Nelson’s interrogation of architectural and archival evidence, the black and the white landscapes of the University of Virginia are unveiled, revealing that the “landscape of slavery” is an insistent presence alongside the university’s symbolic “architecture of democracy” (116).

Two scholarly worlds exist alongside one another in the exhibition and catalogue of *Thomas Jefferson Architect*. In one, the statesman and amateur architect remains celebrated and central, albeit freshly repositioned in a rich, international context of democratic ideals and architectural thinking. In an alternate, and opposing, lens, Jefferson’s dependence on and acceptance of a slaveholding world order pushes him into the shadows. In his place, enslaved workers and craftsman begin to emerge into the spotlight, despite the scholarly and cultural myths and the systemic practices of erasure that have long sought to silence their histories. In the final words of his introduction to the exhibition catalog, Erik H. Neil commented on these two contradictory aspects of the study of Jefferson and his architecture: “a full appreciation of these facts presents a dilemma. We are left with the difficult task of recognizing and reconciling the contradictions” (7). In *Thomas Jefferson, Architect*, the dilemma is evident, and some significant steps are taken toward recognizing the depth and breadth of the historical and methodological quandaries at hand for scholars. However, the task of reconciling these conflicting ideas about Jefferson is left to a future project.

Julia A. Sienkewicz

Associate Professor of Art History, Roanoke College
Sienkewicz[at]roanoke.edu

Notes

[1] Opening exhibition wall text.

[2] Ibid.

[3] The exhibition and accompanying catalogue use both the spelling “Hemmings” and “Hemings”, while the family’s name has been recorded as “Hemings” in the literature. For consistency with the catalogue and museum labels, I am referring to John Hemmings here as indicated by the wall text and catalogue, though this spelling is not standard. For context on the significance of Hemings and his family see, inter alia: Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008); Jan Lewis and Peter Onuf, *Sally Hemings & Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999); and Lucia Stanton, *Those Who Labor for My Happiness: Slavery at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

[4] Exhibition wall text.

[5] Regrettably, the architect is inaccurately referred to as “Henry Latrobe” in the most prominent associated wall text, though his name is correct in the associated object labels.

[6] See the museum’s collection entry and description of this model at <https://www.palladiomuseum.org/models/8>, accessed July 29, 2021. Unfortunately, this model is not reproduced among the plates in the *Thomas Jefferson, Architect* catalogue.

[7] The model of the rotunda is reproduced in *Thomas Jefferson Architect*, pl. 49, 190–91.

[8] This resource is available online at: <https://chrysler.org/community-voices/>, accessed July 29, 2021.

[9] Regrettably, Lloyd refers to the Hemingses as “[Jefferson’s] servants brought from Monticello, where they were enslaved,” though he does also take Jefferson to task for critiquing French treatment of the “laboring poor” while not reflecting on his own hypocrisy as a slaveholder. See *Thomas Jefferson Architect*, 53.

[10] Wilson borrows the concept of the “culture of taste” from Simon Gikandi’s *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Illustrations

Fig. 1, View of installation entrance foyer with opening wall-text and Jean-Antoine Houdon, *Thomas Jefferson*, 1789. Plaster. New York Historical Society, New York. Photograph by the author.

[\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 2, View of installation showing from right to left: Gilbert Stuart, *Thomas Jefferson*, 1805. Grisaille of aqueous medium on blue laid paper on canvas. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge; a door attributed to John Hemings, 1805–16. Poplar Forest, Forest. Photograph by the author.

[\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 3, View of installation looking back toward entrance with: Josiah Wedgwood, *Antislavery Medallion*, after 1787. Ceramic. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg; and Jacob Caleb Ward, *View of the Natural Bridge, Virginia*, 1835. Oil on paper. Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 4, View of installation with central displays of models and vitrines related to Andrew Palladio.
Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 5, View of installation with models of Palladio's *Villa Barbero* and Jefferson's *Rotunda* for the University of Virginia. On the wall behind the models is Hubert Robert, *Landscape with a Temple*, ca. 1765–1800. Oil on canvas. Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 6, View of concluding room of exhibition with interactive Lego and digital displays. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)