

# Corcoran Exhibit Sees D.C. Through The Eyes of Outer-Space Aliens

By: [Rebecca Sheir](http://wamu.org/author/rebecca_sheir/) ([http://wamu.org/author/rebecca\\_sheir/](http://wamu.org/author/rebecca_sheir/))

June 28, 2013 (</programs/metro-connection/13/06/27/corcoran-exhibit-sees-dc-through-the-eyes-of-outer-space-aliens-transcript>)

[Transcript](#)



Corcoran Gallery of Art, Junnie Shah

The Pillar-Builder Archive features nearly 4,000 postcards of classical and neo-classical buildings the world over

Starting July 3, if you take a trip to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, you'll be taking a trip to the distant future. A new exhibit titled, *Ellen Harvey: The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.*, proposes a scenario in which human civilization has long since ended, and aliens land in Washington, where they encounter the rubble of the city's many neo-classical buildings.

Fascinated, the aliens erect a hot-dog-stand-style souvenir cart, from which they distribute hand-drawn, black-and-white brochures advertising what they see. For instance, the White House — known as "The Oval/Triangle Pillar Thing" — is described as follows:

*There is considerable controversy as to its probably function. The exclusive use of Smooth Frilly Pillars has suggested to some that it was used by Medium Pillar-Builders to perform the intimate orientation dances used to guide Large and Small Pillar-Builders back to their beloved oceans when flirting and Pillar-Building were over.*

"Basically the aliens get everything wrong," says Brooklyn-based artist Ellen Harvey. "They come to Earth, there's no life. And they see all these very solidly built things with all these pillars! And they start fantasizing about the lost Pillar-Builders of Earth. And they think they probably lived in the oceans. You know, all of these pillars are on big rivers and estuaries so probably they swam up to mate and then would build pillars. It was probably some big annual party of some kind."

The aliens also believe the Pillar-Builders — a.k.a- humans — were divided into three sexes: small, medium and large. And they built three styles of pillars. But instead of the styles we know, Doric, Ionic and Corinthian, the aliens opt for more straightforward descriptors: Boring, Frilly and Very Frilly.

"They say it like it is!" says Harvey.

Since you can find these pillars on buildings the world over, the aliens believe that, obviously, the Pillar-Builders were telepathic.

As for how the aliens know classical and neo-classical architecture is a worldwide phenomenon when they've only visited Washington, you can find the answer upstairs at the Corcoran, which, incidentally, the aliens call "The Inside-Out Pillar Thing," because all of its pillars are on the inside.

On the second floor, you'll find a cavernous white room with three walls covered in postcards. Harvey estimates they number around 4,000.

"I developed quite a sort of eBay habit, and they started coming in a sort of fast and furious way!" she says.

Harvey calls this room "The Pillar-Builder Archive," and says, "It's an archive that the aliens found in a time capsule and have been trying to make sense of."

The postcards show classical and neo-classical buildings from all over the world, organized by particular architectural features. So, for instance: clustered around a postcard of the Pantheon in Rome, you'll see postcards of other buildings that resemble what the aliens would call a "Circle/Triangle Pillar-Thing": from the Adath Israel Temple in Louisville, Kentucky, to the Pythian Temple in Easton, Ohio, to the Court House in Mayville, New York, to the Bolton Market in Karachi.

And if you scan the entire archive from left to right, you'll notice a kind of pattern. Starting at the left, you'll see postcards of the Washington Monument, what the aliens call "The Really Big Pillar."

Then come all the obelisks, "which then start morphing into these sort of round arenas with obelisks in them," Harvey explains, "which morph into actual arenas and things like the World War II Memorial, which then morph into round buildings.

"The whole thing kind of actually works as a flow. So you start with obelisks and you end with broken pillars. The aliens came up with this story. They think this is how they're all related somehow," she says.

And actually, says Harvey, the aliens' methods aren't necessarily that far from our own as we puzzle over how to understand and interpret our world.

"They don't have much to go on," she says. "They basically have a lot of pillars and some postcards and they're just making it up as they go along, based on their own life experiences."

Harvey also adds that, like the aliens, we've done our share of taking historical treasures like monuments and ruins, and sensationalizing, even fetishizing them, by turning them in to souvenirs. Case in point: the nearly 4,000 postcards plastered on the walls of the Great Pillar-Builder Archive.

"These things are all seen as places that were tourist destinations; they all exist as postcards," she says. "So not only do people build this stuff all over the place, they also travel all over the place, and when they went to see them, they say, 'Look! It's another one of those buildings! I need a postcard to send home to my friends, who are living in a city no doubt also replete with identical buildings!'"

Ellen Harvey is exaggerating of course, but when you come to the Corcoran and experience *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.*, you can't help but wonder if maybe, in a way, these so-called "aliens" really aren't so "alien," after all.

*Ellen Harvey: The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C., is on display at the Corcoran Gallery of Art from July 3 through October 6.*

[Music: "Telstar" by The Pyramids from *Skinhead Moonstomp (Rarities Edition)*]

Photos: D.C. Ruins

