

The Menil Drawing Institute's presentation is co-curated by Edouard Kopp and Kelly Montana.

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LECTURE

Barry Bergdoll

Jean-Jacques Lequeu: The Architectural Imagination in the Age of Reason

Thursday, November 14, 7:00 p.m.

Menil Drawing Institute

Organized in partnership with Rice University's Humanities Research Center, Rice Architecture, and Rice Design Alliance

CURATOR TALK

John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator of the Menil Drawing Institute

Edouard Kopp on Jean-Jacques Lequeu

Sunday, December 8, 3:00 p.m.

Menil Drawing Institute

All programs are free and open to the public.

For additional information and programs, visit menil.org.

The Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) is the custodian of collections unique in the world, gathered for five centuries through the legal deposit instituted in 1537 by Francis I, King of France. This collection is completed by acquisitions, donations or bequests. The BnF keeps more than 40 million documents: fifteen million books and magazines, a collection of some of the most beautiful manuscripts in the world, 15 million iconographic documents (photographs, prints, posters), maps, plans, musical scores, coins, medals, decorations and theater costumes, sound and audiovisual documents, and, starting in 2006, video games along with the billions of files collected as part of the legal deposit of the French web.

The Menil Drawing Institute
The Menil Collection

All photos: Bibliothèque nationale de France, dépt. des Estampes et de la photographie

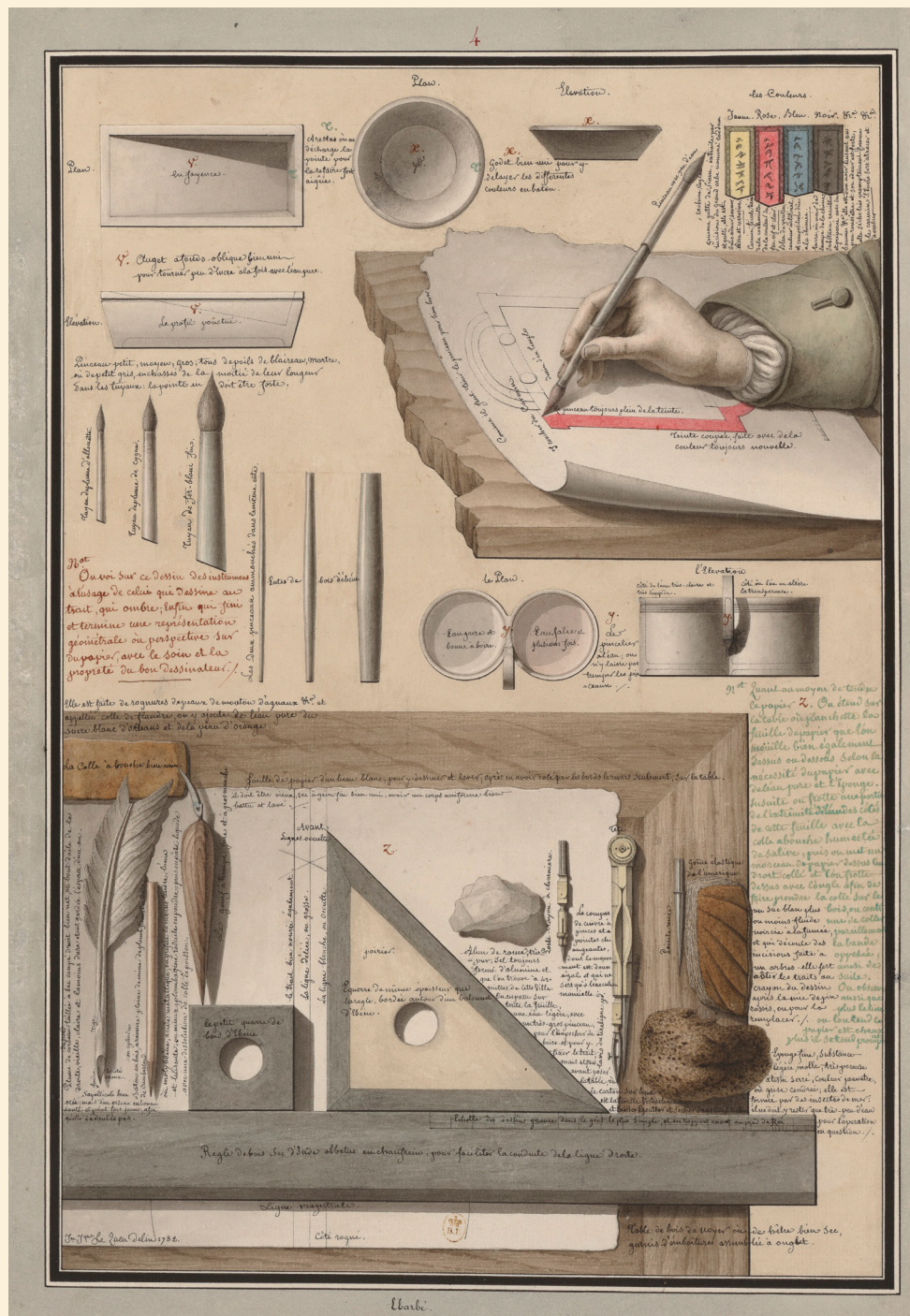
FRONT Jean-Jacques Lequeu, *The Tomb of Isocrates, Athenian Orator (Tombeau d'Isocrate, orateur athénien)*, 1789. Ink on paper, 18 1/2 x 16 1/4 in. (46.9 x 40.9 cm). Collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France

physiognomic studies of the transformations of his own face caused by particular emotional states. No doubt inspired by the work of Johann Kaspar Lavater, who, starting in the 1770s, had made physiognomy into a serious field of inquiry, Lequeu staged his identities, however, in an irreverent way: he shows himself alternatively yawning, pouting, winking, and sticking out his tongue.

A watershed moment in the rediscovery of Lequeu, who is now recognized as a first-rate architectural draftsman, was an exhibition of 18th-century French architectural drawings titled *Visionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux, Lequeu* curated by Jean Adhémar for the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 1964. Dominique de Menil brought the influential exhibition to the United States in 1967 and arranged its American tour, where it was shown at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, before traveling to several institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. There it influenced a number of young artists. Claes Oldenburg, for example, is known to have closely studied the fanciful and obsessive peculiarities of Lequeu's work. Several of the drawings presented in *Visionary Architects* are included in the current exhibition at the Menil Drawing Institute.



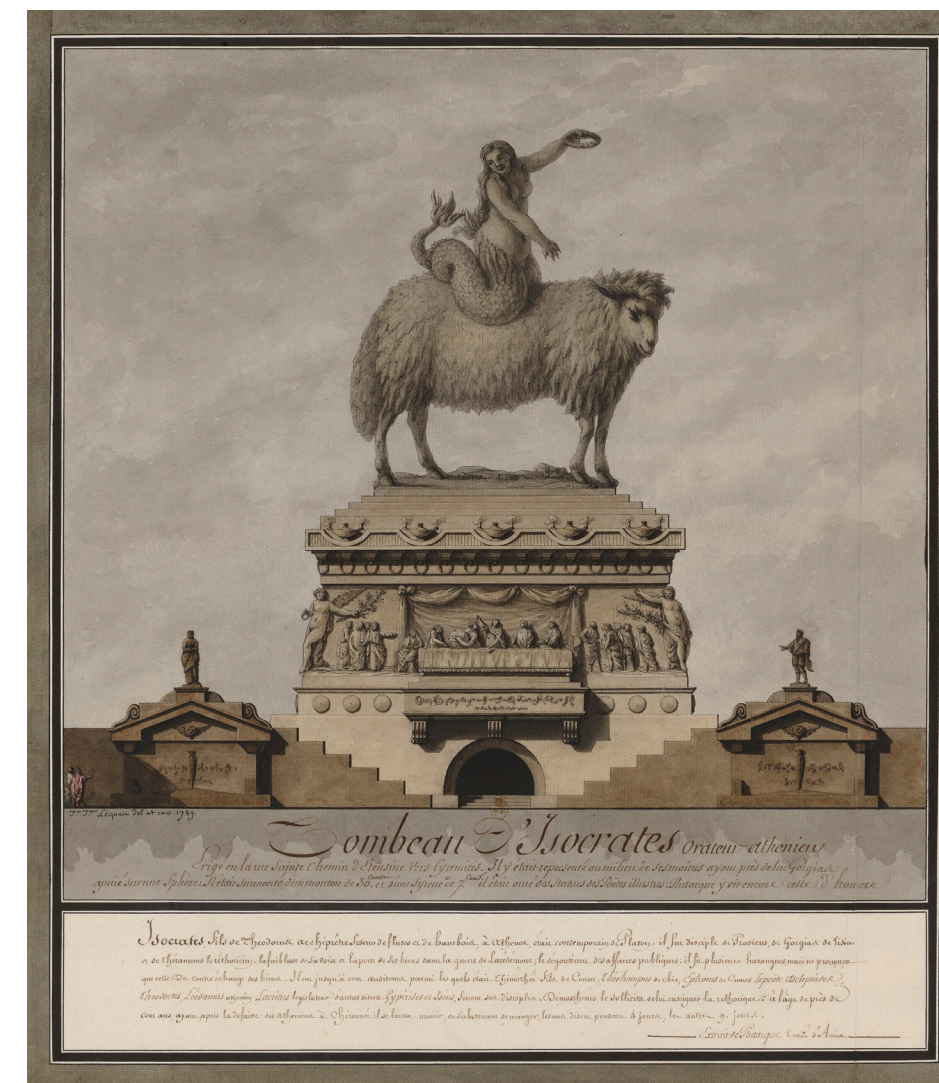
Jean-Jacques Lequeu, *Yawning Man (Le grand baailleur)*, late 18th century. Ink on paper, 13 1/2 x 9 1/4 in. (34.4 x 23.4 cm). Collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France



Jean-Jacques Lequeu, *The Draftsman's Tools (Les instruments du dessinateur)*, 1782. Ink and watercolor on paper, 20 1/4 x 14 1/2 in. (51.5 x 36.5 cm). Collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France

JEAN-JACQUES LEQUEU VISIONARY ARCHITECT

DRAWINGS FROM THE
BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE

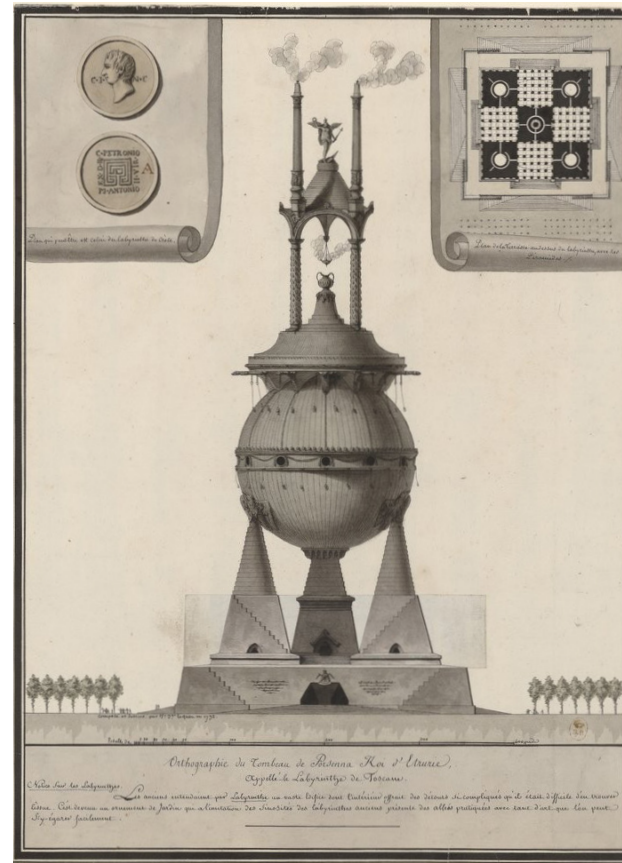


The Menil Drawing Institute

October 4, 2019–January 5, 2020

LONG OVERLOOKED

French draftsman and architect Jean-Jacques Lequeu (1757–1826) is now considered one of the most inventive artists of post-revolutionary France. His posthumous acclaim came from the rediscovery in the mid-twentieth century of more than 800 detailed drawings that he bequeathed to the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 1825. Lequeu's drawings range from actual government proposals to pure architectural fantasies, ideas for pleasure gardens and grottoes, theater designs, as well as anatomical and physiognomic studies, and a few erotic drawings. As a whole, they attest to his keen sense of observation, eclectic interests, and prolific imagination.

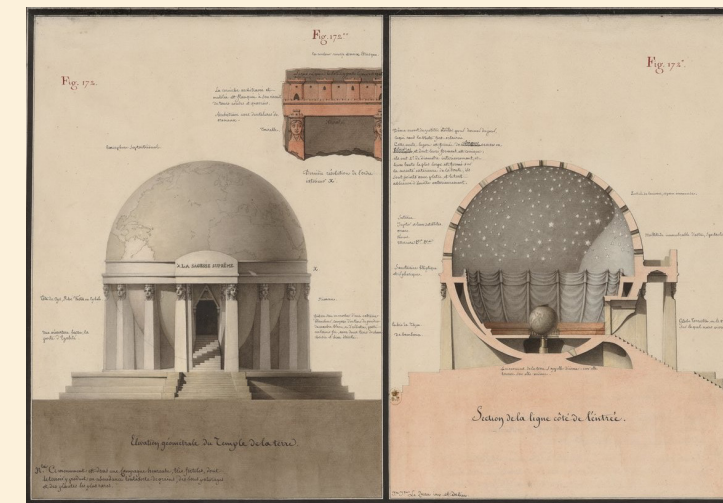


Jean-Jacques Lequeu, *Orthography of the Tomb of Lars Porsena, King of Etruria*, also called the *Labyrinth of Tuscany* (*Orthographie du tombeau de Porsenna roi d'Etrurie, appellé le labyrinthe de Toscane*), 1792. Ink and watercolor on paper, 20 1/8 x 15 3/8 in. (50.9 x 39 cm). Collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France

Born in the city of Rouen, Lequeu trained as an architect in Paris, where his career was drastically impacted by the tumultuous sociopolitical context of the 1789 French Revolution and its aftermath, when the established ideals and styles of architecture were questioned and the traditional structures of patronage disrupted. Simultaneously, opportunities became scarcer for architects, whose practice was deemed no longer viable. As a result, Lequeu was compelled to work as a draftsman, a surveyor, and a cartographer, although he thought of himself primarily as an architect from beginning to end. In spite of his tenacious quest for success, none of his designs were built; for that reason, he may be rightly called an “architect on paper.”

Lequeu's drawings demonstrate how he visualized imagined structures—in elevations, cross-sections, floorplans—that he knew were most unlikely to be realized. His meticulous accuracy and remarkable command of ink and watercolor enabled him to bring his designs to life on paper (note his occasional inclusion of people, smoke, and clouds). The artist's devotion to the craft of drawing is manifest in his depiction of *The Draftman's Tools* (*Les instruments du dessinateur*), 1782. This drawing, reminiscent of the didactic illustrations of the *Encyclopédie* by Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, shows how Lequeu reveled in depicting the implements of a skilled draftsman (including brushes, penholders, graphite, colors, rulers, erasers, etc.) and adding explanations on how they should be used. It was thanks to his technical excellence that he made his daring conceptions visually engaging and palpable to the viewer's sensory experience.

Most of Lequeu's grand architectural ideas, such as his extravagant, gravity-defying project for the *Orthography of the Tomb of Lars Porsena, King of Etruria* (*Orthographie du tombeau de Porsenna roi d'Etrurie*), 1792, though minutely executed on paper, would have been impractical, if not technically impossible to construct—so fantastic was the scale he envisaged for such monuments. In order to describe and explain the purpose, structure, and materials of his inventions, he often complemented his drawings with lengthy, careful annotations, as if to record his genius for posterity.



TOP Jean-Jacques Lequeu, *The Barn and the Gate to the Hunting Pleasure Grounds* (*L'Étable et la porte du parc des plaisirs de la chasse*), late 18th century. Ink and watercolor on paper, 17 1/2 x 12 1/8 in. (44.4 x 30.8 cm). Collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France

BOTTOM Jean-Jacques Lequeu, *Design for the Temple of the Earth* (*Élévation géométrale du temple de la Terre*), 1794. Ink and watercolor on paper, 20 1/4 x 13 3/8 in. (51.5 x 35.1 cm). Collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France

Early in his career, Lequeu, searched for geometric simplicity and explored radical dreams of utopian architecture as exemplified by his *Design for the Temple of the Earth* (*Élévation géométrale du temple de la Terre*), 1794. Here, his composition is made up of a terrestrial globe inserted into a curvilinear pediment supported by columns and placed on a base. The ceiling in the hollow sphere was intended to be punctuated by star-shaped holes to simulate the night sky. Visitors or celebrants would have been invited to contemplate the spectacle of the universe. Lequeu's imaginative use of the sphere was likely indebted to his more famous contemporaries Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728–1799) and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736–1806).

Over the course of his career, Lequeu aimed to transcend—and subvert—the consecrated vocabulary of the classical orders of Greco-Roman architecture (styles based on uniform sets of proportions and most recognizable by the type of column and capital employed) by experimenting with vernacular forms. Lequeu's range of references, from the learned to the popular, was very broad; he even looked to architectural traditions from distant places such as India and China. The drawing *Orthography of the Chinese-style Gardener's House* (*Orthographie de la demeure du jardinier à la chinoise*) features a bungalow with two projecting wings that bear Chinese inscriptions in relief. Although he was inspired by a Cantonese structure reproduced by the Scotsman William Chambers in his treatise on Chinese architecture and design (published in London in 1757), Lequeu added decorations of his own; the entrance to the house combines Chinese, Greco-Roman, and Egyptian elements.

Lequeu liked to experiment with architectural symbolism as seen in *The Barn and the Gate to the Hunting Pleasure Grounds* (*L'Étable et la porte du parc des plaisirs de la chasse*). The overall architectural form and the ornamental elements playfully reference the animals found inside and articulate the structure's function. In the first drawing, the barn is in the shape of a cow; in the second, the entrance to the hunting grounds is decorated with sculpted heads of wild boars, deer, and dogs.

Additionally, Lequeu focused his attention on the human body, especially the face. *Yawning Man* (*Le grand baillleur*) is one of several striking self-portraits that bear witness to his