

ARTS & LETTERS

belied his keen appetite for news of faraway discoveries: One night in 1773 his startled companions watched him jump up, gather the tails of his huge brown coat to resemble a pouch, crook his hands forward, and bound across the room. Naturalist Sir Joseph Banks had just returned from Australia with a description of the kangaroo.

As a writer and thinker, however, Johnson looked inward for inspiration. His visual myopia served as a metaphor for mankind's mental myopia: "We see a little, very little; and what is beyond we only can conjecture," remarks the speaker in *Adventurer*.

Exploration and adventure are the foils by which Johnson's characters typically discover the folly of their hopes. In *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, the travelers seeking truth and happiness are all the more disappointed for having looked "from China to Peru."

Just before he died, Johnson inspected the three-volume new edition of Cook's and King's *Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*. "Who will read them through?" he demanded testily. One "set of Savages" was "like another." The stirrings of the civilized soul—now *there* was cause for wonder.

Natural Skyscrapers

"Naturalized Technology: Louis H. Sullivan's Whitmanesque Skyscrapers" by Lauren S. Weingarden, in *The Centennial Review* (Fall 1986), 110 Morrill Hall, Michigan State Univ., East Lansing, Mich. 48824-1036.

In 1886, the young Boston architect Louis Henry Sullivan stumbled upon an edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. "You then and there entered my soul," wrote Sullivan to his new-found hero, "have not departed, and never will depart." Never shy, he enclosed a few (dreadful) verses of his own. Whitman did not write back.

Many architectural critics have played down the symbolic content of Sullivan's work, says Weingarden, an assistant professor at Florida State University. But Sullivan vehemently upheld it: "I am a poet who uses not words but building materials as a medium of expression."

Like Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson before him, Sullivan assigned himself the great 19th-century dilemma: how to integrate industrial "progress with a national identity rooted in the pastoral ideal." Whitman's poetic solution was to invoke opposing voices—the objective, masculine self linked to progress, the subjective, feminine self to nature—and blend them in a harmonious song to the "Kosmos."

As a pioneering architect of skyscrapers, Sullivan saw this poetic task from a builder's perspective: "Form Follows Function," the dictum he became famous for, referred to the aesthetic and symbolic functions to which the actual structure (form) must adhere. "How," as he put it, "shall we impart to this sterile pile, this crude, harsh, . . . stark, staring exclamation of eternal strife, . . . this strange, weird, modern housetop" the "graciousness of those higher forms of sensibility and culture that rest on lower and fiercer passions?"

His most Whitmanesque skyscraper, the 16-story Guaranty Building in Buffalo, N.Y. (1894-95), creates a unified visual impression while remain-

ARTS & LETTERS



Sullivan's Wainwright Building (1890) in St. Louis: The skyscraper, he wrote, "must be tall, every inch tall. . . . Rising in sheer exultation [so] that from bottom to top it is a unit without a single dissenting line."

ing distinctly two-voiced: utilitarian at eye level and ornamental above. Its massive skeletal steel frame is disguised but not displaced by a "skin" of rustic terra cotta. Profuse clumps of low-relief, idealized plants—pods, buds, thorns, tendrils, and leaves of grass—move vinelike in Saracenic patterns to the cornice.

Whitman and Sullivan were not soulmates in every sense, notes Weingarten. While Whitman revelled in the "Manhattan crowds with their turbulent musical charms!" Sullivan deplored the teeming urban landscape in which he worked. He wanted his skyscrapers to transcend the city; he wanted city dwellers to look high, high, up beyond the lesser rooftops.

Masaccio's Surprise

"Miracle in Florence" by Mauro Calamandrei, in *Art and Antiques* (Feb. 1987), 89 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10003.

During the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries, almost every major Italian artist, including Botticelli, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci, visited Florence's Brancacci Chapel, to pay homage to the frescoes painted there. The works were, in the words of 16th-century Italian artist and art historian Giorgio Vasari, "miraculous."

Modern scholars have never seen why Vasari and his contemporaries made such a big fuss over such somber, lifeless renderings of Florentine characters and the surrounding Tuscan countryside. But recent restora-