"THOSE BLOCKS"

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"What are those blocks of stone?" Though this question is somewhat cryptically framed it is familiar to everyone who works at the Museum, and we all know that it refers to the four rough masses of stone at the top of the pairs of columns that flank the main entrance of the Museum. These blocks and the columns which support them are indeed a very prominent architectural feature of the Fifth Avenue façade, and they evidently make a profound impression on our visitors. Possibly a new generation of Museum visitors, unaccustomed to the grandiloquent architectural idiom of the Chicago Renaissance of 1893, is frankly puzzled by the presence of these four mildly modern cubical masses so prominently displayed in the midst of correctly copied French, Greek, and Roman architectural details. Perhaps our present building program has focused more attention than usual on the building itself; at any rate, in recent months this question about the façade has been recurring almost daily.

Though this part of the building was completed in 1901 it is not generally remembered that it was designed in the early 1890's and that the architect, Richard Morris Hunt, had been studying the problem of planning future extensions of the Museum building as early as 1884. In 1894 Hunt was the dean of American architects, fresh from his great triumphs in helping to design the general layout of the Chicago World's Fair, where his Administration Building was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal of the Royal British Institute of Architects. The design of the Museum's building was one of the last, if not the last, of the major projects on which he worked. The plans and elevations were all laid out when Richard Morris Hunt died in 1895, and his son Richard Howland Hunt was appointed to carry out his father's plans in consultation with the engineer and architect George B. Post.

Thus it is natural that the mark of the Chicago Exposition is heavily evident in our building. It has been remarked, and it is quite possible, that the general design of our façade and entrance hall were redrawn by the aging architect from rejected or preliminary sketches for exposition buildings. At any rate, the architectural style and the sculptural decorative scheme of the façade as it now stands is pure exposition architecture in the style of 1893.

Mr. Hunt planned this section of the building merely as the first unit in a total scheme of positively Roman grandeur. He laid out a plan for the ultimate expansion of the building with wings extending along Fifth Avenue from seventy-ninth to eighty-fifth street; other wings, joined by colonnades and pavilions, stretched back into the Park practically to the foot of the obelisk and completely surrounded the old red brick building which Hunt disliked. This new palace of art was to be constructed of pure white marble and to cover eighteen and a half acres of ground. The nice problems of how such a truly colossal structure was to be built and paid for, maintained, serviced, cleaned, lighted, heated, guarded, staffed, and filled with art objects were not detailed. The exterior of the structure was to be alive with sculpture of all kinds just like the Fifth Avenue façade with its colossal groups, free-standing figures, figures in high relief, figures in low relief, and miscellaneous ornaments. In addition to this there were to be whole volumes of engraved inscriptions cut into the walls.

The ready answer to the question about "those blocks" is the obvious one, that the architect who designed this part of the building intended that these stones should be carved into monumental sculptural groups. But this answer does not really satisfy the curious inquirers—they really want to know what
these groups were to represent and why they were never cut.

Before going further it should be pointed out that the principal reason these stones were never carved into the symbolic effigies envisaged by the architect was one of simple economic prudence. Mr. Hunt drew his plans and made his designs on the most grandiose scale. As a young man (in 1854) he had been employed by the emperor Napoleon III as inspector of construction, and it is said that he supervised the building of the Pavillon de la Bibliothèque, which connected the Palace of the Tuileries with the Louvre. Hunt’s taste for imperial grandeur was thus formed early in his career. And after he returned to America he became a sort of Napoleon of American architecture. At the time he designed the new wing of the Museum he was an old man accustomed to building elaborate palaces for clients who rarely questioned or quibbled over the price of any embellishment he chose to introduce in his work. In planning the Museum he apparently paid little regard to the hard budgetary problems involved in translating his drawings into enduring stone. However, when the problems concerning the proposed sculpture for the Museum façade arose it was found that the cost of hiring one of the leading sculptors of the time to design the groups, the cost of making half-scale plaster models, having them enlarged to the proper size and cut in stone by professional stonecutters was so very great that this course could not be followed and the plan had to be given up. The preliminary estimates for the sculpture came at a most awkward time; the interior of the new building remained unfinished. Naturally the Museum’s Building Committee were more interested at that point in investing their depleted building funds in completing the unfinished interior so the building could be put to use.

So, for this reason, the architect’s scheme for the sculptural decoration of the Museum’s façade was only partially carried out. There are in the spandrels of the arches six medallion portraits of artists (Bramante, Michelangelo, Raphael, Dürer, Rembrandt, Velasquez), and on the attic story of the two wings there are four caryatids representing, we are told, the four arts: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and Music. These medallions and caryatids, and most probably all the minor architectural sculpture of the façade, were designed in the studio of the sculptor Karl Bitter, who was
Hunt's special protégé. The keystones of the three arches are more or less copied after the head of the Minerva of Velletri (the original is in the Louvre); the lion gargoyles placed at intervals along the cornice are also more or less copied after classic models. The cresting of the attic, composed of gigantic female masks with fancy headdresses, however, is only faintly classic in inspiration, and it appears to be more closely related in style to the lush sculptural ornament of the Chicago Fair of 1893. It seems that these heads were subjected to the most drastic and incontrovertible aesthetic judgment almost as soon as they were put in place, for in 1900 two of these damsels were struck by lightning, which knocked off the lower half of their faces.

The remainder of the sculptural decoration, which has never been completed, is perhaps best described in a letter of the architect. This letter not only gives the full description of the sculptural theme as planned by Hunt but it reflects in a most curious way the rather cavalier attitude of architects towards the sculpture which played such an important part in their designs. This is to be seen in the remarks on how a sculptor should be chosen to do the work and on the mechanical methods of having the sculpture copied.

Mr. Hunt says: “In order to express, in the principal sculpture on the façade of the Museum, the character of the building, I would suggest that the four large groups over the columns should represent the four great periods of Art, using the Egyptian for ancient art, the second group, Greek for classic art, the third group, renaissance, and the fourth group modern art.

“In each niche, directly under the principal group, I should like to see a reproduction of the best examples of art expressed in the group above. The stone for the groups is already in the rough on the building, with the exception of such projecting portions, as arms, symbols perhaps, etc., which would as usual be dowelled to the existing stone.

“For the statues in the niches I would propose the use of white marble, stained in order to tone down the extreme whiteness, and give it the effect of a certain age. As it would be probably unadvisable and unpracticable to award the four groups to any one sculptor, I beg to suggest to your committee that the selection of the four sculptors to be employed shall be left to the Sculptors’ Society, to be decided by vote. The sculptors’ designs only need to be made at a quarter or half full size which will greatly reduce the expense of these sketches, and yet enable the stone cutters to reproduce them perfectly.

“In regard to the statues [to be placed in the niches between the columns], particularly for the first three subjects, it will only be necessary for the stone cutters to have the use of casts already owned by the Museum of the examples chosen, as by a system of pointing they can be reproduced in marble at the desired size.”

This letter was discussed with the venerable J. Q. A. Ward, dean of American sculptors, and if his staggering estimate of the cost of designing and cutting these four colossal groups had not stopped the project dead in its tracks his worried remarks on the potential dynamite in the controversy that would explode over just how “modern art” was to be represented would have certainly carried a great deal of weight. Modern art was a sore
Richard Morris Hunt's plan, about 1894, for the expansion of the Museum. It would have been twice as large as the present building.
Richard Morris Hunt's elevation of the Fifth Avenue façade, showing the architect's idea of the sculptural groups above the columns
The Fifth Avenue façade about 1906, as completed from Hunt’s design on the opposite page, erected from 1900 to 1902. The planned sculptural groups were never carved out of the blocks.

question in those days. Besides, there was another problem that would have raised a ruckus, and that was the choice of a sculptor. Mr. Ward wrote:

“There is also another point concerning the periods of art to be represented by these groups. If the term modern art means to include any art later than the ‘renaissance’ you would be getting into a sea of difficulties where there would be danger of disaster. Modern art, that is, any art, painting or sculpture, since the renaissance is too undefined, too chaotic to be clearly represented in a group or by any one great example, universally accepted.”

The Building Committee then sought the advice of another leading architect of the day, Thomas Hastings, and his common-sense suggestions pointed to a way out of the dilemma. He suggested that since the Committee did not have sufficient funds to have the four groups executed in the right way and since they did not care to get involved with the tiresome quarrels among sculptors and critics about modern art, they might better leave the stones rough.

Still a third factor entered the picture to put off the carving of “those blocks”: the Building Committee were afraid that if sculptors were engaged to work on the exterior of the building the Plasterers’ Union would call a strike and halt all progress on the interior. The Plasterers’ Union and the Painters’ Unions at that time were trying to get all such craftsmen and artists, mural painters, and sculptors to join the unions, and there had been difficulties over this question during the construction of the Chicago Fair buildings.

With three such powerful opposing forces—the lack of money, a potential art battle of the
first class, and difficulties with the unions that might put off the completion of their building—there was only one solution left.

As we study the Fifth Avenue façade it immediately becomes apparent that these four blocks of stone play a vital role in the total design of the main entrance. Their bulk and weight, their vaguely pyramidal shape, the massive cornices above and below them, the pairs of columns which support them make these stones one of the key features. If they were to be removed the façade would be completely thrown out of balance as an architectural design. The columns would have no apparent function and the pattern of symmetrical masses would be destroyed. The design, old fashioned as it may be, would be irremediably weakened and damaged. The character of the Museum as a period piece, whatever that may be worth, would be ruined.

When one considers the available sculptors of 1900 who might have been commissioned to carve these innocent stones into the symbolic statuary envisioned by Hunt, the modern observer may feel relieved that the carving was never done, especially since the plain stone masses are so satisfactory. They completely fulfill the architect’s intention as far as general masses go and introduce a welcome note of rugged simplicity into an otherwise self-consciously correct, Beaux Arts design.

When this Hunt addition to the building was completed (about 1900) and later opened (on December 22, 1902) the newspapers and architectural periodicals published some delightful nonsense about the new structure in the quaint journalistic style of the period. The New York Herald for November 11, 1900, says:

“Like a stately bride arrayed in spotless white stands the beautiful new hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This million dollar structure is just completed. When the hundred and thirty-five cases of valuable relics and rare curios . . . are placed in their proper locations within the hall this regal bride will be adorned with jewels of almost equal worth.

“General L. P. di Cesnola, the Curator, who will supervise the decking of the bride, says that labor of love will not be completed for at least a year.”

The New York Commercial Advertiser for December 17, 1901, straining a bit for elegance, reports: “The style of architecture is classic, partaking of old Greek suggestions inside and out.”

When it was finally opened to the public (on December 23, 1902) the massive Greco-Roman building gave the visitors a thrill of mingled nostalgia and pride. To a generation brought up on theatrical performances of Ben Hur, a generation with vivid memories of the classic plaster triumphs of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, the façade as well as the interior seemed like a magnificent dream come true.

As we look at this building today, we are seized with a curious realization of the great transformation wrought by the passage of only fifty years. And though the façade remains actually unchanged from that bright day in 1900 when it first rose in majestic new-minted splendor, it has in that short time assumed an entirely different character from the one it first bore. It can now by no stretch of the imagination be called a “triumph of modern American architecture,” as it was in 1902. It has become a familiar old landmark, mellowed by many associations, no less than by that mixture of gasses, acids, and abrasives that passes for fresh air in New York—it is now a historical monument, a prime document in the history of American architecture. The newspapers called it “the most monumental example of architecture in America.” An architect described it as “the best classic building in the country.” And that’s the story of “those blocks” and the façade they decorate.