

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

1. Name of Property

historic name Corcoran Gallery of Art (including interior spaces)

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 500 17th Street NW

☐

not for publication

city or town Washington, D.C.

☐

vicinity

state District of Columbia code DC county _____ code 001 zip code 20006

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide ___ local

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government _____

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official _____ Date _____

Title _____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register ___ determined eligible for the National Register

___ determined not eligible for the National Register ___ removed from the National Register

___ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper _____ Date of Action _____

Corcoran Gallery of Art
Name of Property

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County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | private |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | public - Local |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | public - State |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | public - Federal |

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | building(s) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | District |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Site |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Structure |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Object |

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing
1	buildings
	sites
	structures
	objects
1	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

Building Exterior listed 1994

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/museum,
education, school

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/museum,
education, school

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS:

Classical Revival, Beaux Arts

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: CONCRETE

walls: Brick, steel, granite, marble

roof: Glass, copper

other: Bronze decorative elements

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Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

Summary Paragraph

The Corcoran Gallery of Art stands at the intersection of 17th Street and New York Avenue, NW, close to the White House and along the row of ceremonial buildings (including the Red Cross and the Pan American Union buildings) that line 17th Street along the west side of the Presidents' Park. The Gallery, which fills the western side of 17th Street NW between E Street to the south and New York Avenue to the north, is an exceptional Beaux-Arts expression of a space ideally suited for the appreciation of art, combining elegant exterior and interior features into a purposeful, exquisitely articulated structure. "I have tried to make it simple and monumental and above all to give it the appearance of an art building," architect Ernest Flagg commented after the building was completed.ⁱ The gallery's exterior was included in the *National Register* in 1971, but, following the practices of the time, the documentation accompanying the nomination was limited. This amendment to the nomination contains additional documentation of the building's interior, including the atrium, grand staircase, hemicycle, rotunda, Salon Doré, and other spaces highlighted in Illustrations 3, 4 & 5.

The gallery's interior spaces are divided into several major sections that reflect the uses originally intended for those spaces. The main gallery area accessed from 17th Street is dominated by the grand Atrium that fills the center of the original exhibit space, with separate galleries for individual exhibits surrounding that space on two floors. The second floor is accessed through a grand staircase at the center rear of the first floor atrium. At the stairway's landing is the doorway to the Clark Wing, designed by Charles Platt in 1925, which extends in a series of galleries behind the original gallery space and also fills two floors as well as a mezzanine. At the northern apex of the building is the "hemicycle," containing an auditorium on the ground floor and a large gallery for temporary exhibitions on the second floor. To the west of the hemicycle is a wing designed for and still occupied by the Corcoran School of Art.

Illustrations 1 and 2 present floor plans of the Flagg building prior to the construction of the Platt addition. Illustrations 3 through 5 depict the gallery after the construction of the Platt addition in 1928. Illustrations 6 through 28 depict the interior of the building as enumerated in the list of illustrations.

Narrative Description

Physical Description

The main section of the gallery building, completed in 1897, was designed by Ernest Flagg and is the second home for the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which was originally located several blocks to the north in what is now the Renwick Gallery on the northeast corner of 17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue NW. The Corcoran Gallery building has had two significant structural changes since it was first constructed. First, in 1915, the large open auditorium on the northeast corner of the building, known as the Hemicycle, was modified by Washington architect Waddy B. Wood to include a second floor of gallery space above the auditorium, and windows were added to the exterior of the Hemicycle. Second, in 1925, with the aid of a major bequest from the estate of William A. Clark, the trustees of the Gallery commissioned architect Charles A. Platt to design an extension to the rear of the original building that adds a number of additional galleries as well as office and storage space. Other than the alterations to the Hemicycle and the spaces added in 1925, the interior spaces have not changed significantly since the building was constructed in 1897. The measurements of the spaces in the original Flagg-designed building are provided in Illustrations 1 and 2.

ⁱ Debra L. Alderson, National Register of Historic Places registration form for the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 11.

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Ernest Flag (1857-1947) was a leading proponent of structural rationalism, and his Beaux-Arts, *Néo-Grec* design for the Corcoran is an outstanding example of the rationalist approach to architecture. The building clearly conveys its several purposes through its division into three main sections: the stately, formal art gallery along 17th Street, the multipurpose Hemicycle at the corner of 17th and New York Avenue, and the academically oriented art school along New York Avenue. The principal interior spaces likewise adhere to Flag's structural rationalist credo as well as the *Néo-Grec* style he adopted for the building. Entering through the main gallery entrance on 17th Street, one arrives in an entry **Vestibule** designed to provide a measured transition to the stately and contemplative interior spaces. The rectangular space measures 46 feet by 15 feet. Two pairs of Doric columns frame statuary niches on either side of a short flight of eight steps that leads to the center of the Gallery's main interior space, the large Atrium that extends across the center of this section of the building, surrounded by smaller rooms for galleries and offices.

The central **Atrium** is 170 feet long and 50 feet across. It is divided into three sections, including two separate atrium spaces on either side of a columned central passage. The center section serves as a columned corridor leading from the entry vestibule to the grand staircase at the rear of the gallery. There are a total of 40 fluted Indiana limestone columns in the Atrium: four columns on either side of the central passage plus two sets of 16 that ring the two rectangular atria to the north and south. All these columns are 18 feet high. The two atrium spaces were originally designed for the display of statuary; each is illuminated by a large rectangular skylight that keeps the space brightly lit during daylight hours. This lighting was an essential aspect of the design of the gallery as not only a museum for casual observers but also a teaching space for the Corcoran School of Art. The bright natural light provides excellent illumination for students copying plaster casts of classical and Renaissance sculptures.

An array of 16 columns surrounds the perimeter of the "open" space lit by the skylight in each of the two atria. There are two sets of columns in each skylit area; Doric columns on the ground floor and Ionic columns directly above them on the second floor. The second floor columns are interspersed with neoclassical panels that serve as safety railings for the second floor; they are pierced with arrays of neoclassical *claustra* that match ventilation grilles on the interior of the building and also echo the row of *claustra* near the top of the 17th Street exterior façade. Additional space is provided for circulation around the outside of the columned area on each floor. Ringing the interior floor space of the two skylit areas are large glass panels set into the floor that serve a dual function. During daylight hours, they provide natural light to the studio spaces on the basement level. In the evenings, artificial light in the basement studios provides warm illumination up through the glass panels to the main floor, providing a temple-like glow to the Atrium. These glass floor panels as well as the skylights remain essentially unchanged from the original design, continuing the patterns of natural light that were intended by the architect for the most prominent spaces in the gallery.

The design of the Atrium embodies multiple neoclassical and Beaux Art allusions. The basic structure of an open central atrium is a standard Roman feature found in domestic architecture such as the villas at Pompeii. A Beaux Arts antecedent in Paris for the two-story atrium is Félix Duban's Palais des Études (1834-40), which Ernest Flag may have had in mind. Henri Labrousse's Bibliothèque Nationale (1854-75) also includes glass floor panels for light and likely was the inspiration for Flag's design. Previously the use of such panels was little known in the United States. Originally the walls surrounding the two atrium spaces were painted a dark Pompeian red with green burlap, giving them a rich, deep color that contrasted with the white marble columns. Of the two atria, the one to the south is ringed at the top of the first floor with a plaster cast of elements of the frieze from the Parthenon in Athens. This frieze marked the southern atrium as the one where classical sculptures would be exhibited, whereas the northern atrium was intended for Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque statuary.ⁱⁱ

The Atrium served as both exhibit space and a central axis corridor offering access to two large and five smaller gallery rooms, originally devoted to the display of sculpture and other objects. While the first floor spaces were originally devoted to sculpture, the second floor galleries immediately above were used primarily to exhibit paintings.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Moore, *Architecture Is Elementary*, (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1979), 68.

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A visitor crossing the central passage from the entrance vestibule would be taken to the elegant **Grand Staircase** on the west side that provides access to the second floor as well as the rear addition designed by Charles Platt. The central first flight of the staircase is 16 feet wide, with relatively low risers, making for a comfortable climb to the mid-level landing, where a visitor could turn before proceeding up to the second floor, to gain a perspective on the Atrium space. Flanking the central flight of stairs are stepped, block-like marble platforms designed to accommodate statues on pedestals as well as decorative plantings. Six statues on pedestals are currently on view on these platforms. A brass-topped railing has been added to the staircase for safety reasons; originally there was no railing. On the west wall, at the landing is a grand central doorway, now leading to the William A. Clark wing. Originally this was a niche for statuary of classical design, flanked by colonettes and topped with a pediment; Charles Platt replaced it with a larger doorway leading to the Rotunda to the west.

The original second floor is reached by two parallel flights of stairs, lined with decorative limestone balustrades, which rise on both sides of the first flight and turn back toward the second floor level of the Atrium. The second floor level of the Atrium is cut through with two open light wells, creating what is known as a "bridge" across the center of the large Atrium space. The second floor of the Atrium offered exhibit space for the display of paintings as well as providing access to eight adjoining galleries also devoted to the display of paintings. It also served as a review gallery for dignitaries at official receptions.

The first floor of the Flagg building originally contained seven **galleries** opening off the Atrium which displayed sculpture and plaster casts. Today, the three small galleries on the building's east side (Seventeenth Street) and the largest gallery on the south side appear to house administrative functions. The west wall of the space now designated as Gallery 4 has been breached to provide access to Gallery 5 in the Platt addition. There are two large galleries to the west of the Atrium, with the north space now housing the museum shop and the southern remaining exhibition space. The trapezoidal space between the north gallery and the hemicycle, originally utilized as an art school classroom, is now designated "Gallery 31," for the exhibition of work by faculty and students. The publically-accessible portion of these first floor spaces exhibits many original-appearing features that match those in other portions of the Flagg building. They include transomed doorways housing double pocket doors, each decorated with three stacked incised panels. These doorways have elaborate multi-plane moldings, and complex ceiling moldings with tiers of cornice and frieze elements.

The Flagg building's second floor contained eight galleries which originally displayed paintings and remain in use as exhibit space today. These galleries are configured differently and employ features not found in those of the first floor. The most striking difference is the glass and metal lattice ceiling found on Galleries 14 (originally H), 15 (originally I), 19 (originally E), 20 (originally F), and 21 (originally G). These ceilings rest atop complex moldings with multiple tiers of entablatures, friezes, and cornices that occupy the upper six feet of the wall. Profiled baseboards and trim surround doubled pocket doors of the same design as those of the first floor. The gallery floors as well as those of the Atrium are of wooden strips laid in a herringbone pattern, corresponding to the description of the innovative Nightingale flooring system laid down in 1898. The transition from Atrium to gallery is demarcated by a marble slab that spans each doorway, while a border of marble separates the herringbone floor strips from the wall. The upper sections of Galleries 16 (originally B), 17 (originally C), and 18 (originally D) on the east side of the building differ from the other second floor exhibition spaces. In these galleries, the glass roof rests atop a shelf-like cornice that is separated from the vertical plain of the walls by a curved frieze section, apparently to accommodate the roofline of the Seventeenth Street façade of the building. The glass and metal lattice ceilings of these galleries are divided into three sections in the approximate ratio of 1:2:1 by wooden cross-members running east-west. The upper moldings of these galleries are approximately ten feet in height, with a complex set of entablatures, frieze sections, and cornices comprising their upper six feet. Their lower section consists of a pattern of incised squares, whose center element is an extruded pyramid. These squared elements are separated by extruded decorative elements which suggest highly-stylized classical columns. This frieze wraps all four walls of the galleries.

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The **Rotunda**, immediately west of the Grand Staircase, was designed by Charles Platt as a transition from the original Flagg galleries to the less formal galleries he added in 1925. The restrained circular Rotunda is 48 feet wide and has a coffered, domed ceiling with a large skylight oculus, recalling the design of the Pantheon in Rome. The Rotunda, which serves as the striking entranceway to the Clark wing, references the circular entrance hall of the New York City residence of Senator William A. Clark (1839-1925). The most impressive works from the Clark collection were originally displayed in this space, including paintings by Titian, Rembrandt, and Perugino. When *The Washington Post* reviewed the opening of the Clark wing in 1928 it drew special attention to the rotunda: “The round room is the “clou” [highlight] of the collection and of the structure as well.”ⁱⁱⁱ Though inspired by a monumental Roman public space, Platt’s rotunda is not nearly as imposing and effectively signals a transition to the more intimate spaces of the Clark wing that continue behind it.

Immediately west of the Rotunda is the Clark Wing’s **Staircase Hall**, a square, wood-paneled room with a marble floor. A grand marble staircase with decorative iron railing leads in two right-angled flights up to a balcony and the Clark Wing galleries on the second floor. There is also a somewhat hidden staircase at the rear of the space that leads down to the first floor Clark Wing galleries. (The Rotunda and Staircase Hall are essentially at a mezzanine level between the two main floors defined by the original Ernest Flagg building). The Staircase Hall’s dark walls contrast sharply with the whitewashed galleries surrounding it, including the walls of the landing at the top of the stairs. Dark marble Corinthian columns—very unlike the austere, white, fluted columns of the *Néo-Grec* Atrium—stand along the balustrade at the top of the staircase. The overall décor is English in style, bearing similarities to stair halls that Platt had previously designed for country houses.^{iv} Despite the dark paneling, the Staircase Hall is well-lit by the large rectangular cupola and skylight in the center of its ceiling. The walls were originally hung with three Beauvais tapestries woven after designs by François Boucher (1703-1770). The paneled Staircase Hall gracefully completes the transition from the public Atrium to galleries that seemingly could be rooms in a genteel country estate, displaying the artworks of a great private collection, as they originally did.

By returning to the first floor Atrium and heading to the northern end of the building, one arrives at the **Hemicycle**, cleverly designed by Ernest Flagg to fill the space at the angular intersection of New York Avenue and 17th Streets NW. Originally, there was no entrance from the Atrium to the Hemicycle’s auditorium, which was meant to function as a lecture hall for the separate art school wing that has its entrance on New York Avenue. The auditorium is 67 feet wide and 45 feet deep and can seat about 300. Fourteen fluted Doric columns, similar to the ones on the first floor of the Atrium, ring the auditorium, supporting a classical entablature. Two pairs of Corinthian columns flank the stage. As Flagg built it, the auditorium space filled the entire Hemicycle; there was no second floor. Flagg based his design on the two-story auditorium at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. However, in 1915, the Corcoran’s trustees decided to modify the Hemicycle to gain additional gallery space and to try to improve the auditorium’s poor acoustics. They hired Washington architect Waddy B. Wood (1869-1944) to redesign the hemicycle with new gallery space on the second floor but retaining the auditorium on the first floor. The glass-roofed second floor Hemicycle Gallery covers a substantial 1,850 square feet of floor space. Wood also added three windows on the previously blank first-floor exterior wall of the hemicycle, matching the new windows to Flagg’s originals on 17th Street.

On the opposite (south) side of the building, among the rooms designed by Platt for the Clark wing, is the **Salon Doré**, an early neoclassical room removed from one of the grand mansions, or *hôtels*, of Paris some time before 1904. The room has had several different titles. For many years it was known simply as the “French Room” and was roped off from visitors as a period room displaying French Neoclassical design and decorations. The Corcoran Gallery undertook an extensive and painstaking restoration of the room from 1989 to 1993, culminating in its reopening as the Salon Doré, a

ⁱⁱⁱ Ada Rainey, “Clark Wing at the Corcoran Now is Open” in *The Washington Post*, Mar. 11, 1928, S13.

^{iv} Barbara Moore, “History in Stone: Beaux-Arts Classicism and the Corcoran Gallery of Art” in *Architecture Is Elementary*, (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1979), 70.

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title that was found in a 1794 inventory of the original hôtel in Paris. The room contains “arguably the finest *boiserie* [carved and gilded wood paneling] in the United States.”^v

The architect for the Salon Doré was Jean-François-Thérèse Chalgrin (1734-1811), a neoclassicist who is best known as the designer of the Arc de Triomphe. The room he designed as one of his first decorative works is an early example of French Neoclassicism, matching the tastes of the Count d’Orsay. Eschewing the curves and frills of the rococo style, Chalgrin’s salon is dominated by the rectilinear emphasis of a series of engaged Corinthian pilasters overtopped by an elegant classical cornice. The severity of the straight lines, however, are modulated by neoclassical garlands above the doorways and a series of elaborately carved trophy panels, as well as a typically delicate and airy ceiling mural painted by Jean-Hugues Taraval (1729-1785), which was done originally for a larger adjacent room. Originally there were four trophy panels in the room, depicting “Victory,” “Love,” “Music,” and the “Arts and Sciences.”

The salon was originally built as a room in the *Hôtel de Clermont*, an elegant mansion constructed between 1708 and 1714 for the widow of Louis de Guilhem de Castelnau de Clermont, marquis de Saissac in the aristocratic Faubourg Saint-Germain quarter of Paris. It was designed by Jean-Baptiste-Alexandre Le Blond (1679-1719), the noted French architect who also designed the *Hôtel de Vendôme* in Paris as well as palaces and parks in St. Petersburg, Russia. In 1768 the mansion was acquired by Pierre-Gaspard-Marie Grimod, Count d’Orsay, who renovated the house and constructed the Salon Doré in 1770 as a drawing room for his young bride, Marie-Louise-Albertine-Amélie, Princess de Croÿ-Molenbais.

Some time before 1904, the extraordinary paneling of the Salon Doré was dismantled and sold to Senator Clark to be installed in the grand French-style palace that he was planning to build on Fifth Avenue in New York City. Clark also purchased the Taraval ceiling mural from a larger adjoining room in the *Hôtel de Clermont* rather than the mural originally installed in the Salon Doré. The original ceiling mural was moved to a different Paris mansion, the *Hôtel Veil-Picard*, where it was destroyed with that mansion in 1970. The original Salon Doré had been a roughly square room, but, using the larger more rectangular ceiling mural from the adjoining room, Clark had the salon expanded when he installed it in his Fifth Avenue mansion. This required rearranging and adding to the original elements. Two windows were added, two additional trophy panels were created (depicting “Theater” and “Sports”), and four new pilasters, a mantelpiece, and a pair of mirror-paneled doors were also added. Also a replica cornice was created; the original was not sold to Clark and remains in place in the *Hôtel de Clermont*. After Clark’s death, the Salon Doré was included in the Clark bequest that was accepted by the Corcoran Gallery. Charles Platt designed a room in the Clark Wing to the exact dimensions of the existing salon so that no further architectural changes would be necessary when the room was moved to Washington.

The design of the room’s paneling leaves the lower parts of the walls undecorated because specially designed furniture, called *mobilier d’architecture*, was to be arranged in front of those areas. While most of the room’s original furnishings were likely dispersed as early as the time of the French Revolution, the room’s original four corner tables were kept together as a set and acquired by the Corcoran in 2001. They have now been restored to their proper places in the Salon Doré.

Studio spaces were originally located in the basement of the Flagg building, as well as on the first and second floors at the northwest corner of the building. Although they connected with the Atrium through a corridor, the school had a separate entrance from New York Avenue. The original studios were described as functional spaces with utilitarian finishes, which is how they were depicted in a *Life Magazine* photo feature in 1939.

Description of the Historic Resource

The Corcoran Gallery and School of Art building is composed of spaces related to significant events and developments in art exhibition and education in both the District of Columbia and the United States. These aesthetically-magnificent spaces were the first modern art exhibition spaces in Washington, D.C. They were essential to carrying out W.W.

^v Dare Myers Hartwell, *The Salon Doré*, (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1998), 10.

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Corcoran's vision for the museum, which he endowed to be "dedicated to Art, and used solely for the purpose of encouraging American genius."^{vi} They also played an important role in the broader ceremonial life of the nation's capital.

Art Exhibition in Gilded Age Washington

Until the last years of the nineteenth century, the original Corcoran Gallery at the corner of Seventeenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue NW, designed by James Renwick and opened to the public in 1874, was Washington's only suitable space for the large-scale public exhibition of fine art.^{vii} The city had a few commercial galleries and spaces, such as the rooms of the Cosmos Club, that presented small-scale exhibitions of paintings and sculpture. Although Congress had authorized a national gallery as a component of the Smithsonian as early as 1842, it had never appropriated building funds. Some government-owned art was displayed in the Capitol, while other works decorated the White House and departmental offices. In 1855, much of the nation's art collection had been placed on view in the Smithsonian castle, where it was destroyed in a devastating fire in 1865. Thereafter, many surviving pieces had been loaned to the Corcoran for exhibit along with the gallery's permanent collection and works owned by private collectors.

At W.W. Corcoran's death in 1888, the Corcoran Gallery was among the nation's premiere art museums, although Rush C. Hawkins probably exaggerated when he told the readers of the *North American Review* that:

In the United States there are but two public collections of any particular value. The first and most important belongs to the New York Historical Society, and the second is in the Corcoran Gallery, at Washington.^{viii}

The Corcoran Gallery was also a popular venue during the Gilded Age. Recent writers often suggest that industrialists and financiers like Corcoran endowed monumental public cultural buildings as a form of social control, demonstrating their power to the public by the buildings' proximity to seats of government and validating their values through the display of opulence.^{ix} Whether this was Corcoran's actual motivation, the Corcoran Institution's charter required that admission be free at least two days each week to make the collection accessible to the working public. By 1877, the gallery received more than 77,000 visitors annually, more than three-quarters of whom were admitted without charge, and admitted as many as 2,200 spectators in one evening.^x

The collection was popular despite the Renwick-designed building's relatively small galleries, narrow central staircase, and cramped corridors, which hampered circulation. Plans for night exhibitions, which would have increased the collection's accessibility for the working public, were quickly abandoned because the smoke of the gas jets "so imperiled art objects."^{xi} Illumination remained insufficient after the addition of an electric light plant in 1890. Such constraints also limited the gallery's use for official receptions, an important function given its proximity to the White House and (Old) Executive Office Building. Alice Henderson expressed a common view in *Art Treasures of Washington* (1912) when she wrote that the original building "appears cumbrous and ill-adapted to the uses of a museum."^{xii}

^{vi} http://www.parrishart.org/print_past.asp?id=119

^{vii} The Renwick-designed gallery had a turbulent and brief history as a gallery. Begun in 1859, it was seized by the federal government at the outbreak of the Civil War for use by the Quartermaster's Corps. The building was not returned to Corcoran, a southern sympathizer who had spent much of the war in Europe, until 1869 and required substantial rehabilitation to function as a museum.

^{viii} Rush C. Hawkins, "The Destruction of Art in America," *The North American Review*, April 1887, 381-387.

^{ix} Robert V. Williams, "The Public Library as the Dependent Variable," *The Journal of Library History* (1974-1987), Vol. 16, No. 2, *Libraries & Culture II* (Spring, 1981), 336.

^x *Washington Post*, "City News in Brief," 2/4/1878, and "Corcoran Gallery of Art," 1/16/1878, 12.

^{xi} *Washington Post*, "Corcoran Gallery at Night," January 21, 1890, 8

^{xii} Alice Henderson, *Art Treasures of Washington*, (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1912) 37.

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Major nineteenth century galleries sought to instill artistic sensibility both by exhibiting masterpieces and providing formal instruction in art. In 1887, the Corcoran began offering drawing classes under the supervision of E.F. Andrews.^{xiii} In 1889, it constructed an annex at the rear of the Renwick gallery to accommodate a school of art,^{xiv} whose active rivalry with the previously established Art Students League played out in sniping comments in the columns of the *Washington Post*.^{xv} However, the Corcoran School's enrollment, which totaled approximately 150 students by 1891, and its four-class curriculum, were pinched by limited space, and there was no adjacent land available to further expand the Renwick building.^{xvi}

The Need for a Modern Gallery Building

The construction of a "new" Corcoran Gallery in the mid-1890s evidenced the evolution of the Corcoran's cultural role as well as the expansion of its functions. During the years following Corcoran's death, the United States felt the first flush of world power, making a full-blown entrance into the age of imperialism and manifest destiny by the close of the 1890s. Political and military ascendancy was echoed by aspirations for cultural dominance. Although the cultural elite remained attuned to European models, the nineties saw a stirring of nationalistic pride in American artists' accomplishments. Prominent New York City landscape painter William Merritt Chase, a judge for the Corcoran's annual Gold Medal competition,^{xvii} captured some of this spirit when he noted in 1894:

I will not say that the best work at the Columbian Exposition was done by Americans, for that would be ungracious, but I will say that the Americans showed themselves to be the equals of any painters in the world...The merit came from the fact that they were really artists and also partially from the fact that they were Americans. There is unquestionably a distinctive Americanism in our art...^{xviii}

While Americans advanced their claims as artistic creators and connoisseurs, a chorus of artists, sophisticates, and society figures voiced aspirations for Washington to become the nation's artistic and cultural capital.^{xix} A *Post* editorial rather naively claimed that "Washington city is the natural art center of America," in part because "in Washington there are no groups of men to set the fashions, fix prices, and cheat the people."^{xx} Portraitist Robert Hinckley went so far as to predict that "Washington will become the Paris of America, in an artistic sense."^{xxi} An 1891 *Post* profile of Corcoran curator Dr. Francis S. Barbarin^{xxii} implied that the gallery should serve as a sort of Capitol building for this capital of the arts, as:

^{xiii} Eliphalet Frazer Andrews (1835-1915), a native of Steubenville, Ohio, studied in Paris, Berlin, and Dusseldorf. A noted portraitist, he established a studio in the Corcoran Office Building on 15th Street NW after reputedly being invited to come to Washington by fellow Kenyon College alumnus Rutherford B. Hayes. He began offering instruction at the original Corcoran Gallery in 1877 and became its full-time drawing teacher in 1887, then served as the School of Art's first director until he retired in 1902. In addition to a portrait of Martha Washington that hangs in the White House, Andrews contributed portraits of Hayes, William Henry Harrison, Andrew Johnson, and several other presidents to the Corcoran collection. (See *Steubenville Herald-Star*, 4/10/1900, 2 and *Washington Post*, "E.F. Andrews Dead," 3/20/1915.

^{xiv} *Washington Post*, "Corcoran School of Art," 5/18/1890, 9 and "New Gallery of Art," 2/21/1897, 20.

^{xv} *Washington Post*, "Art in Washington," 1/28/1894, 5

^{xvi} *Washington Post*, "A Possible Arts Center," 3/15/91, 9.

^{xvii} 5/16/94

^{xviii} *Washington Post*, "The Corcoran Gold Medal," May 16, 1894, 5 and "American Art to Lead," 6/3/94, 16.

^{xix} See *Washington Post*, "Washington as an Arts Center," 5/22/1890, 6, "Art of a High Class," 6/22/1890, 9, "Art in Washington," 4/14/1889, 4, "Need for an Art School," 2/4/1891, 7, "A Possible Arts Center," 3/15/91, 9, and "A Congress of Artists," May 18, 1891, 5 as examples of Washington's claims to be an art as well as political capital.

^{xx} *Washington Post*, "Art in Washington," 4/14/1889, 4.

^{xxi} *Washington Post*, "Paris of America," 3/18/1894, 12.

^{xxii} Francis Sinclair Barbarin (1833-1900) was a dentist from Newport, Rhode Island, who came to Washington in 1853 and married the daughter of future Corcoran trustee Anthony Hyde. After the death of his wife, he became a government clerk in 1862. Although he had no formal artistic training, Barbarin joined the gallery in 1874 as assistant to curator William McLeod. Promoted on McLeod's

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For years the Corcoran was the only center for artistic life here, but its interest has gradually extended, it has done much to attract the attention of the country to the Capital as the future art center of the nation.^{xxiii}

In the spring of 1891, a proposal to call a National Congress of Art into session sent excitement rippling through artistic circles across the country. Its Washington organizers felt that the Congress, ostensibly intended to lobby for a federal Department of Art and Architecture, would further advance the city's claim to be "the art as well as the social center" of the nation.^{xxiv} As the *New York Herald* noted, it was assumed that "the Corcoran Art Gallery, as a local Washington institution, occupying in the public mind a somewhat national position" would host the Congress, as well as a gigantic exhibit of loaned works by American artists.^{xxv} However, Dr. Barbarin demurred because of the limited display space within the Renwick Gallery, adding that he did not think that there was any suitably spacious, properly-lighted venue in the city.^{xxvi} This lack of exhibition space and a full-fledged art school in a building with "abundant space and light," were cited as obstacles to Washington's bid to become a national and international artistic capital.^{xxvii} When a somewhat reduced version of the Congress opened in the spring of 1892, it was centered in the Columbian College at Fifteenth and H Streets NW rather than at the Corcoran.^{xxviii}

While the Corcoran trustees' deliberations were not public, a larger and more modern gallery was plainly required for both the institution and the city to embrace their anticipated cultural destinies. In April 1891, the trustees purchased a large portion of Square 171, and, in January 1892, they resolved to erect a new gallery building on its northeast corner. These plans, along with the selection of Ernest Flagg of New York City as architect, were not announced in the newspapers until a few months before groundbreaking in October 1893.^{xxix}

Creator of the "New" Corcoran: Ernest Flagg (1857-1947)

A controversial figure who often had difficult relationships with patrons as well as his peers, Ernest Flagg was also an exceptionally gifted architect with visionary ideas about the role of architecture in improving people's lives. The Corcoran Gallery of Art building was one of his first major commissions, and it stands as a seminal expression of the 19th-century *Néo-Grec* style that was a hallmark of Flagg's classical, rationalist architectural training.

retirement in 1889, Barbarin proved an extremely effective curator, presiding over the founding of the Corcoran School of Art and the transition to the new gallery.

^{xxiii} *Washington Post*, "Its Influence is Wide," 10/11/1891, 12.

^{xxiv} *Washington Post*, "A Congress of Artists," 5/18/ 1891, 5

^{xxv} *Washington Post*, "The New York Herald: A Congress of Art," 5/17/1891, 4.

^{xxvi} *Washington Post*, "Minerva is Worried," 5/20/1891,

^{xxvii} *Washington Post*, "Need for an Art School," 7.

^{xxviii} *Washington Post*, "National Arts Conference," 5/15/1892, 12.

^{xxix} *Washington Post*, "Another Improving Section," 4/26/1891, 10; "New Site for the Gallery," 4/22/91, 8; "The Corcoran Art Gallery," 1/11/1893, 6; "It Will Be a Beauty," 7/10/ 1893, 5; and "Bright Outlook for Building," 10/14/1893, 6, report land purchases, building plans, and the selection of Flagg as architect.

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Flagg was born to a family of artists. His father, Jared Bradley Flagg (1820-1899), had been a portrait painter from an early age, exhibiting at the National Academy of Design in New York City in 1836, when he was only 16. Jared Flagg studied painting with his older brother, George Flagg, a genre painter, as well as his father's half brother, the well-known landscape painter Washington Allston (1779-1843). An older son, Charles Noel Flagg (1848 - 1916), became a relatively well-known academic portrait and still life painter whose oil "The Country Model's First Pose" was hung in the Corcoran Gallery's "First Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting" in 1907.^{xxx}

Upon his death, the *New York Times* summed up the elder Flagg's accomplishments: "He was chiefly known as a portrait painter, and although his work seems to-day very old-fashioned and can hardly bear the test of modern criticism, he had the faculty of catching a likeness, a fairly good sense of color, and his portraits brought, for the times, high prices."^{xxxi} At the time of Ernest Flagg's birth, Jared Flagg had given up painting to become rector of Grace (Episcopal) Church in Brooklyn, New York. He later abandoned that position, and the family moved several times after that. Ernest Flagg's mother, Louisa Hart Flagg, died when he was only 9 years old, and he and the other children were sent away to boarding school, contributing to the instability of his early years.^{xxxii}

Ernest Flagg seems to have gained fiercely individualistic instincts from his father. He was not immediately attracted to architecture in his early adult years; instead, he embarked on an assortment of entrepreneurial enterprises. After starting out as an office boy on Wall Street when he was a teenager, he moved on in 1875 to selling salted codfish with his brother at the Fulton Fish Market in New York City and after that sold oleomargarine for several years. His turn toward the building arts began in 1880 when he joined his brother and father in participating in a venture led by Philip G. Hubert to develop large, modern apartment buildings in New York City. Flagg designed the interior spaces of two of these cooperative apartment buildings, inventing a novel two-story design that made each unit seem like a small house. Flagg's design was noted for its ingenuity.^{xxxiii}

Flagg's modest success drew the attention of Cornelius Vanderbilt II, who, according to Flagg, asked him to draw up plans to modify his newly constructed residence to create large rooms and expand into adjoining space. While the plans were never executed, Vanderbilt was impressed with Flagg's talents and he offered to pay for Flagg to attend the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Flagg arrived in Paris in 1888, at age 31, and spent a little over a year preparing for entry into the École and another year in studies after he passed the entrance exams. A full course of study leading to a diploma would have taken 6 to 10 years, and Flagg was too old to devote such a lengthy period to study. While at the École, Flagg chose to study in the atelier of Paul Blondel (1841-1897), an exponent of structural rationalism and the Néo-Grec architectural style, which had been exemplified by the French Romantic Rationalists of the 1830s and 1840s.^{xxxiv} While Flagg could be eclectic in borrowing from historical architectural styles, he absorbed Blondel's influence and became a proponent of structural rationalism, an approach vividly exemplified in his Corcoran Gallery of Art building.

Flagg returned to New York City in 1891 and went into architectural practice for himself, a champion of the "French School" in America. With fellow alumni of the École de Beaux-Arts, he co-founded and became treasurer of the Beaux-Arts Society of Architects in 1894. Though competition was fierce, Flagg received two important early commissions that would likely have eluded other architects with such limited experience: St. Luke's Hospital in New York City in 1892 and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington in 1893. He received the St. Luke's commission due to the intervention of his

^{xxx} Corcoran Gallery of Art, *First Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting: February 7, 1907 through March 9, 1907*, (Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1907) #355.

^{xxxi} Jared B. Flagg in *The New York Times*, Sept. 26, 1899.

^{xxxii} John A Garraty, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography*, supplement four (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 280.

^{xxxiii} Mardges Bacon, *Ernest Flagg: Beaux-Arts Architect and Urban Reformer* (New York: The Architectural History Foundation, 1986),

12.

^{xxxiv} Bacon, 18.

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patron, Cornelius Vanderbilt. It was for a large, prominent building located on a hilltop on the Upper West Side of the city. Flagg responded with a palatial, richly decorated structure with a domed central tower and pavilions. His plans were praised for their “symmetrical perfectness so loyal to the French Renaissance.”^{xxxv}

The new building for the Corcoran Gallery of Art was only the second major commission for Flagg. A formal competition was held to choose the building’s architect, but Flagg seems to have been selected even before entries by his competitors were submitted. Family connections appear to have won him the assignment. The Corcoran building came to represent the greatest expression of Flagg’s commitment to the French School and specifically the Néo-Grec style favored by his mentor, Paul Blondel. Completed in 1897, the Corcoran is the first example of a public building in the Beaux-Arts style in Washington.^{xxxvi} Moreover, it was unique for Washington buildings in adhering to the Néo-Grec style; later buildings, such as the Pan-American Union building (1908) are in a more popular Beaux-Arts style.^{xxxvii}

Flagg’s Corcoran building was widely acclaimed, both by critics and the public. *The Washington Post* called it a “magnificent temple” and “one of America’s most beautiful structures, as well as one of those most perfectly adapted to the purposes for which it was erected,”^{xxxviii} *The Boston Herald* considered it a “noble and majestic pile” and called it “beautiful within and without.”^{xxxix} For a magazine reader survey in 1899 of the ten most beautiful buildings in the United States, the Corcoran just missed being on the list, coming in at 11th place.^{xl} Frank Lloyd Wright was said to have called it “the best-designed building in Washington.”^{xli} It was clearly a very popular and widely admired structure.

While no one seems to have questioned Flagg’s architectural talent or the excellence of his design for the Corcoran, he was less successful from a business point of view, quarreling with the Board of Trustees over the conduct of a Board-appointed project manager. Ill will over this falling out had a chilling effect on future commissions in Washington, and Flagg failed to win other important commissions, such as the Washington Cathedral project, possibly because of intervention by displeased Corcoran trustees.

Flagg nevertheless designed an assortment of elegant and important Beaux-Arts buildings. In 1897, as the Corcoran was being completed, he began work on a ten-story headquarters building for the Singer Sewing Machine Company, followed by a similar adjacent structure, in New York City. From 1906 to 1908, Flagg then remodeled, combined, and added to these structures to produce the forty-story Singer Tower, the tallest office building in the world at the time at 612 feet and a pioneer of the needle-like skyscrapers that would come to dominate Manhattan in succeeding decades. The widely publicized Singer Tower cemented Flagg’s reputation as a pioneering and even visionary architect whose ideas about skyscraper construction would influence changes in the New York City building code. Also in New York City, Flagg designed a number of notable Beaux-Arts townhouses for the wealthy as well as the headquarters building for publishers Charles Scribner’s and Sons, a more reserved but still distinctly Beaux-Arts style structure. That building was completed in 1913.

Outside of New York, Flagg’s most notable achievement was his set of designs for the new campus of the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, which he designed beginning in 1896 and which were constructed from 1899 to 1907. By the 1890s, the U.S. Navy was at the height of its prestige, and there was a strong desire in Congress to upgrade the Naval Academy’s facilities. All of the previous buildings on the campus were razed and replaced with Flagg’s carefully composed groupings of Beaux-Arts structures clustered around a majestic, domed chapel. Flagg demonstrated great

^{xxxv} “St. Luke’s New Hospital,” in *Harper’s Weekly*, Jan. 7, 1893, as quoted in Bacon, 89.

^{xxxvi} Moore, 65.

^{xxxvii} Ibid.

^{xxxviii} “New Gallery of Art” in *The Washington Post*, Feb. 21, 1897, 20.

^{xxxix} “Corcoran Gallery of Art” in *The Boston Herald*, Feb. 23, 1897, 3.

^{xl} Bacon, 89.

^{xli} Forgey, op. cit.

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flexibility and inventiveness in adapting his rationalist Beaux-Arts canon to the requirements of individual structures. Many architectural critics praised Flagg's designs, and Flagg considered this his most prestigious commission.^{xlii}

In his later years, Flagg was very involved in building code reform and housing reform in New York City. In a return to his roots, he designed a number of smaller houses and apartment buildings for low and middle-income tenants, such as the Flagg Court Apartments for low-income families in Brooklyn, which he designed in 1933. He became a fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1926 and died at age 90 in 1947.

Creating the New Gallery

Much discussion of the Flagg-designed gallery and its 1928 addition by Charles Platt has centered on its impressive façade and exterior ornament, whose significance has been recognized by their designation in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places. Even more significant than the building's exterior presence, which is worthy of commanding its site at the center of the capital, is its interior program, which includes exhibition, educational, and ceremonial spaces that make an exquisite aesthetic impression. The importance of the interior was recognized in the earliest writings about Flagg's design. The *Washington Post's* coverage of the laying of the cornerstone of this "literal palace of art" in May 1894 devoted as much space to describing its abundant studios and galleries, special room for the photographic reproductions of paintings, colonnade, and atrium as it did to its monumental exterior.^{xliii}

The new gallery's interior was finished in stone and marble, with materials and workmanship at least comparable in quality to those of the exterior. While the foundation and lower walls were erected by contractor Joseph Fanning, the stonework of the upper stories, which included the gallery spaces, was by Norcross Brothers, the Massachusetts firm which executed many of the works of H.H. Richardson, including Boston's Trinity Church, Chicago's Marshall Field Building, and Pittsburgh's Alleghany County Courthouse, as well as buildings by such architectural masters as McKim, Mead, and White, Peabody and Stearns, Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge, Carrere & Hastings, and John Russell Pope.^{xliv} The Corcoran Gallery's interior as well as exterior are thus a major work by one of the most distinguished American artisanal firms.^{xlv}

Although the colonnade's eighty fluted Indiana limestone columns were carved in Boston, Norcross Brothers created virtually all of the building's stonework on site. In a large wooden shed near the gallery's foundation excavation, a "fifty horsepower dynamo" powered the saws which sliced up blocks of Georgia marble weighing up to sixteen tons, while highly-skilled carvers shaped the raw stone.^{xlvi} In February, 1896, a *Post* reporter's behind-the-scenes glimpse suggested the monumental character of the gallery's construction. Although the reporter found the exterior "practically finished," with the bronze "Lions of Canova" from the old gallery entrance lying side-by-side facing New York Avenue as they awaited their new bases, the interior was "still in a rough state, with throngs of busy workmen everywhere." The

^{xlii} Bacon, 112.

^{xliii} *Washington Post*, "New Palace of Art," 5/11/1894, 5.

^{xliv} *Norcross Brothers of Worcester, Massachusetts* website at

http://norcross.ca/NORCROSS%20BROTHERS%20FOLDER/NB_0010_Norcross%20Brothers%20Projects.html, accessed August 12, 2012.

^{xlv} Fanning and the Norcross Brothers constructed the new gallery against the backdrop of the Panic of 1893 and a lingering recession, as well as the march of "Coxey's Army" of the unemployed on Washington in 1893 and the Pullman, Bituminous Coal, and Chicago General Strikes of 1894. However, overall, the depressed economy undoubtedly discouraged strikes. Although work rules prohibited the practice, local brick and stoneworker unions eventually tolerated their members working with non-union "scabs" on the project "on account of the hard times." A brief strike occurred in 1896, when a leader of the anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant American Protective Association charged that a Catholic foreman had fired his son for religious reasons, and Norcross Brothers refused to pay a portion of his wages for demonstrated incompetence. See *Washington Post*, "Corcoran Gallery Work: Trouble in the Bricklayers' Union," 11/ 9/1893, 4, "Will Not Throw Up Their Contracts," 11/10/1893, 2, and "Verdict Ends a Strike," 1/26/1896, 5.

^{xlvi} *Washington Post*, "Art's New Corcoran," 2/4/1896, 10.

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colonnade's columns remained encased in protective wooden shrouds, while workers focused on the laying of the main staircase, "one of the building's most impressive features," with its fifteen foot wide marble steps and massive balustrade. The fourteen galleries, which were open to the glass roof, "thus affording the best possible light," were in a "not very advanced state." The Hemicycle and more utilitarian office portions of the building had been finished in "plain substantial fashion."^{xlvii}

Although the *Post* reporter had predicted that the "exquisitely fashioned pile of marble and stone" would be completed by August 1896, the gallery did not open until February 1897. The Renwick building had closed during the last week of January, and the transfer of art works was accomplished without mishap over the intervening weeks. The migration of school functions was more protracted, with students receiving an extra two weeks off after the new building opened.^{xlviii} The move's last stage, however, was not completed for several years. Then, following the sale of the original gallery to the federal government as office space, Moses Ezekiel's statues of Rubens, Rembrandt, and eight other artistic masters were "suspended by their necks from an improvised gallows" and lowered from their perches on the Renwick's façades. In a scene that "strongly resembled a lynching," the seven-foot tall statues were laid face-upward in express wagons and hauled to the new gallery.^{xlix} The statues were then installed in a courtyard area, where they remained before being sold to a museum in Norfolk in the early twentieth century.

The new gallery officially opened with a grand private reception held on the evening of February 22, 1897, despite "most inclement weather." Under more than 3,000 electric bulbs, President Grover Cleveland, cabinet officers, senators and congressmen, military officers, and the diplomatic community were greeted by the Corcoran trustees to the strains of the United States Marine Band.ⁱ On February 24, when the gallery opened to the general public without further ceremony, it received 2,400 visitors.ⁱⁱ At about the time of the dedication, the trustees and Dr. Barbarin made a somewhat controversial decision to open the new gallery on Sunday afternoons with free admission "to benefit the workers."ⁱⁱⁱ Illustration 26 presents newspaper sketch artists' illustrations of the opening.

The New Gallery as Art Exhibition Space

The response to the new gallery was nothing short of ecstatic. The *Post* banished any fears of continuing civic or cultural inadequacy by proclaiming it "one of America's most beautiful structures as well as one of those most perfectly suited to the purposes for which it was erected."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ The newspaper's editorial page saw the new building as a testament to America's superior technical competence, might, and engineering know-how:

We risk nothing when we make the assertion that it is almost, if not quite, the finest building of its type in the world. Competent judges, who are familiar with all the great famous galleries of Europe, do not hesitate to say the Corcoran altogether the most suitably constructed one that they have ever entered; that it is better lighted and more scientifically arranged, and that it will remain without a rival in these respects for many years, if not forever.^{liv}

For the opening, the *Post* took its readers on a number of guided tours of this "magnificent temple," where "every detail of a perfectly-equipped art gallery is apparent and which has approximately three times the area of the original

^{xlvii} Ibid.

^{xlviii} *Washington Post*, "Closing of Corcoran Art Gallery," 1/21/1897, 2 and "The Corcoran Art School," 3/15/1897, 7.

^{xlix} *Washington Post*, "Art Immortals Removed," 6/23/1899, 4.

ⁱ Leila Mechlin, "Art Life in Washington," in *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, Volume 24 (Washington, DC: Columbia Historical Society, 1922)*, 178. Mechlin's paper was originally read before the society on December 21, 1920.

ⁱⁱ *Washington Post*, "Public Opening of Art Gallery," 2/25/97, 12.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Washington Post*, "Art Gallery Crowded," 3/1/1897, 3.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ *Washington Post*, "Within the Palace of Art," 2/23/1897, 7.

^{liv} *Washington Post*, "Editorial," 2/25/1897, 6.

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gallery.”^{lv} The white marble vestibule, flanked with “colossal statues from antiquity” opened into “the atrium hall with 40 fluted monolithic columns, out of which the splendid marble staircase to the upper galleries deploys itself,” forming a grand space which *Art Collector and Critic* magazine later described as “suggestive of the breadth and freedom of the entire construction.”^{lvi} The atrium was both the central axis of the museum and the exhibition area for its largest pieces of sculpture, several of which had not been seen in America previously. Here Vela’s “massive but beautiful marble” “Last Days of Napoleon,” one of the gallery’s most prominent and popular works, held a place of honor.^{lvii} To the left of the entrance, the atrium was devoted to ancient sculpture, mostly in the form of copies and casts. On its walls the reproduced frieze of the Parthenon ran in a continuous line atop the “Nymphs of the Fountain of Innocence” from the collection of the Louvre, as well as other casts and copies. The individual galleries on this floor were described as “of spacious dimensions and brilliantly lighted” by skylights, supplemented by electric fixtures as well as shrouded gas lights on dark days.^{lviii} Five were devoted to bronzes and marbles, one to the gallery’s collection of Japanese porcelain and bronzes, and another to the world’s largest collection of bronzes by noted animal sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye.

At the mid-point of the grand staircase stood a marble statue of W.W. Corcoran^{lix}, and at the top of the upper flight of stairs was the second level atrium, off which opened galleries devoted to painting. Among the most noted paintings they showcased were Emile Reucref’s “Helping Hand,” a sentimental and critical favorite of the day, as well as such keystones of the collection as Corot’s “The Wood Gatherers,” George Inness’s “Afternoon in the Woods,” and George Frederick Watts’ “Love and Life.”^{lx} As the *Post* reporter noted:

Light, distance, and background must each be given full consideration, as well as attention to the placing of relative canvases or schools of painting, and it is with admirable judgement and foresight that the present collection has been placed; the special requirements of each painting have been carefully studied.^{lxi}

The architecture of the new galleries, the largest of which were nearly twice as long as the main gallery in the Renwick Building, had accommodated these requirements in a fashion that could never have occurred in their original “cramped quarters.” The *Post*, in fact, found the new spaces transformational, declaring that the collection as displayed “in the spacious corridors and well-lighted galleries of their new quarters present[s] an entirely different aspect than when crowded into the restricted space and poorly lighted halls of the former gallery.”^{lxii}

Although notices about the new building were largely enthusiastic, frequently referring to it as an art temple or palace, an embarrassing imbroglio occurred eighteen months of the opening reception. Although the Renwick building had routinely closed for the summer months in July, the directors ordered the doors shut in June 1898 while the firm of James Nightingale replaced the floors. Norcross Brothers had subcontracted with a Chicago flooring firm, which had attempted to cut corners by attaching the galleries’ wooden floor blocks to the concrete sub-floors with animal by-product glue rather than asphalt adhesive. The adhesive rapidly decayed and became infested with vermin, allowing the

^{lv} *Washington Post*, “New Gallery of Art,” 2/21/1897, 20.

^{lvi} *Art Collector and Critic*, nd, reprinted in *Washington Post*, “Corcoran Gallery of Art: How a Critic Regards Washington’s Great Museum,” 6/25/1899, 14.

^{lvii} *Washington Post*, “Within the Palace of Art,” 2/23/1897, 7. The reporter may have been being discrete.

^{lviii} “New Gallery of Art,” 2/21/1897, 20.

^{lix} According to an article from the day of the opening, a marble statue of Caesar from the collection stood in for Corcoran temporarily. This space is now the main entrance to the Clark wing. See “Within the Palace of Art,” 2/23/1897, 7.

^{lx} The tale of Watts’ painting sheds a light on the curious politics of art and “morality” in Victorian Washington. Congress accepted the painting as a gift from Watts in 1894, only to encounter complaints from the Women’s Christian Temperance Union about its depiction of a nude embrace. The painting was then removed from the Cleveland White House and loaned to the Corcoran on an open-ended basis. In 1902, it was recalled to the White House by Theodore Roosevelt, then returned to the Corcoran by the Taft family in 1908. In late 1913, Ellen Wilson noticed the painting on a visit to the gallery and accomplished its restoration to the White House. See *Washington Post*, “Famous Painting Returned to White House Walls,” 11/10/1913, 5.

^{lxi} “New Gallery of Art,” 2/21/1897, 20.

^{lxii} *Washington Post*, “Art Topics,” 1/31/1897, 14.

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blocks to loosen to the point that they could be “swept up.” Nightingale’s patented system utilized tongue-and-grooved, dovetailed, interlocked blocks in a herringbone pattern.^{lxiii}

Within two years of its opening, major spaces within the building were programmed for distinct purposes. Many of the events and exhibitions which took place within these spaces were highly significant to the development of artistic exhibition and education in both the District of Columbia and the United States.

The Atrium and Grand Staircase

Besides the display of art, the Atrium and Grand Staircase areas became a ceremonial space which provided a magnificent setting for formal receptions, whether for openings, visits by dignitaries, or meetings of the Daughters of the American Revolution, business associations, or religious groups. The gallery provided a “fairyland” backdrop for the Capital Centennial celebration, which dazzled the city in December 1900. Protected from a crowd of onlookers by a cordon of patrolmen and detectives, guests entered through the New York Avenue doorway beneath an American flag of colored incandescent bulbs which flickered in a sequence that suggested waves, to find the marble columns of the atrium shrouded in vines and its overhead incandescent fixtures garlanded with greenbrier. Women in evening dress watched from the galleries at the top of the broad staircase lined with potted palms, while the Marine Band played at the southern end of the hall. Announced by a trumpet call at 9:30 PM, President William McKinley and his cabinet entered through the Seventeenth Street entrance and ascended the staircase to a reviewing section at the south end of the atrium.^{lxiv}

In September 1904, a gallery reception honored the first visit to the United States by an Archbishop of Canterbury. Archbishop Randall Davidson, flanked for a time by J. Pierpoint Morgan and religious dignitaries, received guests while standing at the head of the staircase, just to the left of Vela’s Napoleon, while a line composed mainly of women stretched more than a city block from the Seventeenth Street entrance to the corner of Eighteenth Street and New York Avenue.^{lxv} The selection of the gallery for these types of prominent civic and social functions validated its claim to be one of the capital’s grandest public spaces.

Another early reception in the Atrium complemented the Corcoran’s role in developing the presence of women in the arts. Although men exclusively held the positions of trustees, curator, and head of the arts school well into the twentieth century, from an early date women made up the majority of students, medalists in the school’s annual competitions, and gallery visitors. (See Illustration 29) Female collectors such as Phoebe Apperson Hearst lent the museum works from their private galleries, while Mary Foote Henderson, wife of a former Nevada senator and the hostess of a prominent salon at her Sixteenth Street “castle,” took an active role in organizing exhibits. In 1898, Mrs. Adelaide Johnson of Washington donated marble busts of womens’ rights leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony, which were exhibited in the galleries.^{lxvi} On the evening of February 15, 1900, the gallery was the site of the official eightieth birthday reception for Susan B. Anthony, which coincided with the national women’s suffrage conference that saw Ms. Anthony’s retirement from public life. To the strains of “a colored orchestra” directed by a grandson of her Rochester neighbor Frederick Douglass, Ms. Anthony, seated in a “queen’s chair” in the corridor to the right of the main entrance, headed a receiving line that included the wives of senators from two of the “emancipated” western states that permitted women to vote, Carrie Chapman Catt, her successor as president of the National Woman Suffrage Association, and S.H. Kauffman, newspaper publisher and president of the Corcoran trustees. Mary Henderson donated a large oil portrait to the gallery that showed Ms. Anthony in her trademark red shawl.^{lxvii} Holding this reception in a prominent public space like the gallery signified not only the growing role of women in the arts, but also the

^{lxiii} *Washington Post*, “Held Up By Trustees,” 6/26/1898, 21.

^{lxiv} *Washington Post*, “Finale a Fairy Scene,” 12/13/1900, 1.

^{lxv} *Washington Post*, “Reception for Archbishop,” 9/22/1904, 7, and “Honors Paid Primate,” 9/25/1904, 2.

^{lxvi} *Washington Post*, “Corcoran Gallery Reopened,” 10/4/1898, 7.

^{lxvii} *Washington Post*, “Women Paid Homage,” 2/16/1900, 2.

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increasing acceptance of the cause of women's rights, some two decades before women would have the right to vote nationwide.

In addition to its ceremonial functions, the Atrium and Grand Staircase have remained a major art exhibition space for over one hundred years. The walls of the grand staircase have long been a prime area for the display of large works, beginning when six large tapestries purchased from the Barberini palace in Italy by noted textile collector Charles M. Ffoulke were hung there just a few months after the gallery opening.^{lxviii}

By the mid-twentieth century, when the art world turned increasingly toward large, monumental works, the Atrium's unique, soaring spaces provided the backdrop for exceptional artworks that could have been effectively displayed in few other Washington galleries. For example, in 1967 the Corcoran commissioned three noted minimalist sculptors—Tony Smith (1912-1980), Ronald Bladen (1918-1988) and Barnett Newman (1905-1970)—to create monumental sculptures for its "Scale As Content" exhibition, a groundbreaking exhibition of radically new art which confirmed the Corcoran's pre-eminence in the art world. Smith's astonishing "Smoke" a jet black, asymmetric network of 43 piers, 45 feet long, 33 feet wide, and 22 feet tall, was deliberately calculated to "fight" against the staid Doric columns of the restful south atrium. The work was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine and widely acclaimed. Barbara Gold of the *Baltimore Sun* wrote that "Smoke, with power immeasurably stronger than that of the puffing wolf of the stories, pushes, heaves, thrusts, and subdues the solid stone structure of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington."^{lxix} Bladen's "The X," an enormous black wooden X (also 22 feet tall) that strikingly overpowered the north atrium was equally admired. Barnett Newman's "Broken Obelisk" was displayed outside the museum. "There has never been a sculpture exhibition quite like this one," *Post* art critic Paul Richard observed.^{lxx}

Sam Gilliam, one of the greatest of the Color Field painters and a key member of the Washington Color School centered on the Corcoran, is particularly noted for his "draped" paintings, which he began making in the late 1960s after being inspired by the sight of laundry drying on clothes lines. His now-famous draped painting received wide attention and acclaim at a seminal show of new works by Washington Artists at the Corcoran in 1969. Gilliam's draped paintings were arranged across several galleries, but one in particular was hung from the ceiling of the Atrium—a more-than-150-foot drape of canvas painted garishly in gold and silver. The *Washington Post's* art critic Paul Richard believed that "scores of super canvases" could be cut from this single piece, although its crowning achievement was that "Hanging there in space it begins to function as a sculpture, but it remains a painting."^{lxxi} In 2005, the *Post's* Blake Gopnik looked back on the 1969 show as one of the "epochal moments in the history of abstract art."^{lxxii}

The dynamic spaces of the Atrium have also been used for other unique artworks that have contributed to its importance as a landmark of Washington's fine arts heritage. In 1973, artist and sculptor Robert Stackhouse created a unique 40-foot plywood pyramid on the Atrium's second floor "bridge." The deliberately flimsy materials of the pyramid gave it a delicate, transitory quality in contrast to the immovable limestone columns of the gallery. According to Paul Richard's review in the *Post*, Stackhouse spent days sitting in the Corcoran and absorbing its ambience before creating his "powerful" temporary exhibit.^{lxxiii}

The Hemicycle and Galleries

The Hemicycle has evolved through a number of different configurations, although its curving walls have long been devoted to processional exhibition space. It was originally intended to be a two-story tall auditorium, whose first

^{lxviii} *Washington Post*, "Rare Tapestries on Show," 12/14/1897, 7.

^{lxix} Barbara Gold, "'Smoke' at Corcoran Art Gallery" In *The Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 12, 1967, D8.

^{lxx} Richard, "Bladen's X Is an X Is an X Is an X" in *The Washington Post*, Oct. 8, 1967, K7.

^{lxxi} Richard, "Corcoran's Stunning Show" in *The Washington Post*, Oct. 4, 1969, F1.

^{lxxii} Blake Gopnik, "Wrapped Attention" in *The Washington Post*, Oct. 14, 2005.

^{lxxiii} Richard, "Homage Paid to Nameless Gods" in *The Washington Post*, Nov. 13, 1973.

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presentation was a stereopticon lecture by Mary Chenoweth on “Raphael and his Madonnas” in May 1897.^{lxxiv} The Hemicycle was quickly adapted as a space for special exhibitions, especially those sponsored by local groups, which frequently overflowed onto the walls of the Atrium or “loan rooms.” It became the center of the annual Society of Washington Artists, Washington Water Color Club, Capital Camera Club, Washington Architectural Club, and Gold Medal competition exhibitions. These were prestigious events with hundreds of entries, judged by blue-ribbon panels of artists, that were conducted for decades.

In 1900, the Hemicycle became the site of a series of annual prize exhibitions, similar to Parisian salons, that highlighted the work of American artists. The first of these exhibitions, which featured works by Washington artists selected by Mary Foote Henderson, was intended to close the artistic gap between Washington and such major cities as New York and Boston, as “the promoters of this new institution are determined that the National Capital shall lead all American cities,” sparing “neither time nor money.”^{lxxv} In preparation, the Hemicycle was converted to a gallery, as tiers of seats were removed, oak flooring laid to cover the stage, and “electrical picture reflectors” installed by I.P. Frink of New York City.^{lxxvi}

In 1901, the Hemicycle and surrounding galleries played an important role in an extremely influential early urban planning project when they were the venue for the first public viewing of the models and drawings of the McMillan Commission Plan for Washington. As the staging of this exhibition shows, the gallery spaces were actors, rather than a passive backdrop, in the presentation of the plan by Commission members Charles McKim, Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr. and Edwin Abbey.

Upon seeing the hemicycle, Mr. McKim was dissatisfied with both the color of the walls and height of the ceiling. These were changed by the use of unbleached cotton, hurriedly procured. After most of the drawings were hung in accordance with the plan, he was dissatisfied and the pictures were rearranged and re-hung several times, Mr. McKim sparing neither his assistants nor himself. Not until in the early hours was the arrangement finished to his satisfaction. The next day the height of the two models was changed and the entire lighting system rearranged. The opening hour approached and the room was still littered with debris. Several prominent architects invited for a preview was commandeered as janitors, led by McKim, and finished their cleaning task just as the President and Cabinet entered [for the presentation of the plan before it was exhibited to the public.]^{lxxvii}

The exhibit consisted of two clay landscape models, each about ten by fifteen feet in area, placed in the center of the Hemicycle before an elevated viewing platform. One model showed the mall and surrounding neighborhoods as they actually existed and the other as they were envisioned in the Commission’s plans. On the Hemicycle’s curved walls were drawings showing perspective views of the mall stretching in all directions. Maps and plans covered the walls of the gallery to the right of the main entrance. Pictures showing the parks in a variety of international cities as well as ideal designs for Washington occupied a circular stand in the center of its floor. A large rendering on its south wall showed the mall as it was envisioned to be, as well as views of this ideal mall design from the east and west. On its west wall were renderings of the redesigned Capitol grounds, while the north wall illustrated the Washington Monument grounds with sunken gardens and a canal. The east wall showed fanciful proposed designs for a Lincoln Memorial and its grounds. In the small room to the north of the main gallery was a three dimensional model of the proposed monument grounds.^{lxxviii} Illustrations 30-31 depict the preparation and presentation of the plan models.)

^{lxxiv} *Washington Post*, “Lecture at Corcoran Art Gallery, 5/5/1897, 4.

^{lxxv} *Washington Post*, “Salon for American Art,” 3/11/1900, 13.

^{lxxvi} Report of the Trustees, Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1901 (Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art; 1902), 2.

^{lxxvii} Unpublished reminiscences of William Partridge, online at http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/ncr/designing-capital/sec7.html, accessed September 12, 2012.

^{lxxviii} *Washington Post*, “The New Washington,” 1/15/1902, 5, “Plan of New Capital,” 1/15/1902, 11, and “Submitted to Senate,” 1/16/1902, 11.

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The McMillan Plan exhibition generated substantial public interest and evoked great acclaim during its several months at the Corcoran. It remains the most famous urban design exhibition in the history of the city, and its influence remains profound one hundred and ten years later.

In January 1904, the Hemicycle was the locus of a trend-setting exhibition by the Photo-Secessionists of New York, hosted by the Capital Camera Club, whose directors included Photo-Secessionist Norman W. Carkhuff. In a manifesto of rebellion against the prevailing pictorialist school, whose photographs sought to imitate the characteristics of painting, the exhibition catalog proclaimed:

The aim of the Photo-Secession is, loosely, to hold together those Americans devoted to pictorial photography in their endeavor to compel its recognition, not as a handmaiden of art, but as a distinctive medium of individual expression.^{lxxix}

Photo-Secession founders Eduard Steichen and Alfred Steiglitz personally superintended the hanging of the exhibit's 159 photographs and attended the opening reception. The highpoint of the exhibit, to the *Post*'s reviewer, was the Steichen ensemble hung in the Hemicycle, which centered upon his portrait of Rodin in the pose of "The Thinker" set against the backdrop of his statue of Victor Hugo, and included several nudes and landscapes, as well as a portraits of Eleanora Duse and other artists. Observers noted the prominence of female photographers, whose work represented almost half the exhibit catalog. Gertrude Kasebier's "The Manger" was singled out for special praise, as were works by Rose Clark and Wade, "famous women photographers of Buffalo," and Mary Deven.^{lxxx} This exhibit was the first major art gallery show dedicated to the Photo-Secessionists, coming less than two years after the Stieglitz-organized exhibition of "American Pictorial Photography" at New York's National Arts Club and less than one year after the founding of their influential magazine *Camera Work*. It was Washington's first organized exhibition devoted to what became the dominant school of photography. The event was so successful that the following year, the Hemicycle was the site of the "First American Photographic Salon," an exhibit created by the American Federation of Photographic Societies that came to the gallery directly from New York City on its way to a national tour. Selected by a jury chaired by painter and stained glassmaker John Lafarge that included William Merritt Chase, and fellow painters Child Hassam and Robert Henri, its 345 photographs included fifty-five by Photo-Secessionists, who by this time had won world acclaim.^{lxxxi}

In 1915, Waddy Wood and Associates gave the Hemicycle a second floor to create more gallery space. In an exchange of letters between Flagg and Corcoran president Charles C. Glover in 1920, Flagg railed against the modifications to the hemicycle, which he claimed adhered to "improper and untruthful methods of design" resulting in a design "where the columns are not real columns and have no meaning; where the stone is not real stone, but a plaster counterfeit; and where all the most prominent features seem as if intended to deceive the beholder and lead him to think them something they are not."^{lxxxii} Despite Flagg's protests, the redesigned hemicycle proved very successful in both enhancing the acoustics of the auditorium and adding the large new Hemicycle Gallery on the second floor, which art critic Paul Richards called "perhaps [the Corcoran's] grandest hall"^{lxxxiii} and Benjamin Forgey has termed "a great room handsomely situated at the northern end of a sequence of great rooms—the often imitated but seldom equaled parade of skylit exhibition halls on the Corcoran's second-floor front."^{lxxxiv} This was despite a detour that began in 1943, when the second-floor gallery was closed to public viewing and it was used for the next half century as studio space for art students. In 1991, the gallery was restored and reopened as exhibition space, focusing once again on art by local artists and managed by the Corcoran art school.

^{lxxix} *Exhibition of Photographs: A Collection of American Pictorial Photographs As Arranged by the Photo-Secession and Exhibited Under the Auspices of the Capital Camera Club at the Corcoran Art Galleries of Washington, January 1904*, unpagged.

^{lxxx} *Washington Post*, "Camera Club Exhibit," 1/20/1904, 5.

^{lxxx} James Henry Moser, "The First American Photo Salon," *Washington Post*, 1/15/1905, F2.

^{lxxxii} Ernest Flagg to Charles C. Glover, Esq., correspondence of May 25, 1920, in the curatorial files of the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

^{lxxxiii} Paul Richard, "The Corcoran's Home Dome" in *The Washington Post*, Oct. 23, 1991, B3.

^{lxxxiv} Benjamin Forgey, "Corcoran, Going Full Hemicycle" in *The Washington Post*, Jan. 4, 1992, C1.

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At the building's opening in 1897, its alphabetically-designated upper story galleries were devoted to the permanent collection of paintings. During its first winter, the gallery attracted its first major bequest, a collection of eleven European works that had ornamented George B. Lemon's Shoreham Hotel apartment. Rosa Bonheur was the most famous artist represented in Lemon's collection, but he also owned paintings by Barbizon School landscape painters Felix Ziem and Jean Charles Cazin, cattle portraitist Emile von Marcke, and military artist Jean-Baptiste Édouard Detaille. Although the Corcoran already owned works by many of these artists, Lemon's collection was hung as a separate ensemble in the southwest gallery on the upper floor.^{lxxxv}

After the opening, loaned paintings, many from the collection of Phoebe Apperson Hearst, were assigned more prominent places in a separate salon beside the Grand Staircase, whose north wall was completely taken up by "The Last Hours of Mozart" by Monkascy, a celebrated work from the collection of Senator R.A. Alger purchased for the astounding sum of \$50,000 in 1887.^{lxxxvi} By 1901, this gallery and the salon above it were referred to as the "loan rooms." In an era when noteworthy art was more likely to be in private collections than publicly-accessible museums,^{lxxxvii} these rooms often provided the only opportunities for the public to see authentic works by old masters and acclaimed contemporary artists. They sometimes presented the first public displays of an artist's work in Washington. Frequently the displays in the Loan Rooms made news, as when "Last Hours of Mozart" moved on to New York's Metropolitan Museum and was replaced by Gainsborough's "The Cottage Door" in late 1901.^{lxxxviii} In 1904, thirty-two paintings from the collection of Senator John F. Dryden, including a Monet landscape, were hung on the north wall of the upper loan room.^{lxxxix} This marked the first public exhibition of a Monet in Washington recorded in the pages of the *Washington Post*. As part of a 1905 exhibit of the collections of Senators Dryden, Clark, and Alger, seventy-eight loaned pictures occupied the two main western galleries and upper atrium. They included Rembrandt's portrait of a rabbi, as well as William Morris Hunt's noted "The Bathers."^{xc}

Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, the role of the Corcoran Gallery began to evolve in a somewhat different direction. In 1903, Washington socialite Harriet Johnson left her art collection to the Corcoran subject to a set of idiosyncratic conditions that included its reversion to the federal government should a national art museum ever be established. The Corcoran trustees eventually turned down the offer. Disagreements among her heirs led to a lawsuit in which a court ruled that a national gallery had been established by Congress even though it lacked a physical location. The Johnson collection passed to the Smithsonian, which dedicated space in its Natural History Museum to art exhibition in 1910. In 1904, Charles Freer of Detroit had agreed to leave his large collection to the nation and endow a museum building if the government would agree to maintain it.^{xc} The Freer Gallery did not open until 1923, and John Russell Pope's National Gallery was not constructed until 1937. In the mean time, some federally-owned art continued on loan to the Corcoran; however, the Corcoran became less and less associated with its perceived role as a surrogate National Gallery. Perhaps Washington watercolorist and journalist James Henry Moser was prophetic when, in 1906, he wrote that, although:

the Corcoran may, inded, in time be overshadowed by a national institution of wider scope, capable of unlimited expansion under government control...the fact remains that the Corcoran, for so long occupying the field alone, can never cease to exercise an influence peculiarly its own. The influence must grow in importance and the

^{lxxxv} *Washington Post*, "Art Notes," 9/19/1897, 17 and "Changes at the Art Gallery," 9/19/1897, 2.

^{lxxxvi} *Washington Post*, "Art Notes," 9/19/1897,

^{lxxxvii} For example, the city's privately-held paintings in 1894 included a Rembrandt with an anonymous owner, two Botticellis belonging to a Colonel Hays, a Murrillo, a Van Dyke, and several Reynolds portraits owned by Mrs. Hearst, and Henry Adams' collection of Turners. *Washington Post*, "Art in Washington," 1/28/1894, 5.

^{lxxxviii} James Henry Moser, "Art Topics," *Washington Post*, 11/10/1901, 28.

^{lxxxix} James Henry Moser, "Dryden Collection at Corcoran," *Washington Post*, 5/22/1904, e4.

^{xc} *Washington Post*, "Rembrandt at Corcoran," 6/11/1905, TP10.

^{xci} Mechlin, 182-186 provides a detailed account of these events.

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gallery occupy a position of distinction independent of any mere matter of the size of its building or its catalogue.^{xcii}

Indeed the Corcoran continued to expand its collection and staged numerous influential exhibitions over the next hundred and six years.

On February 7, 1907, the Corcoran opened the first of what came to be known as its Biennial Exhibitions of Contemporary American Painting. Restricted to oil paintings by living Americans, the show offered gold and silver medals, with a \$1,000 first honors award endowed by Senator Clark.^{xciii} The Biennials grew out of earlier American art-focused exhibitions like Mary Henderson's "First American Salon" of 1900. Their early iterations, and particularly the 1907 exhibition, came to be important battlegrounds in a conflict which completely revolutionized American art in a half-dozen years.

For the 1907 exhibition, a blue-ribbon jury of artists from New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington selected 397 entries.^{xciv} At the time, the American art world was rent by cross-cutting conflicts. The Corcoran exhibit was itself a salvo in the continuing struggle to win recognition and patronage for American artists and included works by the "American Ten," whose annual New York show was dedicated to this aim. Most American galleries, salons, and museum collections, as well as the National Academy of Design, had been dominated by conservative artistic values, featuring painters who favored the aping of approved European styles, such as the Barbizon or Munich schools, or idealized, brightly-colored versions of French Impressionist landscapes. They created unemotional academic portraits and still lifes, and their infrequent nudes were of stylized, classical form. One study of this period offers William Merritt Chase's "An English Cod" (1904), a dim still life of dead fish beside a plate that was later in the Corcoran collection, as representative of the academic work of the time.^{xcv} Some conservative artists, including Chase, brought remarkable technique to their painting, but much academic art was mannered, derivative, and vapid.

The artistic conservatives were opposed on several fronts. The uncompromising realist Thomas Eakins, who had his students dissect corpses to study anatomy and championed the drawing of nudes from life rather than casts, persevered, despite being forced out of his professorship at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art and having what are today undisputed masterpieces rejected at academic exhibitions. A new and vital force was a group of transplanted Philadelphia artists who coalesced in New York City around a charismatic teacher named Robert Henri. Henri, who preached immediacy and the authentic depiction of the artist's experience, famously implored his students to "stop studying water pitchers and bananas and paint everyday life."^{xcvi} It was this perspective that came to define the group of painters later known as the "New York Eight." Although "the Eight" (who later became "the Ten") varied widely in technique, their work typically featured urban scenes involving ordinary people. Because some of the artists favored working-class streetscapes, the entire group was somewhat misleadingly labeled "the Ashcan School" by their detractors.

In January 1907, just a few weeks before the Corcoran exhibit opened, the jury of the National Academy of Design met in New York City to judge the entries for its prestigious spring show. Dominated by conservatives, the jury reacted derisively to the many submissions by the members of the Eight, and, in the end, only a single painting by Henri represented the group in the exhibition. The rejection of the modernist artists was reported in the press and generated

^{xcii} James Henry Moser, "Art and Artists," *Washington Post*, 1/21/1906, f12.

^{xciii} *First Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting February-March 1907*, (Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1907), 6. Republished in *Biennial Exhibition of American Painting, Volume 1-3*, Google e-book. Unless otherwise noted, detailed information about each Biennial is drawn from the catalogue for that exhibition.

^{xciv} *Ibid*, 11.

^{xcv} Bennard R. Perlman, *Painters of the Ashcan School: The Immortal Eight*, (New York: Dover Press, 1988 reprint of 1979 original edition), 91.

^{xcvi} *Ibid*, 91.

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much controversy in art circles. The Academy retaliated by similar rejections at its summer, fall, and winter shows. The Henri group responded by organizing a famous show at the MacBeth Gallery in New York City in February, 1908, which gave them the title of the "New York Eight," resulted in the total defeat of the academicians, and gave birth to a new, realistic school of American painting. As art historian Bennard Perlman wrote, "No single exhibition of American art has ever produced such widespread consequences."^{xcvii}

A visitor to the February 1907 Corcoran exhibit could view works by artists prominent at the time as well as today. In Gallery B, Winslow Homer's "Beach at Long Branch," "Moonlight-Woods Hole Light," and "A Light on the Sea" hung in proximity to an ensemble of six portraits by John Singer Sargent. Gallery F had Mary Cassatt's "Mother and Child" as well as four paintings by the rising American Ten Impressionist Childe Hassam. The Atrium included Frederick Remington's "An Assault on His Dignity."

The Academy and traditionalist painting comprised perhaps the bulk of the entries in the show. William Meritt Chase alone had three entries. However, unlike New York's National Academy of Design show that opened in March, artistic revolutionaries were well-represented at the Corcoran. The indefatigable Thomas Eakins had a pair of portraits in the Atrium, "Cowboys on the Range" hung in Gallery E, and another portrait in Gallery C. Six of the New York Eight had paintings in the show. Robert Henri's "Spanish Girl" and several of his portraits were neighbors of the Eakins in Gallery C and the Atrium. John Sloan, whose work most clearly typified the Ashcan School, had a "A Girl in White" in the Atrium as well. Maurice Prendergast's "The Willows" and Ernest Lawson's "Early Morning" and "Aqueduct at Little Falls" hung in Gallery G. Arthur B. Davies' "In the High Sierras" was exhibited in Gallery B with the Homers. Everett Shinn's "Hippodrome, London 1902," one of the canvasses in the Macbeth Gallery show, was displayed in Gallery D. Jerome Myers and Walter Shirlaw, close associates of Henri and Sloan who did not participate in the "New York Eight" exhibit, had paintings in Gallery C.

The 1907 exhibit was not a triumph for the Henri group on the scale of the MacBeth Gallery show a year later. The winners of cash prizes and gold and silver Corcoran medals were traditionalist paintings by Willard L. Metcalf and Frank W. Benson. The modernist force's closest brush with victory was the third place medal won by "New Hope Impressionist" Edwin W. Redfield, a friend and roommate of Henri as a student in Paris. However, being display in the galleries of the Corcoran while they were excluded from other prominent venues boosted the status of "the Eight" and advanced the modernist rebellion. It also confronted Washington's artists and art-going public with the latest trends in modernist painting.^{xcviii}

In 1907, more than 62,000 persons attended the Contemporary American Painting Exhibition, which was next held in December 1908 with the added proviso that entries previously exhibited in Washington were ineligible for the four prizes.^{xcix} Gallery A held a stellar array of canvasses, including Winslow Homer's "Early Evening" and "Flight of the Wild Geese," John Singer Sargent's noted "Portrait of James Whitcomb Riley," Albert Pinkham Ryder's "Mending the Harness," Robert Henri's "Young Woman in Black," and Thomas Eakins' "Ruth." "Father and Child" by George Luks, a member of "the Eight" missing from the 1907 exhibition, hung in Gallery B, along with canvasses by Sargent and Hassam, as well as Mary Cassatt's "Caresse Infantine." Gallery C held Homer's "Clouds Shadow," Eakins' "The Vicar General," George Inness' "After the Shower," as well as three Sargent portraits, three canvasses by painter-stained glassmaker John LaFarge, and Arthur B. Davies' "Canyon Undertones." Everett Shinn's "Leader of the Orchestra," Eakins' "Portrait of Whitman," and Ryder's "With Sloping Mast" were displayed in Gallery E. Gallery F included Maurice Prendergast's "Study Decorative," and Gallery G Cassatt's "La Femme au Chien" as well as Ernest Lawson's "Morningside Heights" and Hassam's "Aphrodite." The Atrium held Davies' "Lake and Island, Sierra Nevadas," Louis Comfort Tiffany's "A Market at

^{xcvii} Ibid, 182.

^{xcviii} First Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting. Catalogue of paintings not paginated.

^{xcix} Second Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting December 1908-January 1909, (Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1909), 7-8. Republished in Biennial Exhibition of American Painting, Volume 1-3, Google e-book.

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Nuremburg," Frederick Remington's "The Lost Warrior" and "Fired On," John Sloan's "Night Madison Square," and young Rockwell Kent's "Toiler on the Sea."^c

Once again, the Gold Medal, now accompanied by a \$2,000 prize, eluded "the Eight."^{ci} However, the mingling of the modernists' work with that of the nation's most celebrated artists in a major art museum was evidence of the revolution they had wrought in American art. Virtually all the major paintings enumerated above were exhibited in Washington for the first time when they were hung in the Corcoran's galleries.^{cii}

The early Biennials also provided a transition to the next revolutionary current in American art. The movement toward abstraction that had been evolving in Europe over a decade burst into America's consciousness with New York's Armory Show in 1913. This show, which included a massive number of both abstract and non-abstract pieces by European as well as American artists, was directed by Arthur B. Davies, a member of "the Eight" whose works were included in the early Biennials. A partial list of the artists who were represented in both the early Biennials and the Armory Show include Gifford Beal, George Bellows, Robert Henri, Maurice Prendergast, Childe Hassam, Ernest Lawson, George Luks, John Sloan, and Albert Pinkham Ryder. This relationship evidences the importance of the gallery spaces of the Corcoran in connecting Washington with the most modern currents in international cultural life.^{ciii}

By 1920, the Gallery had held five more Biennials, which included numerous Sargents, Henris, Eakins, and Hassams, usually at least one Cassatt. Arthur Wesley Dow's "The Mowing Lot"; Eduard Steichen's "In Our Garden"; George Bellows' "Winter Afternoon," "Portrait of Dr. Thompson," "In A Row Boat," "Lillian," "On the Porch," and "Portrait of Geraldine Lee"; John Sloan's "Saturday Night," "Spring Planting," and "The Town Steps"; and Rockwell Kent's "Burial of a Young Man" were notable paintings by important artists which received their first Washington exposure in these gallery rooms. The Biennial has continued until the present day, with paintings as diverse as Edward Hopper's "Cape Cod Sunday" (1937) and Robert Rauschenberg's "Axle" (1965) winning the Gold Medal.

Although most press articles in 1897 focused on the new building's grand galleries and exhibition rooms, its educational spaces did not escape journalists' notice. Even during construction, it was noted that "so large are the rooms of the new building that the little school now in use could be almost placed entire in one of the new classrooms."^{civ} A month before the opening reception, a critic observed that:

The portion of the structure which is to be devoted to the art school is entirely finished, and the different ateliers with their inlaid floors, massive white pillars, and gray draped walls are in every particular ideal studios, one of their most striking features being an elaborate system for electric illumination, rendering work in the night classes quite as desirable as those in classes held during the day.^{cv}

In 1898, with director E.F. Andrews as its guide, the *Washington Post* took a behind-the-scenes look at these modern studios, which had allowed the school to virtually double its enrollment. In the basement, classes practiced sketching plaster casts of statue fragments. The second floor studio, "a big spacious room full of light and warmth," accommodated the "life class," which was devoted to the drawing of nudes in the morning and portraits in the afternoon. In the "roof studio," "light flashes slantwise, walls bare brick and mortar; ceiling attic fashion, rough timbers laid across; corners running deep into black recesses, cut by tiny windows which give dungeon effects." Here "an old Irishman, hobble de hoy, beaming face" was being sketched in a corner with "Rembrandt-like shadows." Elsewhere,

^c Ibid, catalog section not paginated.

^{ci} First prize went to Redfield, who was oddly on the selection jury.

^{cii} The Homers, Sargents, and Henri's "Young Woman in Black," were the most notable paintings not eligible for prizes. See *Second Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting* for other entries.

^{ciii} Participant list for Armory Show from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armory_Show. Biennial participants from catalogues.

^{civ} *Washington Post*, "Midsummer Art Notes," 7/15/1894, 14.

^{cv} *Washington Post*, "Art Topics," 1/31/1897, 19.

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watercolor classes sketched a pumpkin with cabbages and peppers or rotting apples. After the Hemicycle was converted from an auditorium to exhibition space in 1900, the classroom beneath it was used for lecture programs as well as sculpting classes.^{cvi} The entries in the first Corcoran Gold Medal competition, all by female students, were hung in the lecture hall, lower classrooms, and the second story "life drawing" room.^{cvi}

Charles A. Platt and the William A. Clark Wing

In 1925, in response to a major bequest from the estate of Senator William A. Clark, the trustees of the Gallery commissioned architect Charles A. Platt to design an extension to the rear of the original building that added a significant number of galleries as well as office and storage space.

Charles Adams Platt (1861-1933) was uniquely positioned to design the 1925-28 extension of the Corcoran Gallery of Art to accommodate the William A. Clark collection. He was one of the few architects of his generation to be trained principally as an artist, and his architectural work consistently showed special attention to space and proportion. For the Corcoran, he designed an extension with unique spaces that powerfully relate to and interact with Ernest Flagg's original design, creating a richer and grander composition.

Platt was born in 1861 to John Platt, a corporate lawyer in New York City who had extensive connections to the world of fine arts and letters.^{cvi} Platt had an early interest in art and enrolled in the National Academy of Design in 1878. He became friends with Philadelphia painter and printmaker Stephen Parrish, father of Maxfield Parrish, who encouraged him to take up etching. Platt focused heavily on landscape scenes both in his etchings and his paintings. In the 1880s he moved to Paris to further his art education, studying under Jules Joseph Lefebvre. After marrying in Europe in 1886 and tragically losing his wife the following year when she died in childbirth, Platt returned to the U.S. and joined an artists' colony in Cornish, New Hampshire. He increasingly focused not just on landscape painting but on landscape design as well as the design and placement of country houses in his landscapes.

Though Platt had no formal training as an architect, he received a number of important commissions for country estate houses, which he executed in a variety of architectural styles, including the popular Colonial Revival and Georgian styles as well as Italian Renaissance Revival. His houses were uniformly restrained and dignified and were always carefully placed in their landscape settings.^{cix}

Through the patronage of William Astor, Platt designed a number of large apartment houses in New York City, and in the 1910s he began to receive institutional commissions, including museums. Most notably in 1913 he produced the Italian Renaissance Revival design for the Freer Gallery of Art on the National Mall, completed in 1923. Freer had visited the artists in Cornish, New Hampshire, and had come to admire Platt's work as many wealthy patrons did. Platt's widely admired design for the Freer was typically restrained, with a large, open atrium in the center that contributes to the museum's sense of restfulness. The result is the "quietest, most contemplative stop on the Mall."^{cx} At the behest of the Smithsonian, Platt also created a design for the National Gallery of Art in 1924, although it was never built.

^{cvi} *Washington Post*, "Sketches of Art Life," 11/27/1898, 26. The basement level also presented a human interest story that escaped the reporters covering the opening. Benjamin V. Darrell (1838-1922), the longtime janitor of the Renwick-designed gallery, was known for his genealogy. Appointed "Doorkeeper for Life" by W.W. Corcoran, Darrell lived in a "handsome suite of apartments" constructed for him in the new gallery, which he shared with his sister Marie (1845-1908), a Corcoran Gallery employee since its beginnings in 1874. He was listed as a watchman at the gallery as late as the 1920 Census. See *Washington Post*, "Midsummer Art Notes," 7/15/1894, 14 and "Funeral of Miss Darrell," 5/31/1908, e1.

^{cvi} 5/28/97

^{cvi} Much of the detail about Charles Platt's early life is from Keith N. Morgan, "Charles A. Platt and the Promise of American Art" in *Shaping An American Landscape: The Art and Architecture of Charles A. Platt*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995).

^{cix} Morgan, 8-12.

^{cx} Benjamin Forgey, "Charles Platt's Perfect Palaces" in *The Washington Post*, Jul. 29, 1995, C1.

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When William A. Clark bequeathed his art collection to the Corcoran in 1925, requiring that it be displayed in its entirety, Charles Platt was the logical choice to design the museum's new addition. Platt's Freer Gallery and commission for the National Gallery had established him as a premier museum designer. In addition, his own artistic talents and close association with other prominent artists added to his credentials.

Platt created a design that was at once respectful of Flagg's original gallery spaces yet provided appropriate and distinctive spaces for the Clark collection. Writing in *The New York Times* at the time of the new addition's opening, Leila Mechlin, secretary of the American Federation of Arts, observed, "Rarely do works of art find more felicitous setting than those in the W.A. Clark collection placed on public view today in the lately completed addition to the Corcoran Gallery of Art." The *Post* called the new addition "the last word in museum structure."^{cxii}

Platt also designed many buildings for schools and colleges. Paralleling Flagg's work at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Platt designed a number of structures for the modernized campus of the Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. He also consulted on buildings for Dartmouth College, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Rochester, New York.^{cxiii} The Corcoran addition would be one of Platt's last major works. He retired from active practice in 1928 to retreat to his Cornish, New Hampshire, summer home, where he died in 1933.

The Clark Wing as Art Space

The Clark Wing's Rotunda is a unique space that can be both vexing and challenging for art installations. Through the years it has been the setting for distinctive art installations designed specifically for the space by artists who have sometimes had deep ties to the Washington cultural landscape. For the Corcoran's 32th Biennial Exhibition in 1971, California artist Robert Irwin installed "a vast, nearly invisible, work of transparent nylon scrim" beneath the Rotunda's dome, a delicate piece that Paul Richard found "beautiful and subtle."^{cxiii} For the 34th Biennial in 1975, all the 19th century paintings that were normally displayed in the Rotunda were moved out, and Washington Color School luminary Gene Davis (1920-1985) painted one of his famous stripe paintings around the entire space, creating one of the most powerful and effective pieces of his career. In 1982, the Corcoran exhibited a show of works by Sam Gilliam that included a special installation for the Rotunda dubbed "Rondo," consisting of 13 separate geometric panels hung as a group around the Rotunda, their colors, shadows, and intersections creating a unique work of art. And in 1985, Mississippi-born artist Bill Dunlap, who would continue a long association with the Corcoran, painted a "cyclorama" of the Civil War Battle of Antietam for the Rotunda, emulating the painting done in the 19th century to commemorate the battle of Gettysburg. The Rotunda's walls provided a unique surface for the monumental work.

Not only have the Rotunda's walls and saucer-shaped dome been used as platforms for unique pieces of Washington art. So has its floor. In 1987, Alex Castro's 'Platform,' a covering of fitted sheets of weathered steel, was installed in the Rotunda. Castro was an established Washington artist, and his unique installation drew special attention to the Rotunda space with a "beauty so subtle that inattentive viewers don't even notice it's there," Paul Richard commented.^{cxiv}

The Corcoran Gallery as Cultural Center

While the Corcoran has continued as a leading art gallery, it has also been the site of numerous special events of historic and cultural significance, both for Washington, D.C. and the nation at large. Most U.S. presidents, for example, have visited the Corcoran on at least one occasion. The Democratic National Committee held a reception for President Jimmy Carter at the Corcoran upon his inauguration in 1977. The annual Corcoran Ball held at the Gallery has been one of the

^{cxii} Ada Rainey, "Clark Wing at the Corcoran Now is Open" in *The Washington Post*, Mar. 11, 1928, S13.

^{cxiii} Withey, 475-76.

^{cxiii} Richard, "Corcoran's Suggestive Thought-Fields" In *The Washington Post*, Feb. 27, 1971, C1.

^{cxiv} Paul Richard, "Compelling 'Platform'" in *The Washington Post*, May 25, 1987, C1.

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city's most distinguished social events for many years, attended by numerous distinguished members of Washington society.

Notable in particular is the supporting role the Corcoran played as a venue for détente between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In 1972, the Soviet Union sent some 2,000 objects to the Corcoran for a massive temporary exhibition called "Soviet Union: Arts and Crafts in Ancient Times and Today," a show that drew immense popular interest as evidenced by the long lines of visitors waiting to get inside. The objects had never been let out of the Soviet Union previously, and the show was seen as a goodwill gesture in advance of a planned trip by President Nixon to Moscow. The Corcoran, as a large, distinguished, private arts institution in the nation's capital, played a unique role in hosting the exhibit, which the National Gallery of Art, being the nation's official fine arts institution, could not have done. Despite demonstrations and even a bomb threat, the show was a landmark in demonstrating the effectiveness of cultural exchanges in promoting diplomacy among nations. It was again at the Corcoran that noted philanthropist Armand Hammer (1898-1990), who had donated funds to cover the cost of free admission at the museum, spoke at a dinner at his honor in 1985 urging then President Reagan to hold a summit with Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko to discuss peace and disarmament.^{CXV} While Chernenko would die only two months later, Reagan's summits with Chernenko's successor, Mikhail Gorbachev, would lead to the end of the Cold War.

^{CXV} Sarah Booth Conroy, "Hammer Urges Summit" in *The Washington Post*, Jan. 19, 1985, G3.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Period of Significance

1897, 1928

1897-1987

Significant Dates

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Ernest Flagg (original gallery)

Charles Platt (addition)

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Period of Significance (justification)

The Corcoran Gallery's period of significance under criterion A begins with the opening of the building in 1897 and continues through Alex Castro's 1987 exhibition. Evolving critical assessments of subsequent exhibitions may determine that the period of significance extends further toward the present.

The Corcoran Gallery's periods of significance under Criterion C are 1897, when the Flagg building opened, and 1928, when the Platt addition opened.

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

The interior spaces of the Corcoran Gallery are significant under National Register criteria A and C. They also meet National Register Criterion G, which does not explicitly apply to listings on the DC Inventory of Historic Sites.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

The Corcoran Gallery interior is significant under Criterion A for its "association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history." The Corcoran Gallery is associated with major developments in art exhibition and art education both locally in Washington, D.C., as well as in the nation as a whole. For decades, the Flagg-designed portion of the building was the leading venue for the exhibition of visual art in the nation's capital. The Atrium, Hemicycle, Rotunda, and gallery spaces are associated with the exhibition of works of by major artists which in some cases had never before been publically shown in Washington, D.C., and in key instances were designed specifically for these spaces. These spaces are associated with major exhibitions of local and national significance, such as the Corcoran biennials, which attracted wide attention to Washington as an arts center and connected the capital to world cultural trends. The Platt addition housed the Clark Collection, Washington's finest assemblage of old masters before the building of the National Gallery of Art and the accession of the Mellon Collection, and still a major artistic resource.

The Corcoran School of Art has been the pre-eminent visual arts school in Washington, D.C., for virtually the entire span of the building's existence. The building's studio spaces are the oldest extant purpose-built art instruction rooms in the District of Columbia and facilitated instruction in life drawing as well as the traditional practice of sketching from casts. Today the Corcoran School of Art is the only four-year art college in the city and is fully accredited. Enrollment in the BFA program reached 300 in the 1990-91 academic year in addition to over 1,000 students in the Open Program, a non-degree granting educational program. There are 47 full time faculty and 40 part time faculty.

The Corcoran Gallery interior is significant under Criterion C, as it embodies "the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, [and] possesses high artistic values." The original gallery is the work of an acknowledged architectural master, Ernest Flagg, while the addition is a highly significant work by a prominent architect, Charles Platt.

The central Atrium with its magnificent staircase is significant for its distinctive architectural elegance. "The atrium, with its rhythmic march of fluted columns on two levels interrupted by the planned pause of the atrium bridge, is indeed the

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best part of the building, its heart,” art critic Benjamin Forgey has written.^{cxvi} Paul Richards has commented that “the bridged and skylit atrium, with its floors of glass and travertine and its forest of gray columns, takes one’s breath away.”^{cxvii} The Atrium is restrained in design, following the precepts of the *Néo-Grec* style that Flagg had learned in Paris and that he believed were uniquely suited to public buildings like the Corcoran. It avoids the over-wrought decorative embellishment of much Beaux Arts public architecture, focusing on making the structure itself dramatically suited to its unique function. In contrast, Hornblower and Marshall’s National Museum of Natural History (1901-1911)—the Washington museum building closest in age to the Corcoran—seems chiefly concerned with creating massive and dominating spaces that do little to provide a restful atmosphere for contemplating the museum’s artifacts. The Hornblower and Marshall design, based like Union Station on the Baths of Diocletian, represents the mainstream of Beaux Arts design tendencies at the beginning of the 20th century. Flagg’s Corcoran building, in contrast, is unique for Washington in its spare approach. Not until Charles Platt’s Freer Gallery of Art was completed in 1923 would another major Washington museum achieve the same contemplative, art-focused atmosphere. Platt, of course, also relied on a neoclassical atrium as a central design element, and it would be Platt who would design the extension to the Corcoran in 1925. In addition to its distinctive architecture, the Atrium has been the site of unique art installations that have been seminal for the development of the visual arts in Washington and for the careers of notable Washington artists (Criteria A and B).

The combined heritage of the many unique works of art exhibited in the Atrium and the Rotunda, including exceptional pieces designed specifically for those spaces by renowned artists, establishes a unique cultural significance to these spaces that is unmatched in the history of any other Washington structure.

The inclusion of the rare and exceptional Salon Doré within the Clark Wing is highly significant, not just because this is one of the few such rooms to be installed in a Washington gallery but because of the custom design of the space within the neoclassical Clark Wing, which displays the historic room to great effect. The placement of the Salon within the Corcoran highlights the gallery’s role in bringing great European art—particularly through the Clark Collection—to Washingtonians who had little other access to such works prior to construction of the National Gallery of Art.

The Flagg-designed portion of the building is significant for its role in the development of artistic exhibition space in Washington, as well as the United States. The design was at the forefront of the neoclassical movement in American architecture, following fast on the heels of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which showcased classical designs by such architects as Richard Morris Hunt and McKim, Mead, and White. The building embraces natural lighting with its network of glass-roofed skylights and the glass panels in the Atrium floor, as well as technological innovations such as electric lighting, which also use the Atrium’s glass panels for exceptional effect when lit in the basement studios at night. The gallery spaces were among the first designed for electrical illumination. At its opening, the building was compared to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art as an exceptional venue for the visual arts.

What was written of the exterior of the building to support its designation as an historic landmark is equally true of its interior: “The excellence of the designs of the exterior and interior and the wholly compatible addition to the Corcoran make it the premier example of French Beaux Arts architecture in Washington at the turn of the century, a tribute to the Gallery’s founder and its architects, all of whom made additional significant contributions to the history of America art and architecture.”

The National Park Service (NPS) requires that properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years be of “exceptional importance...to a community, a state, a region, or the nation” to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places. This 50-year threshold is not an arbitrary arithmetic standard. The NPS specifically states that:

^{cxvi} Benjamin Forgey, “The Best Building in Washington” in *The Washington Post*, Jul. 31, 1982.

^{cxvii} Richard, “A Cornerstone of Beauty” in *The Washington Post*, May 11, 1994, C6.

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It is not designed to prohibit the consideration of properties whose unusual contribution to the development of American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture can clearly be demonstrated.

Among the specific criteria for determining that a resource possesses extraordinary importance are that "it may reflect the extraordinary impact of a political or social event" or that its "developmental or design value is quickly recognized as historically significant by the architectural or engineering profession." The Corcoran Gallery plainly meets this test. Its extraordinary contributions to the development of modern art in Washington during the post-1962 period are undisputed in critical circles. Sufficient time has passed to determine the historical importance of Abstract Expressionism, the Washington Color School, and other modernist movements as artistic landmarks, and the Corcoran Gallery's role in developing an appreciation for them in the capital city has been clearly documented.

Developmental history/additional historic context information (if appropriate)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

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Exhibition of Photographs: A Collection of American Pictorial Photographs As Arranged by the Photo-Secession and Exhibited Under the Auspices of the Capital Camera Club at the Corcoran Art Galleries of Washington, January 1904, unpagued.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other

Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property _____

(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 _____
Zone Easting Northing

2 _____
Zone Easting Northing

3 _____
Zone Easting Northing

4 _____
Zone Easting Northing

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

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Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Peter Sefton, John DeFerrari/Trustees

organization D.C. Preservation League

date _____

street & number 401 F Street, NW, Room 324

telephone (202) 783-5144

city or town Washington

state DC

zip code 20001

e-mail info@dcpreservation.org

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.

- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property:

City or Vicinity:

County:

State:

Photographer:

Date Photographed:

Description of Photograph(s) and number:

1 of ____.

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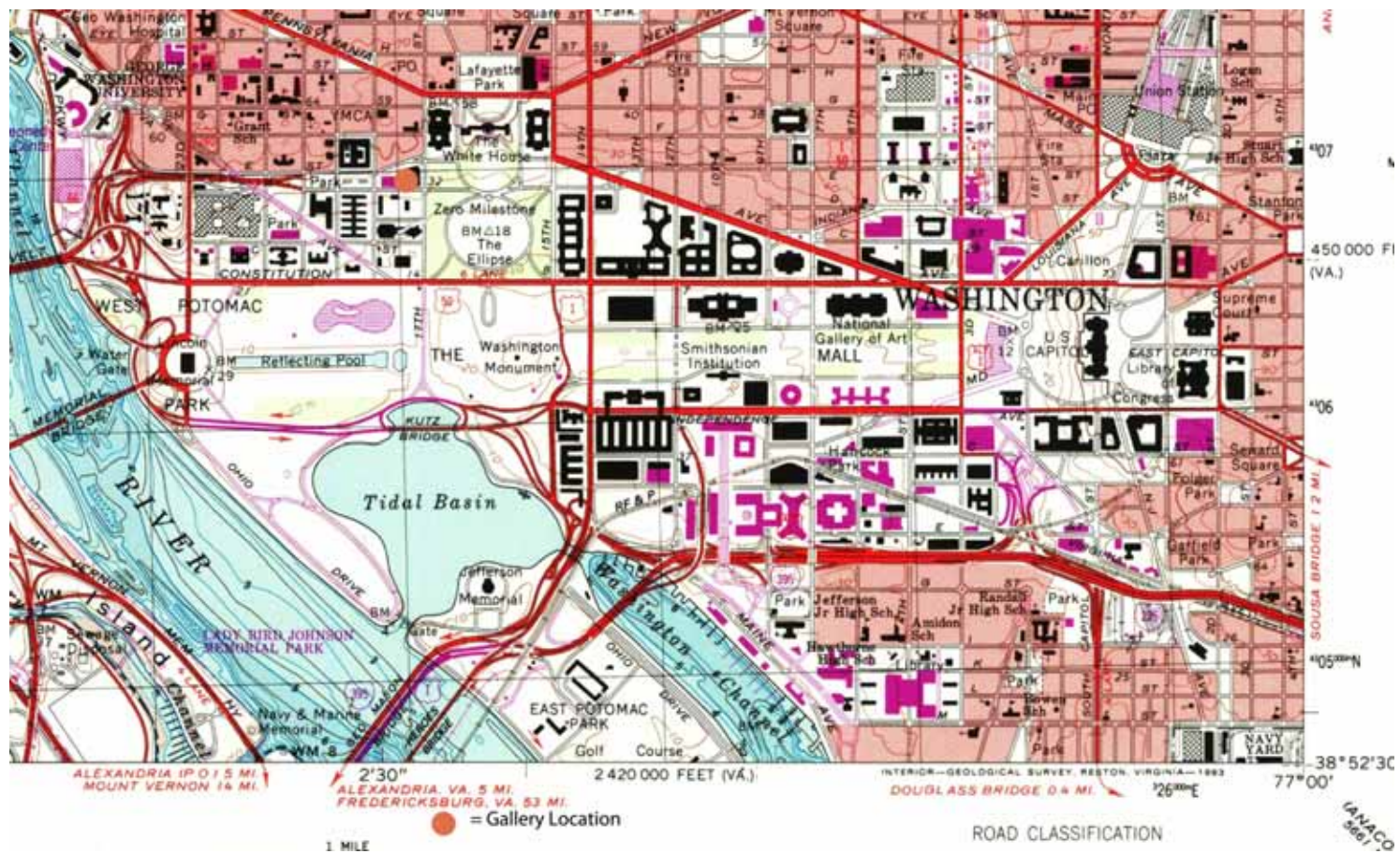
Property Owner:

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Corcoran Gallery of Art
street & number 1700 New York Avenue, NW/500 17th Street, NW telephone 202.639.1700
city or town Washington state DC zip code 20006

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.



USGS Location Map

Attachment 1: Illustration List

ILLUSTRATION	TITLE	SOURCE	PHOTOGRAPHED
1	Plan of First Floor	<i>Corcoran Gallery of Art General Catalogue, (Washington, D.C.: 1897), 6-7</i>	
2	Plan of Second Floor	<i>Corcoran Gallery of Art General Catalogue, (Washington, D.C.: 1897), 6-7</i>	
3	Plan of First Floor after construction of the Clark Wing w/proposed interior designation zones highlighted	<i>Corcoran Gallery of Art Annual Reports, Vol. 3, 1924-1934</i>	
4	Plan of Second Floor after construction of the Clark Wing w/ proposed interior designation zones highlighted	<i>Corcoran Gallery of Art Annual Reports, Vol. 3, 1924-1934</i>	
5	Plan of Basement after construction of the Clark Wing w/ proposed interior designation zones highlighted	<i>Corcoran Gallery of Art Annual Reports, Vol. 3, 1924-1934</i>	
6	Sectional diagram of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, designed by Ernest Flagg.	<i>Corcoran Gallery of Art General Catalogue, (Washington, D.C.: 1897</i>	
7	Main Vestibule, looking toward Seventeenth Street NW	John De Ferrari	29-Jun-12
8	Corcoran Gallery North Atrium	John De Ferrari	3-Jul-12
9	Corcoran Gallery, Historic View of North Atrium	Library of Congress, Detroit Publishing Company Collection, 1905-1915	
10	South Atrium	John De Ferrari	15-Sep-12
11	Historic View of South Atrium	Library of Congress, Detroit Publishing Company Collection, 1905-1915	
12	Historic View of Second-Story Painting Gallery With Glass Ceiling	Library of Congress, Detroit Publishing Company Collection, 1905-1915	
13	Atrium Central Passage	John De Ferrari	29-Jun-12
14	Balcony, Central Gallery in Historic View	Library of Congress, Detroit Publishing Company Collection, 1905-1915	
15	Atrium, Second Floor	John De Ferrari	15-Sep-12
16	Atrium, Looking South from Second Floor	John De Ferrari	15-Sep-12

17	South Atrium from Second Floor	John De Ferrari	15-Sep-12
18	Main Staircase, showing entry to Clark Collection	John De Ferrari	15-Sep-12
19	Main Staircase, Historic View Showing Statue, Prior to Construction of Platt Addition	John de Ferrari Collection, Detroit Publishing Company Collection, 1905-1915	
20	Main Staircase, From Second Floor	John De Ferrari	15-Sep-12
21	Platt Addition (Clark Collection) Rotunda Dome Oculus Detail	John De Ferrari	15-Sep-12
22	Detail of Gallery-to-Atrium Pocket Door, With Herringbone Pattern Wooden Floor and Marble Border.	Peter Sefton	23-Sep-12
23	Detail of floor, Upper Atrium Upper door, Atrium to Gallery Doors	Peter Sefton	23-Sep-12
24	Platt Addition (Clark Wing), Rotunda	John De Ferrari	29-Jun-12
25	Platt Addition (Clark Wing), Rotunda Dome Detail	John De Ferrari	15-Sep-12
26	Platt Addition (Clark Wing), Staircase Hall	John De Ferrari	29-Jun-12
27	Platt Addition (Clark Wing), Staircase Detail	John De Ferrari	15-Sep-12
28	Platt Addition (Clark Wing), Salon Dore	John De Ferrari	15-Sep-12
29	Corcoran Gallery Visitors, Showing High Representation of Women	Culver Pictures, circa 1900	
30	Refining the McMillan Commission Models in the Hemicycle, 1902.	Sue Kohler and Pamela Scott, eds., <i>Designing The Nation's Capital: The 1901 Plan for Washington, D.C.</i> (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, 2006). 2306. Photo by Frances Benjamin Johnston, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.	
31	Sketches from the Presentation of the McMillan Plan	<i>Washington Post</i> , January 15, 1902	

THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

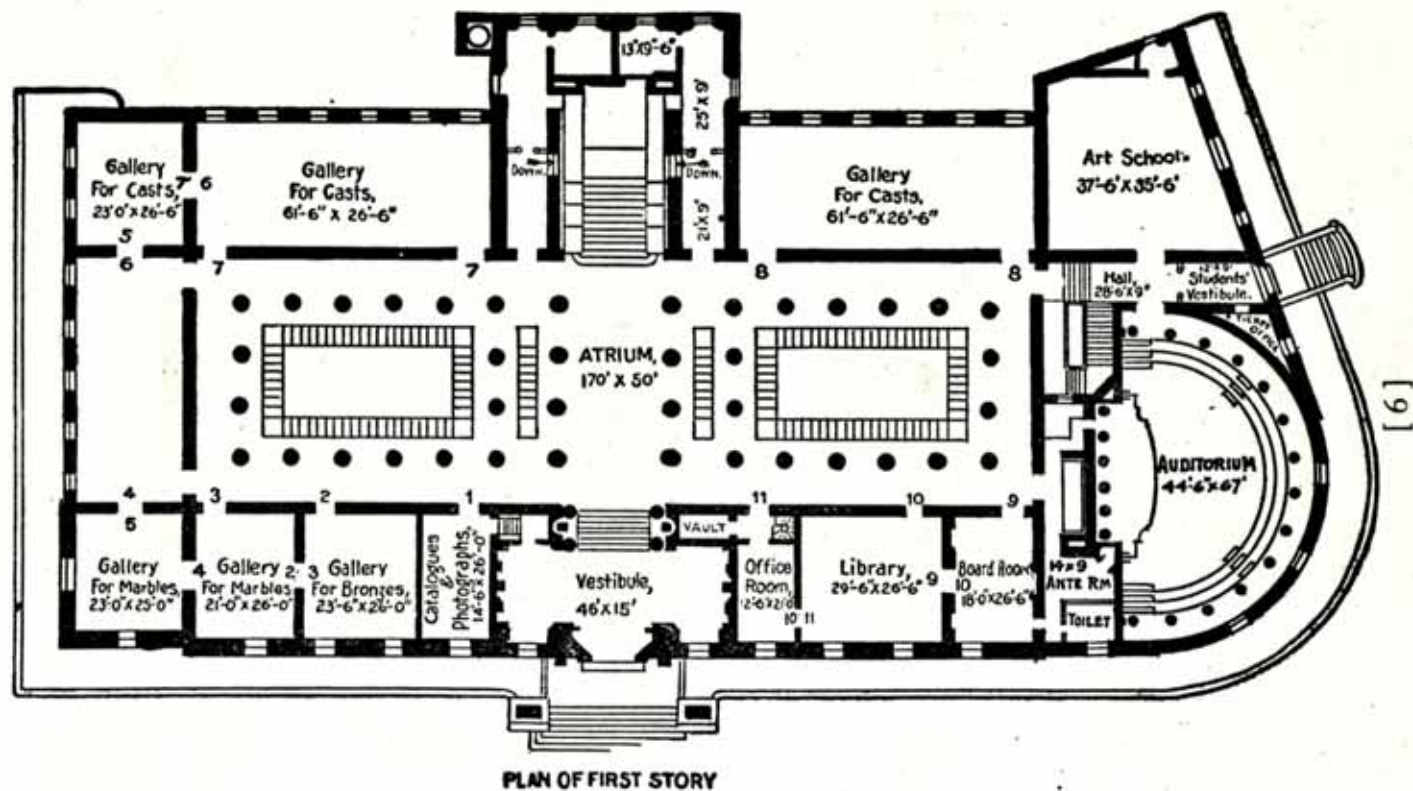


Illustration 1: Plan of First Floor, *Corcoran Gallery of Art General Catalogue*, (Washington, D.C.: 1897), 6-7.

THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

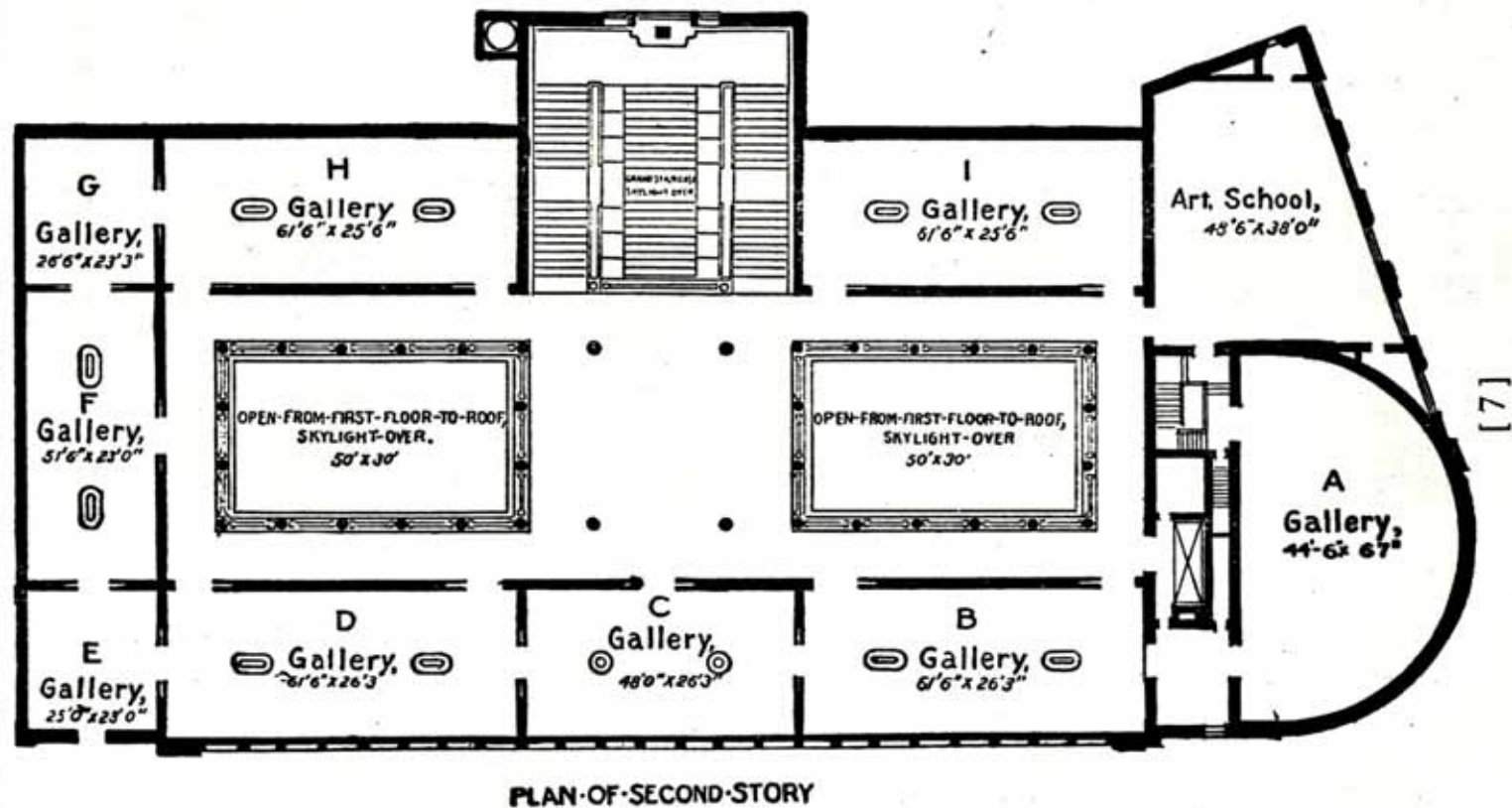


Illustration 2: Plan of Second Floor, *Corcoran Gallery of Art General Catalogue*, (Washington, D.C.: 1897), 6-7.

Illustration 3



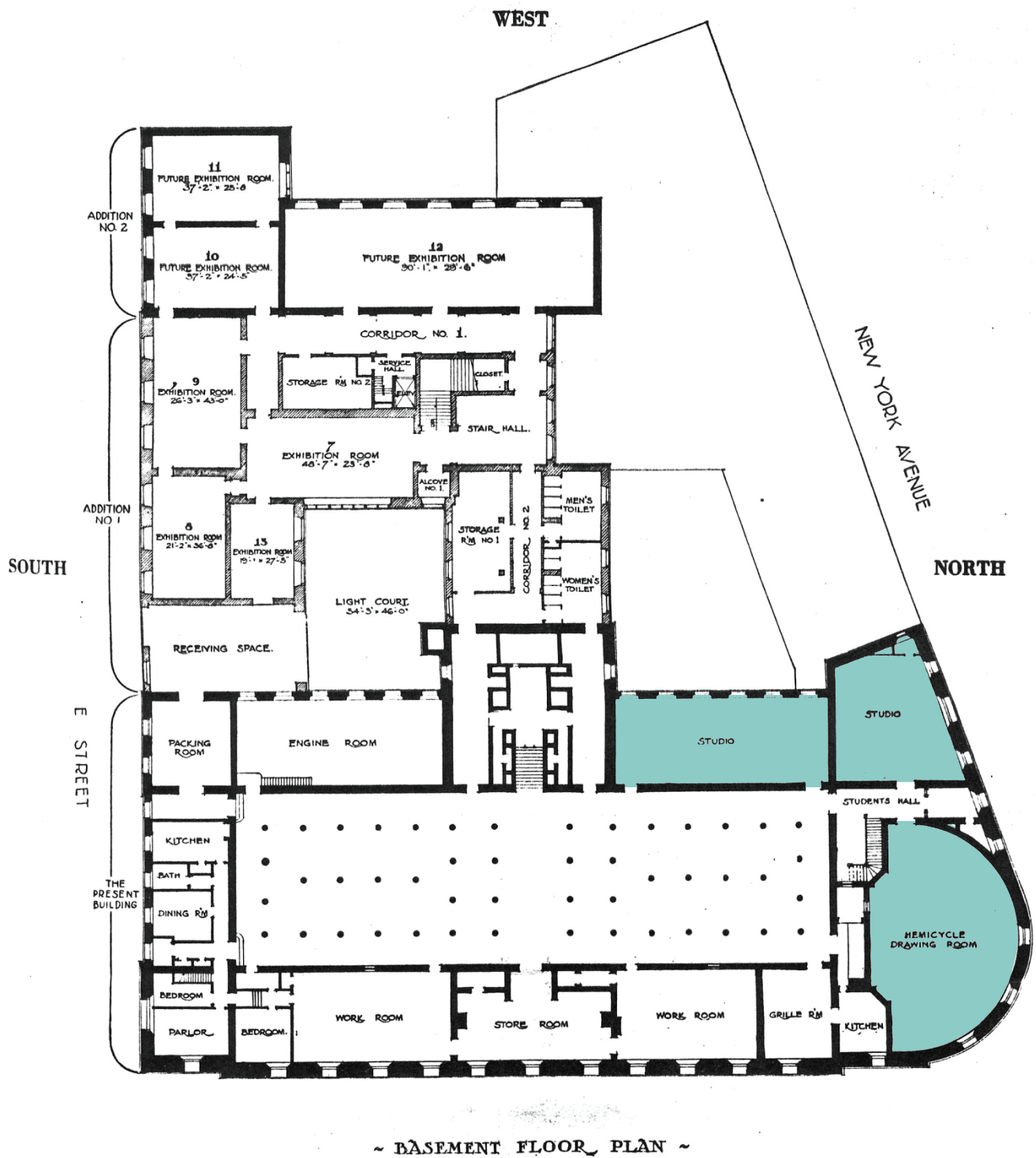
Areas proposed for interior designation

Illustration 4



 Areas proposed for interior designation

Illustration 5



Areas proposed for interior designation

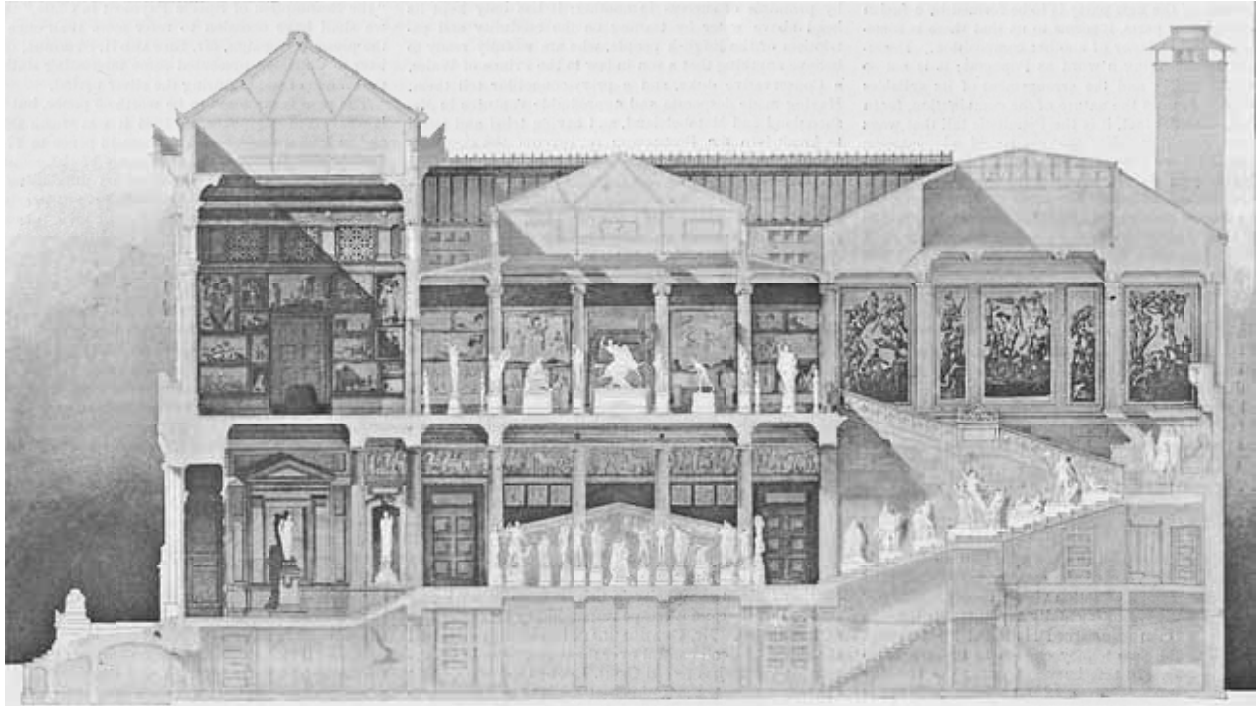


Illustration 6: Sectional diagram of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, designed by Ernest Flagg.
Source:



Illustration 7: Corcoran Gallery Main Vestibule, looking toward Seventeenth Street NW



Illustration 8: Corcoran Gallery North Atrium



Illustration 9: Corcoran Gallery, Historic View of North Atrium



Illustration 10: Corcoran Gallery, South Atrium



Illustration 11: Corcoran Gallery, Historic View of South Atrium



Illustration 12: Historic View of Second-Story Painting Gallery With Glass Ceiling.



Illustration 13: Atrium Central Passage



Illustration 14: Balcony, Central Gallery in Historic View



Illustration 15: Atrium, Second Floor



Illustration 16: Atrium, Looking South from Second Floor



Illustration 17: South Atrium from Second Floor



Illustration 18: Main Staircase, showing entry to Clark Collection



Illustration 19: Main Staircase, Historic View Showing Statue, Prior to Construction of Platt Addition



Illustration 20: Main Staircase, From Second Floor



Illustration 21: Platt Addition (Clark Collection) Rotunda Dome Oculus Detail



Illustration 22: Detail of Gallery-to-Atrium Pocket Door, With Herringbone Pattern Wooden Floor and Marble Border.



Illustration 23: Detail floor, Upper Atrium (above) Upper door, Atrium to Gallery Doors (below)





Illustration 24: Platt Addition (Clark Wing), Rotunda



Illustration 25: Platt Addition (Clark Wing), Rotunda Dome Detail



Illustration 26: Platt Addition (Clark Wing), Staircase Hall



Illustration 27: Platt Addition (Clark Wing), Staircase Detail



Illustration 28: Platt Addition (Clark Wing), Salon Dore

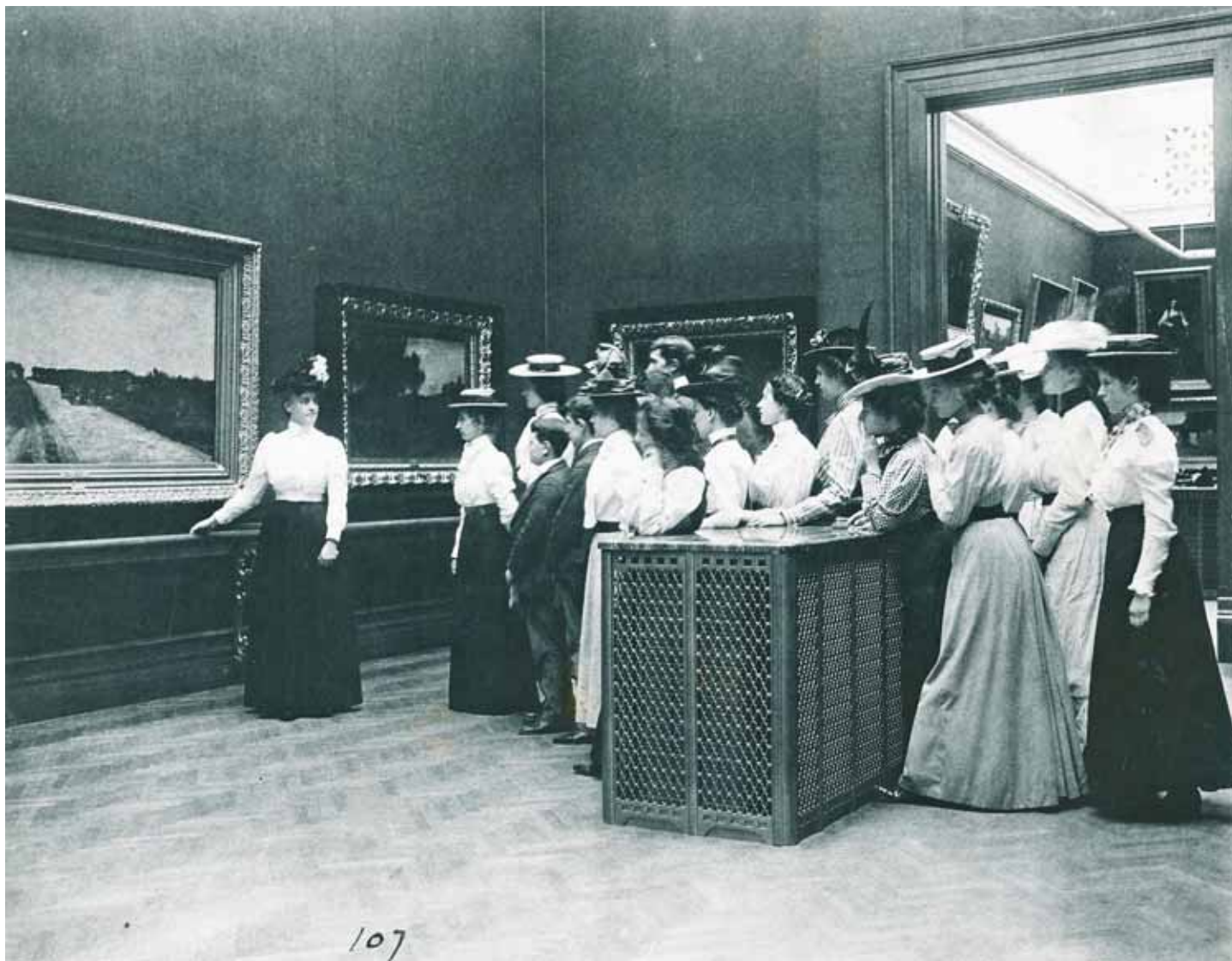
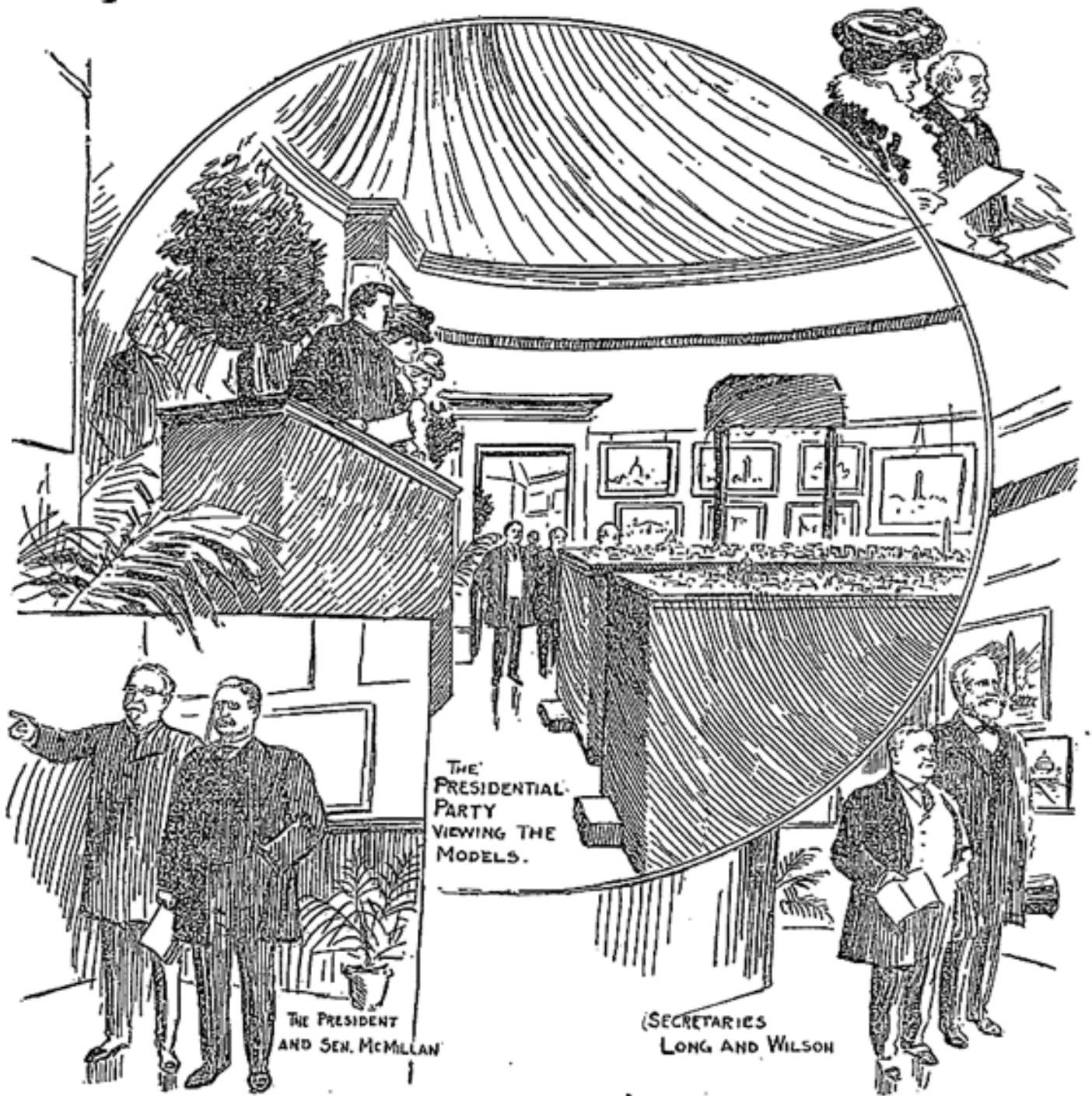


Illustration 29: Corcoran Gallery Visitors, Showing High Representation of Women



Fig. 10 Designers working on Senate Park Commission model already installed in the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Illustration 30: Refining the McMillan Commission Models in the Hemicycle, 1902.



Viewing the Exhibit in the Hemicycle.

Illustration 31: Sketches from the Presentation of the McMillan Plan, *Washington Post*, January 15, 1902