

Landmarks Preservation Commission
March 23, 1982, Designation List 153
LP-1119

PIERPONT MORGAN LIBRARY, first floor interior consisting of the entrance hall, the east room, and the west room; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, columns, murals, sculpture, fireplaces, attached bookcases, and light fixtures; 29 East 36th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1903-06; architect Charles Follen McKim of McKim, Mead & White.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 866, Lot 25 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On January 8, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Pierpont Morgan Library, first floor interior consisting of the entrance hall, the east room, and the west room; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, columns, murals, sculpture, fireplaces, attached bookcases, and light fixtures (Item No. 12). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses, including the representative of the Pierpont Morgan Library, spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Pierpont Morgan Library, built in 1903-06, is one of the finest neo-Italian Renaissance buildings in New York City. Designed by Charles McKim of the firm of McKim, Mead & White, it was constructed to house the extensive book, manuscript, and art collection of J. Pierpont Morgan. In its careful design, integrating sculpture and painting, the library evokes the turn-of-the-century ideal of the unity of the arts in order to create a splendid showcase for Morgan's collection. The interior of the library, which shows the same attention to detail as the exterior, is particularly distinguished by the extensive ceiling murals of H. Siddons Mowbray and the rich array of wood and marbled surfaces. Today the Pierpont Morgan Library possesses one of the foremost collections of its kind; it is unsurpassed in the Western Hemisphere and compares favorably in diversity and quality to major European collections. Part museum and part research library, the Library is a lasting legacy of the taste and judgment of J. Pierpont Morgan and his successors.

John Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913), internationally known banker and financier, was born into two old New England families. His father, Junius Spencer Morgan, established a career as an international banker as a partner in London of George Peabody & Co. His mother, Juliet Pierpont, was the daughter of the Rev. John Pierpont, poet, reformer, and abolitionist preacher. Between 1854 and 1857, J. Pierpont Morgan was educated in Vevey, Switzerland, and at the University of Göttingen, then entered his father's firm and was sent to New York as an American representative of George Peabody & Co. By 1864, he had established his own banking house. In 1895, when Morgan's firm became J.P. Morgan & Co., it was one of the most powerful banking houses in the world. Throughout the 1880s and after the financial panic of 1893, Morgan was responsible for reorganizing many of the nation's railroads, "with a view to the restoration of faith abroad in American securities."¹ By the end of the century Morgan had controlling interest and influence in four of six of America's railroad "empires." In 1901, Morgan organized the United States Steel Corporation, then the largest corporation in the world. The vast organization and numerous interests of J.P. Morgan & Co. led to a congressional investigation of the "money trust" in 1912, which brought widespread public knowledge of the extent of the Morgan holdings. Morgan has been characterized as "not the industrial pioneer, but the banker and conservator; while he was the foremost organizer of great corporations in his time, his interest was that of the protector of investors and depositors. In general, he personified legitimate investment throughout a period in which wreckers were typical of financial operations."²

Morgan's collections began very modestly with the acquisition of autographs. However, his family background and wealth had given him the means to acquire taste and judgment.³ Morgan did not buy extensively until after his father's death in 1890. He was aided and stimulated by his nephew, Junius S. Morgan, a connoisseur of books, prints, and manuscripts, and the collection grew very rapidly.⁴ Much of the material

was stored in a basement room of the Morgan house at Madison Avenue and 36th Street. Other pieces were on loan to libraries, stored in a warehouse, or kept in the bank offices. Clearly a library building was needed to consolidate the materials in one place.

Morgan purchased property in 1900 on 36th Street adjacent to his house and first commissioned a design from the firm of Warren & Wetmore, architects of the New York Yacht Club Building (Morgan was then president of the club).⁵ Whitney Warren's baroque fantasy was rejected and Morgan turned instead to McKim, Mead & White, giving the firm the commission in 1902.

By that date McKim, Mead & White was the country's most prestigious architectural firm, exerting considerable influence over architectural development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In particular, the firm played a leading role in promoting the popularity of classically-inspired architectural forms. The firm had been established in 1879, and with the design of the Villard Houses (1882-86), reintroduced the Renaissance style to American architecture. The Boston Public Library (1887-95) was another major essay in the style. The University Club (1897-99) is a leading example of firm's work in the palazzo mode. The latter was the design of Charles McKim, senior partner in the firm, and it was to McKim that Morgan ultimately turned for his library.

Charles Follen McKim (1847-1909) was born in Chester County, Pennsylvania. After studying engineering at Harvard, McKim turned to architecture, apprenticing in the office of New York architect Russell Sturgis. He then spent three years traveling and studying in Europe, including time at the Paris Ecole des Beaux-Arts. On his return in 1870, McKim joined the firm of Gambrill & Richardson, then set up an office with William Rutherford Mead in 1872. Stanford White joined them in 1879. McKim's approach to design was a classical one, and his French Beaux-Arts training led him to seek a clarity of plan expressed in the careful proportions and organization of the facade.

McKim's proclivities show themselves clearly in his Morgan Library design. His first design was a large rectangular block with a Palladian-inspired Ionic entrance portico.⁶ The library design as built looked back to McKim's 1891 design for the Walker Art Gallery at Bowdoin College, but was more fully developed and carefully executed. The specific prototype is the attic story of the Nymphaeum for Pope Julius III in Rome, built in 1555 by Ammanati. The facade of the Morgan Library is divided into three 40-foot bays, each of which is subdivided into units of three. A recessed entrance set beneath a barrel-vaulted arch carried on double columns dominates the central bay, while the side bays feature recessed niches. The attic story, rising above a cornice, is divided into recessed panels with surrounding frames that carry up the lines of the pilasters below. The walls are of Tennessee marble blocks laid up with dry joints, a technique used in the construction of the Erechtheum and one which McKim estimated added \$50,000 to the cost of the library building.⁷

Sculpture is an important element of the exterior design, illustrating McKim's belief in encouraging a unity of the arts. The lions flanking the

entrance steps are by Edward Clark Potter, who went on to create the lions of the New York Public Library. The main sculpture commission was given to Andrew O'Connor, who had designed the portal frieze of St. Bartholomew's Church for McKim, Mead & White. By 1905, O'Connor had only completed the dedicatory panel in the attic parapet--a relief sculpture depicting the winged muses of Tragic and Lyric Poetry--and the lunette over the entrance door--two boys with the emblem of Aldus, the Venetian printer. O'Connor was released from his contract, and the other relief sculptures in the side bays were designed by Adolph Weinman.

The interior design is as carefully thought out and executed as the exterior. Behind the Italian bronze entrance doors is the domed entrance hall. (The main entrance is now customarily closed and access is through an auxiliary hallway leading from the annex). Rectangular in plan, the entrance hall, which is also called the rotunda, is intersected at the north by an apse with semi-dome. The floor surface, which is of richly-colored marble, is laid in a pattern modeled on one in the Villa Pia in the Vatican. Waldo Story, an American sculptor based in Rome, helped to secure the marble. The walls are divided into mosaic panels, above a marble baseboard, by veined Skyros marble pilasters with Composite capitals. Delicate moldings in contrasting mosaic outline the panels. Freestanding columns of green veined Cippolino marble flank the doorways leading into the east and west rooms. These doorways have white marble enframements incorporating entablatures with contrasting marble panels. The marble enframed antique doorway in the apse, leading into the librarian's room, supports a lunette with a Della Robbia sculpture. The upper portion of the walls incorporate a full entablature of white marble with contrasting marble panels in the frieze. Marble benches and freestanding marble columns supporting alabaster lamps are other features of note.

Surmounting the room is the richly-adorned domed ceiling with central skylight. The ceiling murals and plasterwork decoration are the work of the noted American muralist, H. Siddons Mowbray.

Henry Siddons Mowbray (1858-1928), born in Alexandria, Egypt, of British parents, was brought to the United States as a young child and raised by relatives in Massachusetts. At the age of 20, he went to Paris to study art, entering the atelier of Leon Bonnat. Returning to New York in 1886, he became an academician, a member of the Society of American Artists, and taught men's life classes at the Art Students League. One of his first patrons was Thomas B. Clarke, the noted collector of American art, and his first mural commission came from Clarke. In his posthumous autobiography Mowbray wrote: "A fondness for the Italian art of the Renaissance came over me. I wanted above all things to do mural work."⁸ Among Mowbray's major mural commissions were: the main hall of Collis P. Huntington's New York mansion (1892-1894); "The Transmission of the Law," a frieze in the Appellate Division Courthouse in New York (1898); the drawing-room ceiling of the F.W. Vanderbilt mansion at Hyde Park, N.Y. (1897); the boardroom of the Prudential Life Insurance Co. at Newark, N.J. (with E.H. Blashfield); the United States Courtroom in the Federal Building, Cleveland, Ohio; the ceiling of the Gunn Memorial Library, Washington, Conn.; the chancel of St. John's Church, Washington, Conn.; and the chancel of St. Michael's Church, Litchfield, Conn. Especially notable was the decoration of the library of the University Club, another commission which came to him via Charles McKim. These murals, executed

in 1904, were based on Pinturicchio's wall paintings in the Borgia apartments in the Vatican. He went to Rome in 1902 to study the originals, and while there served as the director of the American Academy.

Mowbray's decorative program for the Morgan Library entrance hall is also based on Renaissance prototypes--Raphael's ceiling in the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican and the Villa Madama in Rome. At the time Mowbray received the contract, May 12, 1904, the subjects were not fixed, and he chose themes that alluded to the Morgan collection. The largest murals are in the lunettes, which intersect the dome, above the entrances. That to the south, above the original library entrance, illustrates Arthurian Romance and the Divine Comedy.⁹ Above the east entrance is the muse of Epic Poetry with Homer and several Greek deities. To the west is the muse of Lyrical Poetry with Tasso and Petrarch.

The ceiling of the dome is subdivided by painted and gilded bands into panels. The four roundels have figures portraying Religion, Art, Science, and Philosophy. The large rectangular panels depict the Transmission of Knowledge (School of Plato), Force Chained by Wisdom (Conquest of Light over Darkness), Art Crowned, and the Annunciation. In the small panels are painted figures suggesting classical reliefs. The semi-dome of the apse is adorned by intricate plasterwork setting off ten figural panels in relief on a blue background. These portray Wheat, Flowers, Ceres, The Vine, Fruit, Venus and Cupid, Mercury and Persephone, Diana the Huntress, Cupid and Psyche, and Silenus and the Young Bacchus.

Opening off the entrance hall to the east, is the impressive east room, dominated by triple tiers of bookcases which line the walls. These handsome wooden bookcases, which store many important volumes in the collection, are enclosed by grilled doors. Projecting balconies provide access to the upper tiers. On the east wall between the bookcases is a massive Italian Renaissance fireplace, above which is a magnificent 16th-century Flemish tapestry depicting the Triumph of Avarice.¹⁰ A pair of casement windows, incorporating stained-glass fragments, light the north wall. The room rises above a gilded entablature to an impressive coved ceiling with intersecting groin vaults forming lunettes. The lunettes and flanking spandrels are adorned with Mowbray murals. The form of the spandrels and the basic idea of the decoration again show their debt to Mowbray's and McKim's Roman studies, for they are derived from the Sala di Galatea of the Villa Farnesina. The eighteen lunettes are decorated with alternating female muses and circular portraits of leaders or teachers of civilization. The muses are stylistically based on Pinturicchio's sibyls at Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. The murals depict: Socrates, History, Caxton, Music, Herodotus, Science (this mural is signed and dated (1904) by Mowbray), Galileo, Astronomy, Columbus, Tragedy, Dante, Comedy, Botticelli, Painting, Michelangelo, Architecture, Sangallo, and Poetry. Twelve spandrels flanking the lunettes are adorned with the symbols of the zodiac and the Roman deities governing the appropriate months. Two additional spandrels depict Pluto taking Persephone to Hades and Mercury returning Persephone from Hades, representing the change of seasons. The researches of Morgan Library curator William Voelkle show

that the zodiac signs had particular significance for Morgan.¹¹ Of special interest are the signs of Aries and Gemini over the entrance which coincide with dates of Morgan's birth (April 17, 1837) and his marriage to Frances Louise Tracy (May 31, 1865). Richly ornamented gilded paneling surrounds the ceiling skylight set with leaded-glass panes.

The west room, to the west of the entrance hall, was designed as Morgan's study. Wayne Andrews has characterized it as "one of the great achievements of American interior decoration, revealing as do few other rooms in the United States, all that an architect might accomplish in the Age of Elegance."¹² The room features low wooden bookcases, enclosed by grilled doors, and a marble fireplace traditionally ascribed to the studio of Desiderio da Settignano.¹³ The walls are lined with red silk damask, a modern copy by Scalamandré of the original armorial pattern that hung on the walls of the Chigi Palace in Rome. The room is lit by windows containing stained-glass fragments which Morgan had collected from old churches and museums while a schoolboy at Vevey, Switzerland, and the University of Göttingen. An alabaster chandelier hangs from the ceiling.

The precise origin of the painted wood ceiling remains a mystery. In 1905 McKim had purchased an antique Italian ceiling from Stefano Bardini, and Thomas Waderton was contracted to piece it together and install it in the west room. The ceiling displays two sets of arms; because of the resemblance of these arms to those illustrated in an Aldobrandini manuscript in the Morgan collection, the ceiling's origin was incorrectly attributed to the Aldobrandini Palace in a London Times article of Dec. 4, 1908. Later one set of arms was correctly identified as those of Cardinal Ignazio Gigli of Lucca. The other set belongs to the Convent of St. Stephen in Empoli. Recent research has revealed that both sets of arms were painted on the ceiling by James Wall Finn (d. 1913), the noted decorator and muralist who was responsible for the overall decoration of the west room.¹⁴ Finn based his coats of arms designs on illustrations of 16th-century Italian bookplates.

While retaining the original furnishings, the room is used to display many of the choice artworks in the Morgan collection including sculpture and goldwork. A portrait of J. Pierpont Morgan by Frank Holl hangs over the fireplace, while one of his son, J.P. Morgan, by Frank O. Salisbury, is on the west wall.

Together McKim and Morgan created one of the great architectural monuments of New York City. Morgan wanted the best, and McKim was anxious to comply. On February 1, 1906, McKim wrote to Stanford White: "The sky is blue and there is no occasion for worry.../Morgan/ expressed just pride and satisfaction in the building."¹⁵ McKim's own sense of accomplishment was well justified. Mowbray had written of McKim's efforts: "I doubt whether he had ever before been spurred to the point he was in this work in every detail."¹⁶ Indeed, Morgan himself often said that the building was not his library but McKim's.¹⁷ Clearly this splendid showcase for Morgan's collection was a source of great achievement for both men.

Following the completion of the building, Morgan continued to add to his collection, increasing its quality and density. He also appointed Belle DaCosta Greene as librarian at the recommendation of Junius Morgan. Among Morgan's notable purchases were rare bookbindings, American 19th-century literary manuscripts, Coptic manuscripts, a collection of master

drawings, and many illuminated manuscripts, incunabula, and autographs. J.P. Morgan continued in this tradition in the years after his father's death and added many exceptional illuminated manuscripts. J.P. Morgan also transferred the library to a board of trustees in 1924, when it was incorporated as a public reference library. An annex on the site of Pierpont Morgan's house was constructed in 1928 from designs by Benjamin Wistar Morris. This wing houses an exhibition hall, reading room, staff facilities, and stack space. In 1949, a national association of Fellows of The Pierpont Morgan Library was established "to provide funds for exceptional acquisitions, and to encourage the use of the collections by financing publications and making grants-in-aid to scholars."¹⁸

With the aid of the Fellows, legacy income, and other contributions, the library has been able to maintain vigorous and noteworthy collecting and exhibition programs. In 1960-62 another wing was added behind the annex. This was designed by Alexander P. Morgan. A further addition, designed by Platt, Wyckoff & Coles, for offices and storage vaults was made in 1977.

The Pierpont Morgan Library is a National Historic Landmark and, since 1966, has been a New York City Landmark. The building continues to house one of the foremost collections of its kind, and its design, exterior and interior, is a lasting legacy of the taste and judgment of J. Pierpont Morgan and Charles McKim.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Morgan, John Pierpont," Dictionary of American Biography, vol. 7 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 176.
2. Ibid., p. 179.
3. Frederick B. Adams, Jr. An Introduction to the Pierpont Morgan Library (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1974), p. 7
4. For a description of his purchases in the 1890s and early 1900s, see Adams, pp. 9-10.
5. Warren's drawings for the project are now in the collections of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum.
6. This was on display at the Morgan Library in its 75th Anniversary Exhibit (December 1981-February 7, 1982).
7. Wayne Andrews, Mr. Morgan and His Architect (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1957), pp. 4-5.
8. "Mowbray, Henry Siddons," Dictionary of American Biography, vol. 7 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 298.
9. Wayne Andrews, p. 7, notes that the library possesses three original editions of the Divine Comedy and several Dante manuscript texts.
10. Wayne Andrews, p. 8, suggests that Morgan may have been amused to note that one of the figures is stealing the leaves of an illuminated manuscript.

11. See: Paul Goldberger, "Morgan Library Show Traces 75-Year History," New York Times, Dec. 30, 1981, p. C8, and William Voelkle, Diagrams of Morgan Library Ceiling Decorations (New York, /1981/).
12. Andrews, p. 8.
13. Adams, p. 19.
14. The ceiling was discussed in the 75th Anniversary Exhibit.
15. Quoted in Andrews, p. 1.
16. Quoted in the 75th Anniversary Exhibit.
17. Andrews, p. 12.
18. Adams, p. 14.

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this interior, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Pierpont Morgan Library, first floor interior consisting of the entrance hall, the east room, and the west room; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, columns, murals, sculpture, fireplaces, attached bookcases, and light fixtures, have a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City, and that the interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more, and that the interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public, and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Pierpont Morgan Library, built in 1903-06, is one of the finest neo-Italian Renaissance buildings in New York City; that the library was designed by Charles McKim, senior partner in the country's most prestigious architectural firm, McKim, Mead & White, to house the extensive book, manuscript, and art collection of J. Pierpont Morgan; that the library with its interior is a major manifestation of the turn-of-the-century movement which called for an integration of architecture, sculpture, and painting; that the design displays the skill and classical proclivities of Charles McKim; that the interior and exterior harmoniously work together to create a splendid showcase for Morgan's collection; that the interior is particularly distinguished by the extensive ceiling murals of H. Siddons Mowbray and the rich array of wood and marbled surfaces; that the murals, which are based on Renaissance prototypes, depict themes that allude to Morgan and his collection; that today the Morgan Library continues to house one of the foremost collections of its kind; and that the library building, exterior and interior, is a lasting legacy of the taste and judgment of J. Pierpont Morgan and Charles McKim.

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 an Interior Landmark the Pierpont Morgan Library, first floor interior consisting of the entrance hall, the east room, and the west room; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, columns, murals, sculpture, fireplaces, attached bookcases, and light fixtures; 29 East 36th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 866, Lot 25 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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Photo: Morgan Library

PIERPONT MORGAN LIBRARY
29 East 36th Street
Manhattan

Entrance Hall

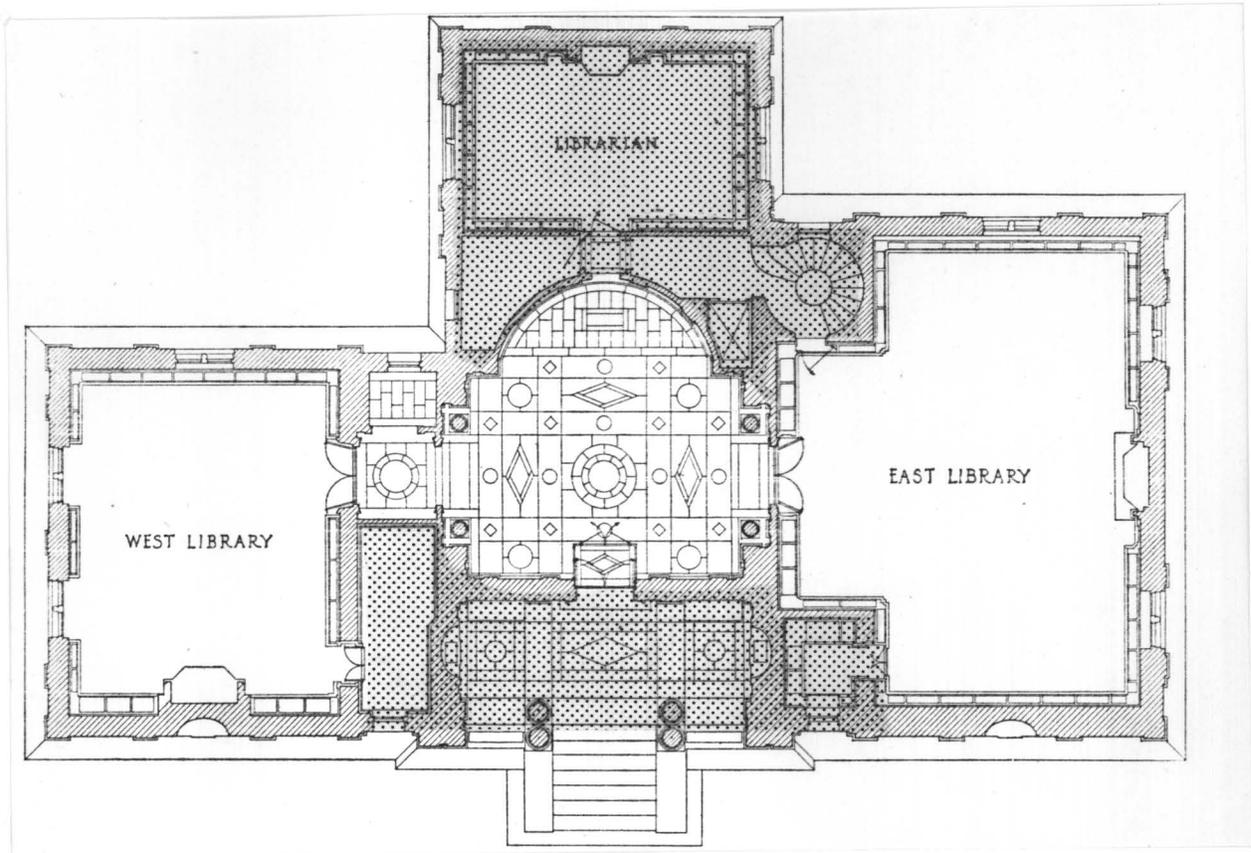
Built 1903-06; architects McKim, Mead & White



Photo: Morgan Library

PIERPONT MORGAN LIBRARY, 29 East 36th Street, Manhattan

West Room



Morgan Library Interior
29-33 East 36th Street
Manhattan

Architects: McKim, Mead & White
Date: 1903-07

Not Drawn to Scale
Deleted Areas