

THE AMERICAN FINE ARTS SOCIETY, 215 West 57th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Begun 1891, completed 1892; architect Henry Janeway Hardenbergh.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1029, Lot 23.

On May 10, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of The American Fine Arts Society and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 8). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. In a letter to the Commission, the President of the Fine Arts Society outlined changes the Society was making to the interior of the building while preserving the exterior.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The American Fine Arts Society building is a dignified adaptation of a Francis First, French Renaissance town house. The facade displays an air of restrained elegance in its formally balanced composition. Below the heavily decorated cornice, with balustrade at the roof line, it is divided into three major horizontal divisions, separated by plain and decorated band courses. In this four-story stone structure, the richly decorated central portion contrasts extremely well with the severely plain walls of the side portions which contain small single windows, handsomely enframed.

The arched, main entrance doorway is well decorated, being flanked by tall, ornate, candelabra-like spindles executed in stone. The surface, surrounding the three gracefully arched second floor windows, is embellished with rich decoration, and these three arches are likewise separated by large sculptured stone spindles. Above them, on the third floor, three triple windows with mullions are flanked by pilasters, decorated with a profusion of detail. A balustrade, adorned with delicate urns, and the low pitched red-tiled roof add a touch of stability and color to this distinguished building.

The history of the American Fine Arts Society building is very significant to the art world of New York. It was incorporated in 1889 by several societies including the Society of American Artists, the Architectural League and the Art Students League. The objective of the Society was to provide facilities for the activities of these three societies in this one building, which was opened in the fall of 1892. Practically all major fine arts exhibitions were held in the American Fine Arts Society's galleries until 1941, when the National Academy of Design, which had absorbed the Society of American Artists, acquired its own building and moved to Fifth Avenue. The Architectural League established new quarters in 1927. The Art Students League purchased the interests of the other two tenants in 1941 and is now sole owner of the American Fine Arts Society building.

The Art Students League, now in its ninety-second year, held its first art classes in a building on Fifth Avenue and Sixteenth Street. The school occupied space at two other locations in Manhattan before they moved to Fifty-Seventh Street in 1892. The roster of former League students, members and instructors, too numerous to list here, reads like a Who's Who in American Art. The school has had a tremendous influence on art in this country. The membership lists are studded with names of the famous, representing every idiom of the arts, whose creative efforts have been the recipients of many national awards and prizes. Their work may be seen in private collections, public buildings and museums all over the United States. Some artists associated with the Art Students League have achieved international reputations.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that The American Fine Arts Society has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

THE AMERICAN FINE ARTS SOCIETY

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, The American Fine Arts Society building is a distinguished example of French Renaissance architecture, that it possesses great charm and a restrained elegance, that the fine architectural detail is in good taste and that the structure, as a noteworthy example of American architectural achievement, has provided a home worthy of the artistic societies which it has sheltered and the numerous nationally known artists who were associated with the Art Students League.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark The American Fine Arts Society, 215 West 57th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1029, Lot 23, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.