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DESIGN NOTEBOOK

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"THE painter sketches to paint, the sculptor draws to carve, and the architect draws to build," the late Louis Kahn once wrote. And it is true. Architects tend to put pencil to paper mainly for practical reasons, not for the sake of art. After serving the utilitarian purpose, "to build," the architect's drawings tend to stay, more or less, in his or the client's files.

Lately, however, architecture as a subject has become much more accessible, and architects not quite so anonymous. While they still draw to build, they now often draw or paint - as does one of the most famous contemporaries, Michael Graves -for themselves, without commissioning from a client. And increasingly, their drawings - those done for practical use as well as pleasure- - are sought after by art collectors who once left the buying of such material to specialists in the field.

Some acquisitors look for traditional work from past centuries; others will have nothing but contemporary drawings, and still others mix the two. Herbert Lust, a New York stockbroker who writes on art, finds that the drawings of today's architects fit with the rest of his holdings, and he has added work by such designers as Michael Graves, Peter Eisenman and Robert Venturi. "Architecture is the strongest art today," he says. "You get as much pleasure from looking at these drawings as you do great Cubist or Surrealist work, but you approach them in a different way, more sentimentally. I love them as objects because I love the architecture their makers did."

In the home of Paul F. Walter, an executive of an electronics company, the works of 18th- and 19th-century architects such as Robert Adam, Sir John Soane and Sir Edwin Lutyens hang along with those of 20th-century contemporaries: Arata Isozaki, Frank Gehry and Paul Rudolph. They are compatible with the photographs, Indian miniatures, prints by Whistler and contemporary paintings that he also collects. "They all seem to work together," Mr. Walter says. "I'm interested in the architect's thought processes, and so I'm more involved with design and construction drawings than with pretty elevations."

Not only individuals but also institutions are snapping up the drawings, with the Getty Museum in Malibu, Calif., and the well-endowed Canadian Center for Architecture in Montreal among the most active buyers.

"Alas for us!" says Mary L. Myers, curator in the department of prints and photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Things are going for enormous prices." Apprehension over the current collecting trend is expressed outright by the Society of Architectural Historians, which fears that the piecemeal dispersal of related drawings and other material will destroy their value as documents.

The term "architectural drawing" can include anything from a crude floor plan to the highly finished rendering of a full project. Random examples include Robert Venturi's quick conceptual sketch to suggest the hull-like form of a house, the utopian urban fantasies of the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and the detailed rendering of a massive office building proposed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1924. Wright, Koolhaas and Venturi are

some of the 20th-century architects whose drawings are sought, with those of others such as Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, Oscar Nitzchke, Michael Graves, John Hejduk, Aldo Rossi and Frank Gehry.

But the work of 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century designers is attracting buyers as well. "There's been a definite upswing over the past 10 years in collecting this material," says Elaine Dee, curator of drawings and prints at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum. "Today, few collectors can afford drawings by Leonardo and Michelangelo. t. So architectural and ornamental drawings have become collectible.

The acceptance of a fine architectural drawing as a masterpiece is easier than it used to be."

A recent show of 18th- and 19th-century architectural drawings at the Artis Group Ltd., 52 East 76th Street, boasted nearly 100 pieces, among them a four-part project for a grandiose triumphal arch in Milan by the 19th-century Italian architect Dionisio Santi, and an exquisitely rendered neo-Roman facade for a projected Academy of Sciences, attributed to the French designer Charles Percier.

Prices ran from $2,500 to well over $30,000 for the Santi piece; the Percier sold for under $20,000. The work sells well, mainly to

"bright young people who know about design; Europeans or Americans with strong ties to Europe," says Thilo von Watzdorf, an Artis partner.

"They consider it a chic thing to have a wall of these." In Paris, where much early material is found, Mr. von Watzdorf points out, "architectural drawings are not a new thing, but the price level is." He adds, "At one time they were not considered serious work, and you could buy them in antiques shops for a few hundred dollars." But, while praising the drawings as "decorative and interesting documents," Mr. von Watzdorf doesn't quite see them as examples of fine art. "Though they can be beautiful and of great historical value, they are working drawings, technical studies to build buildings, and they shouldn't be treated like the works of Rembrandt or Degas," he says. "It rubs me the wrong way when architects make drawings to show in galleries." His approach is countered by Max Protetch, whose gallery at 37 West 57th Street has something of a corner on the contemporary market, handling work by, among others, the architects Wright, , Rudolph, Venturi, Leon Krier and Ricardo Bofill, and the architecturally oriented artists Scott Burton, Siah Armajani and Will Insley. Prices range from $1,000 for a small work by a not-so-famous architect to more than $200,000 for a finished piece by Frank Lloyd Wright.

"To say that architects can't be artists refutes a whole kind of creativity," Mr. Protetch says. "Most architects draw as a way of getting ideas out. For them drawing can be a creative and expressive act."

A powerful factor contributing to the interest in drawings of the past is the now-famous show of 19th-century works from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris mounted in 1975 by the Museum of Modern Art. Proclaiming the era of post-modernism, the show boasted big, elaborate Belle Epoque renderings by Beaux-Arts students that played into a sense of the past then awakening after the "now" era of the 60's. Their size and stunning workmanship gave them great decorative appeal, and the Modern's imprimatur, as one curator said, "made it O.K. to collect such things."

The interest in contemporary works also goes back to the 70's, when architects themselves got more into drawing as a way of talking about the philosophy of architecture. "The Minimalist esthetic, with its emphasis on concept, helped give rise to the notion of architecture existing only in drawings," says Pierre Apraxine, art consultant to the Gilman Paper Company, who in the 70's bought for the company a splendid group of visionary drawings by contemporary designers.

Arthur Drexler, chairman of the department of architecture and design at the Museum of

Modern Art, wryly points out that the late 60's and early 70's was also a time of recession and unemployment in the building trade. "The significance of architectural drawings fluctuates with the economy," he says. "When architects have no building to do, they have a lot of time to draw. Some do very interesting work; some know how to mass-produce the sensitive look."

In any event, collectors are discovering that architectural drawings give an interesting new dimension to their acquisitional pursuits. Whether the drawings achieve the status of work by "pure" artists, the best of them give a real sense of participation in the ideas that produce our built environment.