

## CASS GILBERT AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF ART

By Marjorie Pearson, Ph.D.

Cass Gilbert's talents in pen, ink, and water color are well-known and an important part of his artistic legacy. He is equally esteemed for his championship and patronage of painters, sculptors, and decorative artists in many of his major buildings, beginning with the Minnesota State Capitol (1895-1905).

The buildings Gilbert designed especially for the exhibition of art and the work of artists form an interesting subset of his career.

The first building Gilbert designed for the exhibition of art was the **Palace of Fine Arts** (1904), the only permanent building at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. After the fair closed, it became the home of the St. Louis Art Museum. Since the building originally contained temporary exhibits, Gilbert focused on creating a grand architectural statement, based on classical Roman precedents, that would serve as a backdrop for the paintings and sculpture on display. In the years after the fair, the museum has adapted and modified Gilbert's original design to accommodate the needs of a permanent museum. (See Sharon Irish, *Cass Gilbert Architect: Modern Traditionalist*, 76-84).

The **Allen Memorial Art Building** at Oberlin College (1914-1917) is based on an early fifteenth-century design in Florence by Filippo Brunelleschi. The building incorporates exhibition galleries, classrooms, and studio space. It also incorporates mosaics, sculpture and ornamental ironwork by Samuel Yellin. (See Irish, 87-89).



Left: St. Louis Art Museum, main entrance. Photo: Marjorie Pearson. Right: Allen Memorial Art Building, Oberlin College. Photo: Mary Ann Sullivan

**Rodin Studios** (1916-1917) on West 57<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City is an anomalous building in Gilbert's career. Once Gilbert left St. Paul, he ceased designing residential architecture, except under special circumstances. The Rodin Studios was his only multiple dwelling. New York had a tradition of resident artists' studio buildings, most of which were constructed near Central Park. Rodin Studios was built of reinforced concrete with brick facing and French Gothic and Early French Renaissance terra-cotta and cast-iron detail. The interior apartments were two stories in height with two-story studios set over one-story bedroom spaces. The painters who formed the corporation to construct the building, Lawton S. Parker and John Hemming Fry and Georgia Timken Fry, apparently met Gilbert through W. Francklyn Paris, the decorative painter who had worked with Gilbert on several buildings. The exterior design complements that of the American Fine Arts Society Building across the street, designed by Henry J. Hardenbergh and built in 1891-1892.



Left: Rodin Studios, 200 West 57<sup>th</sup> Street, with Gilbert's ingenious arrangement of double-height studios.  
 Right: Side entrance door at 900 Seventh Avenue.  
 Photos: Marjorie Pearson

The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1928-1930) at West 156<sup>th</sup> Street off Broadway, was designed by Gilbert for an organization with which he had a longstanding affiliation. The Academy moved in 1923 to Audubon Terrace, a cultural complex in Upper Manhattan which had been conceived by railroad fortune heir and philanthropist Archer M. Huntington, into a building which had been designed by William M. Kendall, of McKim, Mead & White. Five years later, Gilbert was asked to design an additional building for the organization that would incorporate gallery space for artist members to exhibit their works and an auditorium. Both spaces remain in active use; the auditorium is reputed to have some of the finest acoustics for musical recording in New York City. (See Barbara Christen and Steven Flanders, *Cass Gilbert Life and Work*, 12-13). The exterior design is based on Italian Renaissance prototypes. Both Academy buildings are enhanced by sets of double bronze doors, designed by sculptor Herbert Adams portraying various aspects of the arts.



Left: The façade of the Academy building facing the courtyard plaza of Audubon Terrace. The frieze inscription reads: All Passes Art Alone Untiring Stays To Us.

Right: The inner leaves of Herbert Adams' double doors with Inspiration at the left and Drama, portrayed by the figure of Hamlet at the right. The inscription above the doors reads: By the Gates of Art We Enter the Temple of Happiness.

Photos: Marjorie Pearson

Sharon Irish recounts Gilbert's active participation in a wide variety of artistic organizations: Architectural League of New York, one of the founding organizations of the American Academy of Fine Arts, serving as president in 1913-1914; American Institute and Academy of Arts and Letters, member from 1906 and president in 1918-1920; president of the American Institute of Architects in 1908-1909; and National Academy of Design, a member from 1908 and president between 1926 and 1932. In that capacity he gave an address on January 4, 1934, while presenting the president's medal to muralist Edwin H. Blashfield and gave an overview of mural art and artists in the United States.