

# MACKINNON FINE FURNITURE



## THE SHARDELOES URNS AND PEDESTALS by JOHN LINNELL

England, 1767

These magnificent sculptural neo-classical urns stand on their original matching pedestals and formed part of one of the early commissions that would confirm Robert Adam's reputation as the leading driver of taste and fashion in 18th century Britain. Their outstandingly well-documented provenance means they can be firmly traced back to Shardeloes, the seat of the Drake family in Buckinghamshire, as part of the commission of architecturally informed fine furniture executed there by John Linnell in the 1750s and 60s to designs by Robert Adam.

### Shardeletes and the Drake Family

The urns and pedestals were commissioned as part of the redecoration of Shardeloes from 1758 to 1766, but the history of the house stretches centuries further back to the court of the Tudors, where

Richard Drake first won Royal favour serving as Equerry to Queen Elizabeth I. The family fortunes continued to rise, with his son Francis Drake gaining a position as a gentleman of the Privy Chamber to James I acquiring the Shardeloes land by marriage. Some generations later, William Drake (1723- 1796) returned from his Grand Tour in 1747 filled with new ideas for the family seat. An advantageous marriage to the wealthy Elizabeth Raworth gave him the scope to completely rebuild Shardeloes to the building as it stands today, an eight year project which cost approximately £19,300.

### **Robert Adam and Shardeloes**

Several capable minds and hands came together to create Shardeloes in its new neo-classical form, although the project's architect was initially Stiff Leadbetter, he was soon eclipsed by his visionary, determined young colleague Robert Adam (1728 - 1792), who joined the project in 1760. At this point, the scholarly and aesthetic interest that would be called neo-classicism was nascent but rapidly developing, spurred on by writers like Wincklemann and, in the decorative arts, the etchings of Piranesi in particular. Against this backdrop, Robert Adam had just completed his own extended tour of Italy, and Shardeloes was one of the significant early commissions that would establish his reputation, alongside the likes of Osterley Park and Kedleston Hall. Many of the motifs that would become staples of Adams' repertoire were conceived and refined during this period, including urns and pedestals of this form.

### **The Bill from John Linnell**

The invoice from John Linnell of the 2nd October 1767 itemises the 'making and carving [of] 2 coopers the tops in form of vases and large brass handles like Mr. Childs one lin'd with lead to water and the other top sham and a pot cupboard underneath'. The reference to Mr Childs links to the recent Robert Adam commission at Osterley for Robert Child and the related urns and pedestals supplied. These can still be seen at Osterley today, and as promised in the bill, the mounts and carving on the urns match the Shardeloes examples exactly. Adam's interest in urns of this form is well-documented in drawings and designs of this period, including a drawing in the collections of the John Soane's Museum (SM Adame Volume 25/82) that matches the original design for the niche and sideboard at Kedleston Hall.

In this design the urns are painted and fitted with a tap to run water. The Shardeloes urns are only partly functional, as noted in the original bill: 'one [is] lined with lead to hold water and the other top sham'. Daniel King judges Osterley to be the ensemble within which Adam 'introduced the idea of a sideboard suite comprising a table flanked by urn-topped pedestals' which would become recurrent in his *oeuvre*. He would later choose to record this design for urns with handles, masks and twisting fluting in *The Works in Architecture of Robert and James Adam* (1779).

### **The Craftsmen Behind the Urns**

John Linnell (1729-1796) was one of the foremost cabinetmakers of the 18th century, joining his father William's firm after training at St Martin's Lane Academy, and becoming sole owner of the company on his father's death in 1763. William Drake had commissioned William Linnell to furnish his London residence in Grosvenor Square, continuing his patronage of the family firm uninterrupted after his son

took over. The balance of responsibilities between Linnell and Adam seems to have been varied: many pieces were both designed and executed by Linnell, such as the mirrors from the Drawing Room (now in the Rijksmuseum) for which there is a Linnell drawing in the Victoria & Albert Museum. However, Linnell's bill for '5 Cornices with festoons by drawing' refers to drawings from Adam, and it is the bill for our urns that explicitly states the link to the Adam designed urns at Osterley.

Linnell's work was of the finest quality, which came with a hefty price tag, and Drake did look to others for competitive quotes - although he received a lower quote for these urns, he still decided to give the commission to Linnell. The gilt bronze handles and mounts are particularly well executed and indicate the involvement of a top bronzier. Nicholas Goodison notes that the "[a]t present we do not know who was responsible for the mounts and handles supplied to [...] Thomas Chippendale, John Linnell or practically any of the leading cabinet-maker" of the mid 18th century. Matthew Boulton is known to have supplied doorknobs and escutcheons to Kedleston that closely follow Adam's designs and he also includes designs for similar urns in his *Pattern Book*. Other prominent bronziers included Dominique Jean and François Morellon La Cave, who are known to have worked with Pierre Langlois.

## **A HIGHLY IMPORTANT PAIR OF GEORGE III GILT BRONZE MOUNTED URNS AND PEDESTALS BY JOHN LINNELL, AND DESIGNED BY ROBERT ADAM**

***Supplied by John Linnell to William Drake (d. 1796) for Shardeloes, Buckinghamshire in 1767***

### ***The urns designed by Robert Adam***

Each urn with a removable tapering lid carved with stop-fluting, foliate designs and a guilloche rim, the gilt-bronze mounts with a conforming guilloche collar between scrolled handles on satyr masks, the wrythen fluted bodes with acanthus and foliate carved socle, one fully hollowed with a lead lining, the other shallow sham unfinished cavity. The pedestals with a fluted frieze to three sides within acanthus and guilloche mouldings and centred with a paterae, the doors decorated with laurel swags and paterae, one enclosing a shelf, the other with two shelves, each on a square moulded plinth base.

### **Literature:**

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M. Jourdain, 'A Chimney-Glass by John Linnell', *Country Life*, 9 December 1949, p. 1736

*Country Life*, 30 December 1949, p. 1959 (illustrated)

Robert Osresko, *The Works in Architecture of Robert & James Adam*, 1975, p. 89

H. Hayward and P. Kirkham, *William and John Linnell - Eighteenth Century Furniture Makers*, 1980, vol. I, pp. 96 - 102 and vol. II, pp. 154-155, figs. 299 - 300

David King, *The Complete Works of Robert & James Adam*, 2001, p. 197

E. Harris, *The Genius of Robert Adam - His Interiors*, 2001, p.160-161 and fig. 231

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John Harris, 'Shardeloes: A lasting tribute to a remarkable restoration', *The Connoisseur*, July - December 2006, p. 269, p. 275

J. Musson, *Robert Adam - Country House Design, Decoration & the Art of Elegance*, 2017, pp. 86 - 87

Height: 5' 0<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" in (154 cm)  
Width: 1' 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" in (44.5 cm)

Depth: 1' 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" in (44.5 cm)

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