

COLLECTORS CLUB BUILDING (Former Thomas B. Clarke Residence), 22 East 35th Street. Borough of Manhattan. Built 1901-02; architects McKim, Mead & White.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 864, Lot 53.

On May 8, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Collectors Club Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 10). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This charming building, now the home of the Collectors Club, was constructed in 1901-02 as the residence of Thomas Benedict Clarke in the fashionable Murray Hill section of New York. An especially notable example of neo-Georgian architecture, it was designed by the firm of McKim, Mead & White, and is one of their outstanding residential designs in New York City.

Murray Hill had begun to be developed with residences in the mid-19th century. The area took its name from the country estate of Robert and Mary Murray.¹ According to legend, during the Revolutionary War, Mary Murray had detained General Howe at the family house on their country estate, thus allowing George Washington to escape further northward.² Following the opening of Lexington and Fourth Avenues through the area in 1848, rows of brownstone residences were quickly built along the side streets. Socially prominent and wealthy residents, such as A.T. Stewart and J.P. Morgan, moved into the area, concentrating their residences along Fifth and Madison Avenues. Although by the turn of the century commercial development was beginning to encroach upon Fifth Avenue, the streets to the east of Madison still remained fashionable, due in large part to the efforts of J.P. Morgan.³ Consequently in 1901 Thomas B. Clarke purchased a brownstone rowhouse on East 35th Street with the intention of creating a new residence suitable for housing his extensive art collection.

Thomas Benedict Clarke (1848-1931) was a prominent New York City art collector, dealer, and decorator. Although he began his career as a merchant and banker, his first love was art. In 1892 he became a dealer, opening his "art house" at 4 East 34th Street. He collected and sold art in a number of areas, including 17th and 18th-century English furniture, Chinese porcelain, and European antiques. He was the first major collector in the United States to concentrate on American painting, especially works by late 19th-century artists and Hudson River painters.⁴ This collection was sold at auction in 1899. While reviewing the furniture and antiques in Clarke's collection prior to an auction in 1925, the noted art critic Royal Cortissoz described "the signs every where discernible of an exacting taste and a thoroughgoing knowledge of the subject" and praised the collection as having "on it the bloom of superfine quality, of things chosen with pondered judgment."⁵ Throughout his collecting career Clarke remained devoted to and continued to add to his collection of early American portraits. With over 170 examples at the time of his death, it was "pronounced the finest in the world in private ownership."⁶ Clarke also served as president of the New York School of Applied Design for nine years, and endowed an annual composition prize at the National Academy of Design.

To design his new residence as a suitable showcase for his varied collections, Clarke turned to the prestigious firm of McKim, Mead & White. By 1901 McKim, Mead & White was the most prominent architectural firm in the United States. Founded in 1879 by Charles Follen McKim (1847-1909), William Rutherford Mead (1840-1928), and Stanford White (1853-1906), the firm began to achieve a national reputation with its designs for the Henry Villard Houses (1882-86), a designated New York City Landmark, and the Boston Public Library (1887-95). This reputation was consolidated and expanded by the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893 in Chicago, which set a trend for monumental neo-classical architecture. Through the skill of its members and the breadth of its resources, the firm was able to produce a vast number of designs in a variety of classical styles for many types of buildings, ranging from residences to monumental public edifices. The firm can be credited with popularizing classical stylistic modes inspired by English and colonial American precedents. Following the American Centennial of 1876 which renewed interest in colonial antecedents, McKim, Mead & White began to closely study the forms of colonial architecture.⁷ Throughout the 1880s the partners utilized these forms, particularly in their designs for suburban and country houses. However, they also utilized the more urbane forms of colonial Georgian architecture, beginning with a group of town houses on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston. They continued this trend for urban town houses, like that of Thomas B. Clarke, well into the 20th century.

The design of Clarke's house has long been attributed to Stanford White,⁸ a personal friend of Clarke with many of the same interests. White achieved fame even greater than that of the firm, not only for his prolific work in residential design, but also because of the public scandal which surrounded his murder in 1906. While White had ambitions to be a painter, he joined the architectural firm of Gambrell & Richardson at the age of 19 in 1872. He stayed with Richardson until 1878, working on many residential commissions and designing many interiors and much ornamental detail. In 1878 he left Richardson to travel in Europe, staying for over a year in Paris with the American sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, with whom he would collaborate on many occasions in later years. Upon his return in 1879, he joined McKim and Mead in partnership. In the office he continued many of the same architectural interests he had developed with Richardson.

Although Clarke desired a new residence, the architect chose to drastically alter the existing brownstone rowhouse, rather than completely demolishing and replacing it. The party walls and floors were left intact, but a new front was added, the rear was extended, and an additional story was built.⁹ The interiors were completely redesigned in accordance with the new configuration of the exterior. Upon its completion in 1902, the house was described in the Sun as "an art home .. a home absolutely unique, as beautiful as it is individualistic. There is nothing like it in New York."¹⁰

The five-story building is faced with contrasting red and gray brick laid up in Flemish bond--a characteristic of neo-Georgian design--with contrasting stone and metal detail. The entrance is approached through a small front area enclosed by a tall, elegant, wrought-iron fence and gate. An arch form with cage lantern rises above the gate. While now painted black, this wrought ironwork is shown in early photographs as being painted a light color to match the stonework of the building.¹¹ The rusticated ground story is dominated by a classically-

inspired entrance portico. Smooth columns with fruit and flower-adorned Ionic capitals support a projecting entablature to form the portico, while Ionic pilasters flank the doorway and two narrow side windows. The glass entrance doors and windows are framed by wrought iron.

Rising above the portico is a two-story projecting window bay, the dominant feature of the facade. The design of this bay is strongly reminiscent of widely-published designs by the British architect Richard Norman Shaw for the New Zealand Chambers in London (1872-73) and also for his own house at 6 Ellerdale Road (1875).¹² At each story the central portion of the bay consists of small-paned casement sash set beneath a fanlight transom. This portion is flanked by curved sash set with small panes of curved glass which follow the curve of the muntins. These, in turn, are flanked by small-paned sidelights set flush with the brick facade. Graceful wrought-iron railings, whose design is based on Georgian prototypes, are set at the base and on top of the projecting bay. The total effect is graceful, light, and airy--qualities which are suggestive of White's role in the design. For contrast, it is interesting to compare the exuberant Clarke house with the more restrained neo-Georgian Philip A. Rollins residence, 24 East 78th Street (within the Metropolitan Museum Historic District), designed by Mead and McKim and also completed in 1902.¹³

The fourth story of the Clarke house, rising above the projecting bay, is set off by a paneled stone bandcourse which contrasts with the red brick facade. Two windows with flat brick arches, keystones of Georgian design, and projecting sills, have double-hung twelve-over-twelve sash set with square panels. A swag-adorned stone panel adorns the wall between the windows. A modillioned cornice set above a frieze with triglyphs sets off the mansard roof which forms the fifth story. Two hipped-roof dormers pierce the roof.

In 1937 the house was purchased from Thomas B. Clarke's estate by the Collectors Club, an organization founded in 1896 and devoted to philately. While the exterior of the house was left intact, certain changes were made to the interior to better serve the purposes of the club. According to the records of the club,¹⁴ these were supervised by Clarence Brazer (1880-1956), an architect member. Brazer designed the town of Essington, Pennsylvania, for the Westinghouse Corporation and the Capitol building in San Juan, Puerto Rico. After his retirement in 1947, he became a stamp dealer and appraiser; he was responsible for appraising Franklin Delano Roosevelt's stamp collection.¹⁵ Records in the Buildings Department indicate that the architect was very anxious to retain features of White's original design, especially the interior staircase and stair hall.¹⁶

The Collectors Club is one of the foremost organizations of its kind. Its library contains one of the world's largest and most comprehensive collections of philatelic literature.¹⁷ The club also publishes a bi-monthly, scholarly periodical, The Collectors Club Philatelist.

The neo-Georgian design of the Collectors Club building is both unusual and delightful, looking both to English and colonial American precedents, yet using them in an original way which is the hallmark of the best work of McKim, Mead & White. It remains an outstanding visual asset to the Murray Hill community and is a notable contribution to the New York City work of McKim, Mead & White.

It has historical significance as the home of an early collector of American art and as the present-day home of a notable philatelic organization. It is indeed fortunate that a sympathetic re-use, from residence to club, has allowed it to remain for the enjoyment of all New Yorkers.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Anita Pins, An Historic District in Murray Hill (New York: The Murray Hill Committee, Inc., 1977), p. 9.
2. Pins, p. 7.
3. Pins, p. 12.
4. W.H. Truettener, "William T. Evans, Collector of American Paintings," American Art Journal, 3 (Fall 1971), 54.
5. New York Times, January 19, 1931, p. 17.
6. Ibid.
7. In 1877, before their partnership was formed, the three architects and William B. Bigelow made an expedition to sketch New England colonial architecture. See: Vincent J. Scully, The Shingle Style and the Stick Style (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 29-30.
8. Leland M. Roth makes this attribution in "Notes on the Plates," A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White, 1879-1915 (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1973), p. 66; and in The Architecture of McKim, Mead & White, 1870-1920: A Building List (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978), p. 43. New York City, Department of Buildings, alteration permit 2789-1937 notes that the building was designed by "the late Stanford White of McKim, Mead & White."
9. New York City, Department of Buildings, Alteration Permit 1551-1901.
10. The Sun, May 25, 1902.
11. "No. 22 East 35th Street," American Architect and Building News, 87 (February 4, 1905), 40, plate. A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White, 1879-1915 (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1973), plate 162.
12. Richard Norman Shaw's work is usually called Queen Anne in style. The Queen Anne movement in England and the Colonial Revival movement in the United States had much in common. Both looked to similar antecedents and used similar forms. Certainly White knew Shaw's work, and in this particular case, he found it very sympathetic to his neo-Georgian design.

13. Roth describes this attribution in his "Notes on the Plates," p. 66, and in his Building List, p. 133.
14. William W. Wylie, An Informal History of the Collectors Club (New York: The Collectors Club, 1971), p. 12. New York City, Department of Buildings, Alteration Permit 2789-1937, lists the architect as Floyd Yewell. If Brazer was not licensed in New York State he may have had Yewell file the plans for him.
15. New York Times, May 8, 1956, p. 33.
16. Alteration Permit 2789-1937.
17. Wylie, p. 16.

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 Collectors Club Building (former Thomas B. Clarke Residence) 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 Collectors Club Building (former Thomas B. Clarke Residence) is an outstanding example of the residential work of McKim, Mead & White in New York City; that it is a noteworthy example of neo-Georgian architecture, looking both to English and colonial American precedents; that among its important features are the graceful projecting window bay, the classically-inspired entrance portico, and the elegant wrought-iron fence and gate; that it was built for Thomas B. Clarke, an early collector of American art; that it is now the home of the Collectors Club, a prominent philatelic organization; and that the building remains an outstanding visual asset to the Murray Hill community.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Collectors Club Building (Former Thomas B. Clarke Residence), 22 East 35th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 864, Lot 53, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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- New York City. Buildings Department. Plans, Permits and Dockets. Municipal Building, Manhattan.

New York Times, January 19, 1931, p. 17 (Thomas B. Clarke obituary).

New York Times, May 8, 1956, p. 33 (Clarence Brazer obituary).

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Collectors Club Building
Built 1901-02

Photo Credit:
Landmarks Preservation Commission

Architects:
McKim, Mead & White