



HIDDEN
COLLECTION

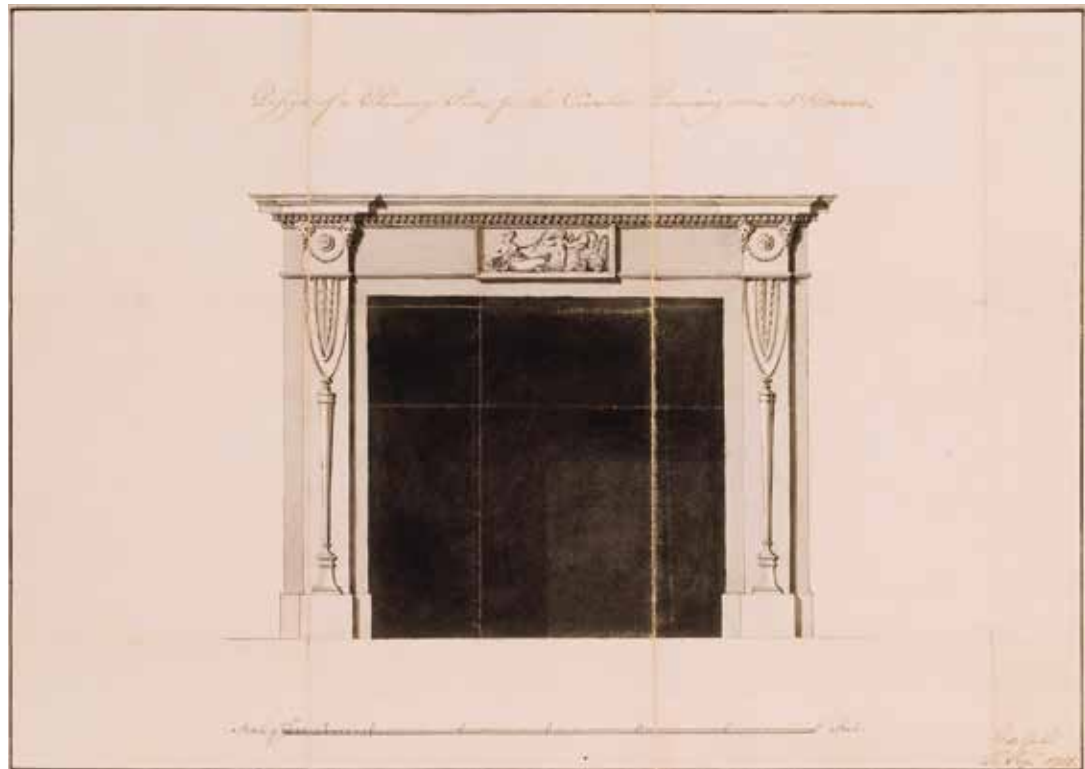
BY DAVID MASELLO

BUILDING A COLLECTION OF BUILDINGS

Peter May collects houses and buildings. While most of these structures don't actually belong to him, they are rendered in exquisite detail in his collection of more than 700 architectural drawings, one of the world's largest private holdings of such ephemera. In addition, May has owned and lived in many real houses. Some of those brick-and-mortar residences are among America's most architecturally distinctive, including a few designed by Ferguson & Shamiian, the New York City firm known for building what founding partner Mark Ferguson calls "new traditional" houses.

May is the billionaire president and founding partner of Trian Partners, a New York City investment management firm. He says that, beyond managing other people's financial portfolios, "One of the things I care about is architecture, especially detail in architecture. I have a very large collection of antique drawings that directly addresses that ongoing passion. Detail has always been a hallmark of what I care about and what I respect in buildings."

Bunny Williams, the leading interior decorator who runs her eponymous design firm from New York, has furnished many of the



ROBERT ADAM (British, 1728–1792); Presentation drawing for a mantelpiece for the Circular Room at Moccas Court, Herefordshire, England; 1771; ink and watercolor on paper; 13 x 18 1/2 in.

ARLES
THEATRE ROMAIN

JULES FORMIGÉ (French, 1879–1960); Reconstruction drawing of the façade of the Arena in Arles, France; 1914; pencil, ink, and watercolor on paper; 32 x 54 1/2 in.



Architect unknown (French); Competition drawing for an aquarium: elevation view mounted with cross-sections in roundels; c. 1884; pencil, ink, and watercolor on paper; 30 1/2 x 44 1/2 in.





Peter May's study at the San Remo, New York City

the studies of frescos at Herculaneum and Pompeii by Emile-Jacques Gilbert (1793–1874), drawings of London buildings by Robert Adam (1728–1792), and more contemporary views of European opera houses and New York City edifices by Andras Kaldor (b. 1938). Cassidy-Geiger herself has visceral responses to certain works in the collection, referring, for instance, to the reconstruction drawings of Rome's Villa Giulia by Harold Bradshaw (1893–1943) and of Arles's Roman arena by Jules Formigé (1879–1960) as “mouthwatering.”

JUST SAY “YES”

During his three-plus decades of collecting, May has rarely shied away from purchasing anything that catches his eye. In fact, he once told his former curator, “It's too big. It's too expensive. I'll take it.” While the collection is varied, May's keenest attention has been devoted to European Beaux-Arts buildings.

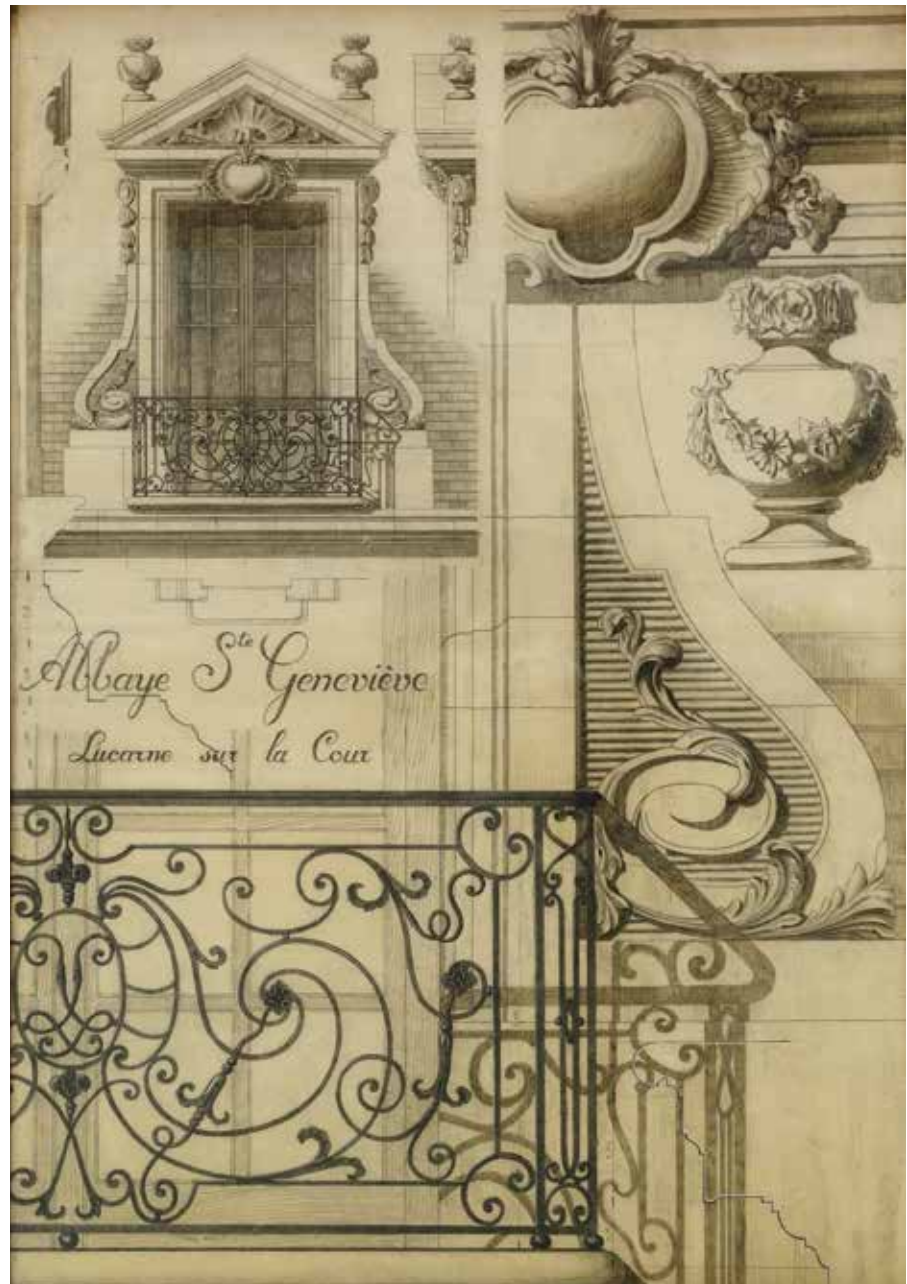
Architect unknown (French); Composite study of the Abbey of Sainte Geneviève, Paris; c. 1900; pencil, ink, and watercolor on paper; 39 1/4 x 26 3/4 in.

houses May and his wife have owned over the years in Palm Beach, Connecticut's Litchfield County, New York City, and Beaver Creek, Colorado. She says of her client and longtime friend, “Peter can read architectural plans better than anybody. I said to him once, ‘Peter, you should be an architect.’ He replied, ‘If I'd done that, I couldn't have afforded to build all of these houses.’”

Such pragmatism — and humor — has led May instead to assemble, live with, and now exhibit for the first time his trove of architectural drawings that date from 1691 to the 1950s. As a philanthropist intimately involved in New York City's cultural life (he's a director of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, co-chairs the New York Philharmonic, and has produced such Broadway shows as *Tootsie* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*), May will share approximately 40 of his finest works at the New-York Historical Society, where he is a trustee. This exhibition, *Architectural Drawings from the Peter May Collection: Training and Practice at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts* (on view January 22 through March 21), reveals not only what has largely been wholly private, but also replicates, in part, exactly how May lives with the drawings.

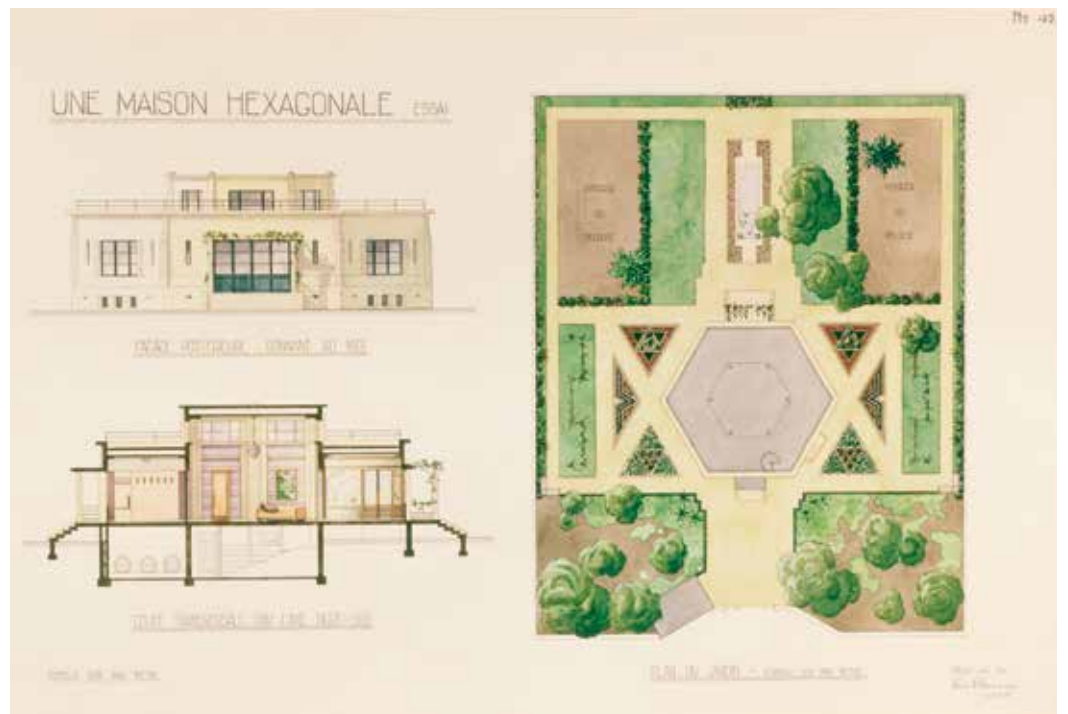
Maureen Cassidy-Geiger, staff curator at Trian Partners and curator of May's private collection for the past four years, explains, “The drawings will be hung salon-style in the Society's Great Hall, cheek-by-jowl, because that's how Peter lives with them; they cover the walls of his homes and his offices on Park Avenue. And because virtually every work is already framed, it was a real shocker to mount a show where some of the drawings didn't have to be taken out of drawers, as with most other collections, and then prepared to hang in the museum.” In conceiving the display, Cassidy-Geiger has positioned the more detailed drawings at eye level, while other works, some 10 feet long, will hang high on the walls.

May's collection of drawings includes such drawn, rendered, and watercolored treasures as

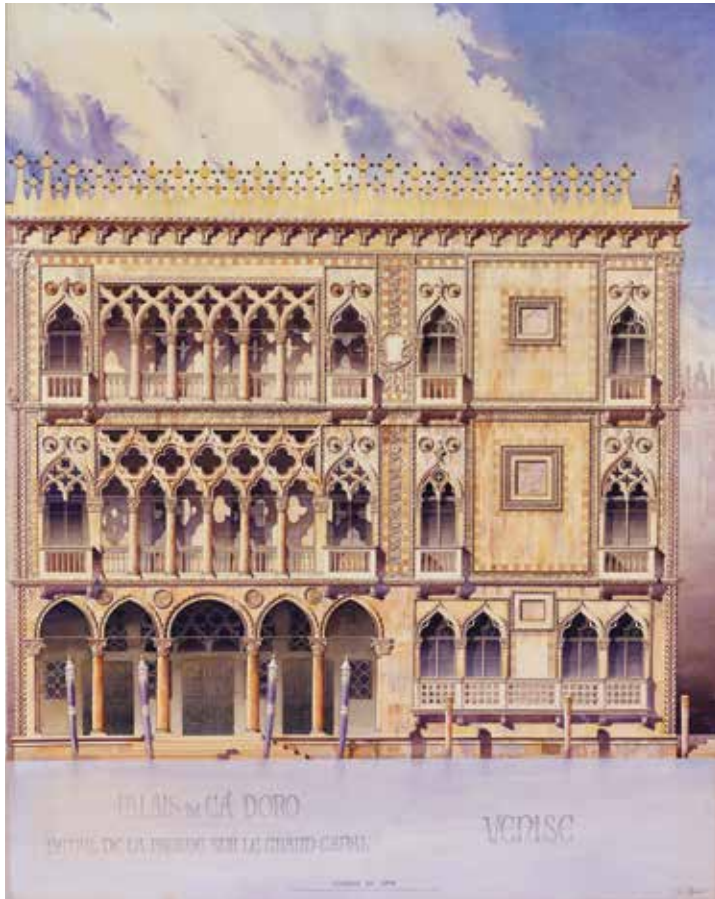




JEAN-BAPTISTE FOURTUNÉ DE FOURNIER (French, 1798–1864); Interior of the Salle des Gardes du Corps, Tuileries Palace, during the reign of Napoleon III; 1856; pencil and watercolor on paper; 14 7/8 x 18 7/16 in.



Hans Rasmussen (Danish, dates unknown); Competition drawing for a hexagonal house: plan, elevation, and cross section; 1931; pencil, ink, and watercolor on paper; 26 3/4 x 40 in.



ALPHONSE-ALEXANDRE DEFASSE (French, 1860–1939); Canal façade of the Ca'd'Oro, Venice, after the restoration of 1891; c. 1900; pencil, ink, and watercolor on paper; 47 x 37 1/4 in.

“While I care about and respect contemporary architecture and love to see creative new architecture on the New York skyline and elsewhere, what I always gravitate to are things that go back to a different time, when textures and ornament and detail were well thought out. And so my favorite period is the Beaux-Arts.”

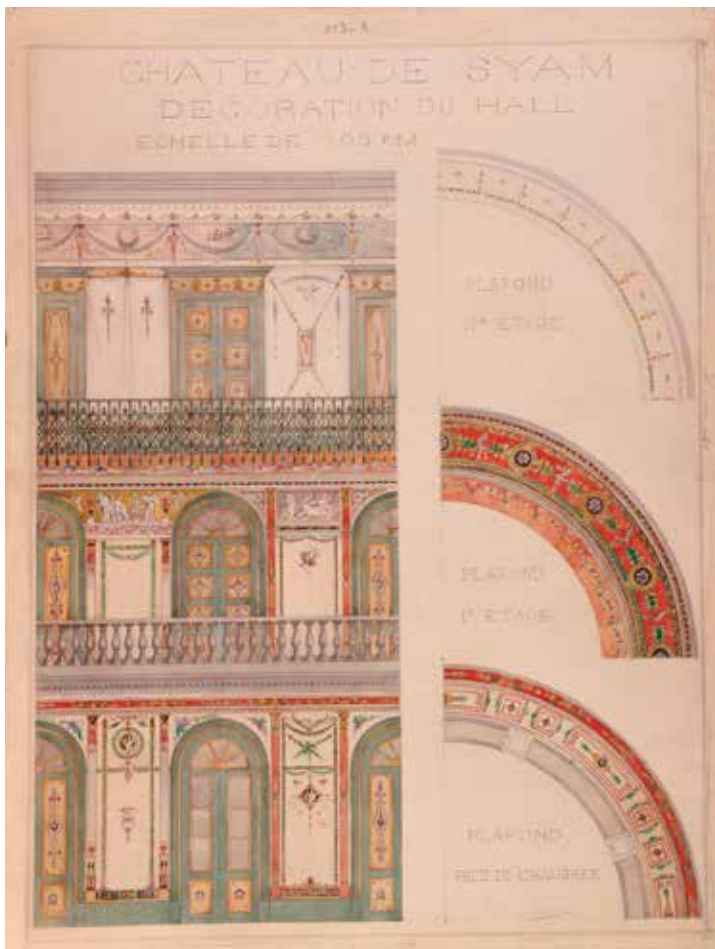
Thus the New-York Historical Society show will focus on the Beaux-Arts. Cassidy-Geiger points to the museum’s vast holdings of architectural drawings from this period and to the fact that this French system of training was embraced by New York’s architects during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Just for example, “It was certainly a touch point with McKim, Mead & White, so one of the drawings we’ll display is a work by that firm.” As it happens, the most important McKim, Mead & White archive anywhere is held by the Society, she adds.

Although May can read blueprints and floor plans like a seasoned architect, his collection comprises chiefly finished design drawings, oil sketches, watercolors, pastels, and sketchbooks. Regarding its large number of British drawings, Charles Hind, chief curator of drawings at the Royal Institute of British Architects, writes in the two-volume catalogue that accompanies the exhibition: “Peter May focuses less on the constructional aspects of architectural drawings... but more on the representational methods by which either the appearance of a building has been sold to the client or the architect’s skill as a designer in exhibitions or reproduction has been advertised.”

Given the way he lives, May’s works function as both art and décor, as well as daily confirmation that he has secured the treasures he sought. But they may also, perhaps, be a poignant reminder of the career that might have eluded him. In his foreword to the catalogue, May writes candidly about his early love of architecture, even as a boy growing up on the South Shore of Long Island in a 1920s Tudor-style house. So fascinated was May by Frank Lloyd Wright and other early practitioners of the Chicago School that he enrolled at the University of Chicago, where he could visit some of those structures. He recounts living as an undergraduate “practically next door” to Wright’s “fabulous” Robie House (1909), and also the many field trips he took to see iconic buildings by Louis Sullivan and Daniel Burnham. In her ongoing work with May, Cassidy-Geiger has discerned that “Chicago has a special place in Peter’s heart.”

“Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), the University of Chicago did not have an architecture school, so I was unable to enroll in that course of study,” May continues. “I chose finance and business instead.” And in an echo of Bunny Williams’s anecdote, he adds, “If I had become an architect, I probably wouldn’t have been fortunate enough ultimately to build the beautiful homes our family has lived in.” Cassidy-Geiger observes, “It’s important to note that Peter can read cross sections and elevations and plans, but it’s not a given that others can.” Meanwhile, architect Mark Ferguson says of his client, “Peter is a profligate builder who loves construction, who loves design, and who is, perhaps, a frustrated master builder.”

May’s collection was, Cassidy-Geiger explains, “jump started” in 1987 when he purchased 130 works all at once from Stephanie Hoppen, the London dealer noted for works on paper. In 1985, when he and his wife, Leni (“55 years and counting,” May writes in the foreword, and whom he calls his “greatest collaborator”), had purchased an expansive apartment in New York’s San Remo building, they hired Bunny Williams to decorate it. (He has since moved to an apartment on Park



Architect Unknown (French); Design proposal for the wall and ceiling decoration of the three-story circular center hall of the Chateau de Syam, Syam, France; c. 1820; pencil, ink, and watercolor on paper; 32 x 24 in.

Avenue where, as recently as this past summer, Williams and Cassidy-Geiger donned masks and helped May decide where to hang his drawings.) More than 30 years ago it was Williams who took the Mays on that buying trip to London and brought them to Hoppen's gallery. May recalls, "While there, I noticed a couple of architectural drawings on display and I immediately fell in love with the genre. We bought all she had — and that was the beginning."

While the drawings, in aggregate, have a substantial value, Cassidy-Geiger points out that individual architectural drawings are largely affordable, which made this collecting endeavor, perhaps, even more appealing to May, despite his sizeable resources. The curator intimates that many drawings on the market and at auction can be purchased for a few hundred dollars, though some works in May's collection were bought for far more, including a 1950s Frank Lloyd Wright drawing of Oklahoma's Price Tower for \$22,000. "Their value is modest compared to Old Master drawings," Cassidy-Geiger emphasizes. "Often, the bigger expense is in the framing and the conservation," she adds, saying that frames can cost as much as half the price of the work itself.

In another essay in the catalogue, Charles Hind notes that the market for architectural drawings today pivots on individual works dating from the Renaissance through the 1960s, and on works by such "starchitects" as Norman Foster and Frank Gehry. The driving forces in this market are institutions such as Paris's Centre Pompidou and Montreal's Canadian Centre for Architecture, which maintain archives of post-war and contemporary drawings. Hind concludes, "[T]he market is limited to a few private individuals and a greater number of institutions who want material for pleasure and research rather than status."

MAKING ROOM FOR ROOMS

While May's collection focuses on late 19th- and early 20th-century competition or certification drawings by architecture students, it also includes presentation drawings, reconstruction studies, and interior design schemes. By now, May has amassed so many works — along with a smaller collection of architectural models and artifacts (the one area of his collecting in which his wife, Leni, sometimes has veto power), including a newel post from the old Chicago Stock Exchange — that Cassidy-Geiger had to organize the book's chapters by building types. These categories include, among others, train stations; hotels, casinos, and spas; private and royal residences; landmarks and monuments; government buildings; cast-iron architecture; interior design; and landscape design and garden architecture.

While it is a fact that true collectors never stop collecting, May has scaled back simply because, his curator explains, he has run out of wall space, despite owning multiple residences. Though he makes use of a climate-controlled Manhattan storage facility for overflow, May prefers to live with as many works as he can. He often stops to study a familiar drawing — tracing his way through a floor plan or examining the measurements of a finial. "Because his walls are largely full, his impetus to acquire has diminished a bit," says Cassidy-Geiger, "but because he has such a great eye, he still goes to the occasional independent art fair and buys things, like Le Corbusier prints or a Frank Lloyd Wright chair. If he sees a gap in his collection or if he has an idea to fill a bare corner, he'll buy something he likes."



Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959); Chair for the Usonian Exhibition House, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; 1953; oak plywood and paint; 37 x 18 x 19 in.

It is important to note that the two-volume catalogue is dedicated to the late Steve Andrews, who served as May's personal curator for many years. He recalls, "Steve was a wonderful, funny, artistic, and incredibly knowledgeable young man who had a great eye. We really built the collection together." Andrews died in 2016, but May continues to reference him and his role in the collection. "Steve would source drawings at galleries and auction houses and then present them to me. He was brilliant in determining the perfect frame for each drawing and was a genius when it came to hanging the right drawing in the right location."

In May's ready and generous ability to acknowledge his curators, the architects who designed his houses, and the decorator who has furnished them, he understands the concept of collaboration, a dynamic that also defines the running of a (hugely) successful business. Collaboration is equally essential to the practice of architecture, for a good architect needs to listen to others and adapt in order to design well. "I have been blessed to work with great people who really appreciated the creation of this collection," May says. "The ability to live on a daily basis with so many beautiful pieces has significantly enriched my life and love of architecture."

Once the show opens at the New York Historical Society, visitors will surely feel as though they have been invited inside one of

May's residences to experience how he lives with, and looks at, the drawings he loves. ●

Information: Visit nyhistory.org for details on the exhibition. Paul Holberton Publishing (London, paulholberton.com) has produced the two-volume catalogue *Living with Architecture as Art: The Peter May Collection of Architectural Drawings, Models and Artefacts*.

DAVID MASELLO is executive editor of *Milieu*, a national print magazine about design and architecture. He lives and works in Manhattan.