

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
June 9, 1967, Number 2  
LP-0410

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART (including Old Assay Office Facade), Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1880-1894, 1902, 1911, 1913, 1916, 1926, 1956 and 1965; architects Vaux and Mould; Weston; Richard and R.H. Hunt; McKim, Mead & White and Brown, Lawford & Forbes. Old Assay Office Facade built 1823; architect Martin E. Thompson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1111, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described buildings are situated.

On November 10, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (including Old Assay Office Facade) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 29). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. In a letter to the Commission, the Museum indicated that it was in favor of the proposed designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Metropolitan Museum, the most important art institution in the Western Hemisphere, is contained in one of the most notable monumental structures remaining in New York City. The first of the fifteen units comprising the colossal building, was begun in 1874 and the expansion program is still continuing. Although these component parts were designed by eminent architects and reflect diverse architectural styles, they are well related in scale to each other. Some consider the dramatic central element of the long limestone facade facing Fifth Avenue to be the most significant architecturally. Completed in 1902, it represents Richard Morris Hunt's masterpiece in the Roman style.

This imposing entrance with its wide, central flight of stairs is comprised of three monumental arches set between four pairs of free standing Corinthian columns on high pedestals each with its own entablature. They support massive blocks of stone which were intended to become sculptural groups set in front of a high attic story. Crowning this attic story is an ornately decorated cornice with female heads connected by swags. The richness of this design of Hunt's is in marked contrast to the initial Victorian Gothic unit designed by Calvert Vaux in 1880. Two subsequent additions to the north and south were built in 1888 and 1894. Facing the park and set well back from the Avenue, these buildings are of red brick with stone base, trim, and cornice and high pitched slate roofs. Hunt's creation blocked out the view of this original group, and his design succeeded in determining the future architectural character of the entire Fifth Avenue facade. Two contiguous units to the north completed in 1911 and 1913 and two to the south completed in 1916 and 1926 were designed by McKim, Mead & White. These extremely handsome additions, though simpler, are in complete harmony with Hunt's classic central portion.

Another unit, unusually significant architecturally but seen only from the Park and from a courtyard at the northwest corner of the Museum complex, is the facade of the Old Assay Office Building which was located on Wall Street from 1824 to 1912. Saved from destruction by I. N. Phelps Stokes, this facade was dismantled in 1915 and stored on the Museum grounds until it was re-erected in 1924 at its present location as a part of the American Wing. Of marble and in the Federal style, it was designed by Martin E. Thompson and is one of the most beautiful examples of the refined architecture characteristic of that period.

#### History of the Museum

The idea for a great museum in New York City was born on July 4, 1866 when John Jay, speaking at an assembly in Paris, called upon a group of his friends for "the foundation of a national institution and gallery of art." The Museum was actually founded in 1870, although neither funds, building, nor one single work of art belonged to the corporation at that time. Two temporary downtown houses served the Museum until Vaux's initial structure was completed in 1880. The objectives listed in the Museum's charter of "encouraging and developing the study of fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and to that end, of furnishing popular instruction" were put into effect at this time.

Following these guiding principles, the Metropolitan's activities have prospered to the extent that it is today as much a giant educational institution as it is a depository for great art. What started as a single building in 1880 has grown into a complex of fifteen separate but connected units, that cover the equivalent of four city blocks and seventeen and a half acres of floor space. With a collection of over 265,000 individual works of art and visited by some six million persons annually, the Museum has indeed become a great and cultural institution. Today, it is acknowledged as one of the renowned museums of the world.

A 1928 drawing which appeared on the cover of the 1965 Metropolitan Museum of Art Summer Bulletin showed two diminutive figures standing at the foot of the great entrance steps peering up at the towering columns and soaring entablature above. One, a young girl, laden with the bounties of a shopping tour, is saying to her sedately dressed, elderly relative, "This, Aunt Nettie, is the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I suppose one could spend a whole day looking at the things they have in it." Today, we know it would take even longer.

#### 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 Metropolitan Museum of Art (including Old Assay Office Facade) 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 Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the central entrance unit of the Metropolitan Museum, with its contiguous additions facing Fifth Avenue, are outstanding examples of late Nineteenth Century architecture; that this style in turn influenced the design of the Museum's remaining elevations; that it contains, in its midst, the beautiful facade of the Old Assay Office, saved from destruction; that the Museum is one of the great monumental structures remaining in the City and that the Metropolitan Museum is the outstanding art institution in the Western Hemisphere, a valued cultural possession of our City, and of the Nation.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A 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 Metropolitan Museum of Art (including Old Assay Office Facade), Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1111, Lot 1 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.