The Architecture of the Museum

In its earliest years, the Museum had no building of its own, and occupied rented quarters, such as the Douglas Mansion on Fourteenth Street, its home from 1873 to 1879.

But meanwhile there were plans afoot for a permanent building in Central Park. These were at first rather indefinite, as this anonymous sketch of 1869 shows.

Construction began in 1874, and by 1880 the first part of the building was completed and open. It was designed by Calvert Vaux, one of the architects of Central Park itself, in an eclectic style one observer has called “Ruskin Gothic.”
Each new wing was designated by a letter as it was built. Thus the central core “A” became sandwiched between Wing B, designed by Theodore Weston and constructed in 1888, and Wing C, designed by Arthur L. T. Tuckerman and built in 1894.

It had been planned that a series of wings in the same spirit would be built along Fifth Avenue.

But William Morris Hunt, fresh from his triumphs at the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893, had other ideas. His conception of Wing D was a grandiose neoclassical hall that (purposely) concealed the “old-fashioned” building behind.
Hunt’s design proved somewhat too grand, at least in its sculptural ornament, and when it was built, in 1902, the groups intended to surmount its main pillars, representing Egyptian, Classical, Renaissance, and Modern Art, were left rough blocks.

By 1917 the façade reached its present familiar boundaries, although the interior of the last wing, K, was not finished until 1926.
This roughly T-shaped complex formed the nucleus of the building, but around it, and in its interstices, other wings have been built, such as the Library (Wing G), the Morgan Wing (F), and the American Wing (L and M).

There has been, of course, reconstruction within, at times quite extensive, as when the cast-iron arches and glass roof of the original building were replaced in 1938.

The most recent addition has been the Thomas J. Watson Library, designed by Brown, Lawford, and Forbes, and erected in 1964 to replace the old library wing. Standing between the eclectic vigor of the oldest structures and the classical grandeur of the Fifth Avenue wings, its style is severely modern.