

Fantastically French!

Design and Architecture in 16th- to 18th-Century Prints

6: Jean de Gourmont

The last three prints on this wall make up one of my favorite groupings in the show. The works are examples of French artists inventing architectural fantasies using the vocabulary of classical architecture.

In Jean de Gourmont's round etching, a double colonnade defines two sides of a courtyard. In ancient Greek and Roman architecture, this type of space is known as a peristyle. But as we look closer, the ambiguities pile up. For example, the space between the columns seems recessed. Are these sunken walkways, or perhaps pools of water? How would one enter this building? And where does the arch at the end of the left colonnade lead? The large circular tower looming in the background is not classical, but rather more medieval in form. The circular rose window at the end of the curved gallery would most likely be found in a Gothic cathedral. Also enigmatic is the nude figure reclining in the courtyard amidst architectural fragments. Is he a resting *putto* (one of those winged infants we see in other prints), or a statue, or an allegorical figure? All of these puzzling elements reflect the artist's ingenuity in conjuring a space that invites visual wanderings and wonderings.