THEME: 19th CENTURY ARCHITECTURE

Form 10-300 (July 1969) UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

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The description and history of the Old Corcoran Art Gallery have been abridged from notes provided by James Goode, Smithsonian Institution, for this study and evaluation.

The Old Corcoran Art Gallery faces Pennsylvania Avenue and is rectangular in shape, 107 feet wide and 126 feet long. The building is constructed of red brick, with sandstone trim, and has a slate roof. A major feature of this two-story structure is a set of three pavilions, one on each corner that fronts a street. Above the central door is a fourth or central pavilion, larger than the others and carrying an entablature with the raised inscription DEDICATED TO ART and a low triangular pediment in the typemanum of which is a round bas-relief portrait of W. W. Corcoran in profile. The pavilions are crowned with steep mansard roofs and were originally finished with decorative iron cresting. They also stand slightly forward of the main plane of the facade and have paired Corinthian pilasters marking their corners. At the second floor level are a series of eleven large niches, four facing Pennsylvania Avenue and seven facing 17th Street. These are now empty, but from ca. 1885 to ca. 1900 they contained seven-foot high statues of "the greatest artists and sculptors of all time." It should be noted that a pavilion was never intended for the North East corner since the building was designed to be seen from only two sides. The street level of the building has a stone belt course and vermiculated guoins at the corners of the pavilions. The main entrance doorway and the window openings have moulded stone architraves, arched lintels and decorative "cartouche" keystones. An iron railing separates the sidewalk from the excavated basement areaway which surrounds the building on the South and West side. Since originally constructed, the interior and exterior have been slightly modified four times: by the U.S. Army during the 1860's, restored by Corcoran in the early 1870's, modified by the U.S. Court of Claims in the early 20th century, and restored by the Smithsonian Institution in the late 1960's. Today the principal rooms are very close to their basic original design. central entrance door gives access to a large entrance hall. A broad staircase extends immediately ahead up to the second and principal floor. A pair of large corridors, flanking the stairway, extend to the rear of the first floor to the original sculpture hall, 86' x 25'. A large exhibition room on the first floor, in the center of the West side connects the South West pavilion with the North West pavilion. ceiling on the first floor measures approximately 20 feet in height.

The main staircase leads directly to the entrance of the principal exhibition room of the building, the Main Picture Gallery, which is located at the north end of the building and extends the entire width of the museum. Over the entrance hall is the octagon room, 24' x 24' with large rooms on either side. Most of the original skylights over the galleries on the second floor have now been covered, however the elaborate coffered ceilings with decorative plaster work have survived.

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Old Corcoran Art Gallery, now the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, begun in 1859 from designs of James Renwick and Robert Auchmutz, is one of the first buildings in the United States erected exclusively as a gallery of art, and is the oldest art gallery in the District of Columbia. Its outstanding merit is, however, the quality of its architectural design. Conceived in the French Second Empire style, the Old Corcoran Art Gallery is, more particularly, a deliberate emulation of the design of the new additions to the Louvre in Paris executed by Visconti and Lefuel for Napoleon III. The relatively modest scale of this building, the date of its construction, and the excellence of its architectural detail give this building a seminal position in the development in the United States of the Second Empire style which achieved such wide popularity and produced, ultimately, such vast buildings as the Philadelphia City Hall and the Old State War and Navy Building in Washington.

<u>History</u>:

The Old Corcoran Art Gallery, now the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, was erected 1859-1861 by William Wilson Corcoran (1798-1888), Washington banker and philanthropist, as an art gallery for his private collection of paintings and sculpture. The building was designed by James Renwick, Jr., the prominent New York architect who designed the original Smithsonian Institution Building in Washington in 1847. The history of the Gallery falls into the following periods of time: erection, 1859-1861; occupation by the U.S. Army, 1861-1869; restoration, 1869-1873; home of the Corcoran Art Gallery, 1874-1897; home of the U.S. Court of Claims, 1899-1964; and the acquisition and restoration of the building by the Smithsonian Institution in 1965-1972.

W. W. Corcoran chose Renwick as the architect, for they had been friends for some fifteen years. Renwick was assisted by his partner, Robert T. Auchmutz in the design of the building. Both Renwick and Corcoran visited the Paris Exposition of 1854 and must have viewed the new addition to the Louvre which had just been erected in the Second Empire style. The Gallery has many features which were inspired by the Louvre additions.

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Most of the sources for this building come from the extensive files on the history of the Renwick Gallery recently collected by the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution. The catalogues of the Corcoran Art Gallery of 1878 and 1890 are particularly useful, also Specifications of the Various Kinds of Work In a Building to be Erected on the Corner of Penn. Avenue and 17th Street, Washington, D.C., ca. 1858, pp. 1-15.

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Old Corcoran Art Gallery

8. Significance (1)

By mid-1861 the exterior of the building was finished except for many of the decorative devices used on the front facade but little interior work had been completed.

It was seized by the U.S. Army in August 1861 for use as a warehouse for the storage of records and uniforms for the Quarter Master General's Corps. The building at that time was roofed but unfloored and unplastered. In January 1864 the building was cleared and converted into the offices of the Headquarters of the Quarter Master General's Corps (Gen. Montgomery Meigs). After the Civil War, a few rooms on the first floor were still used by this same organization. After the Civil War, Corcoran pressed for the return of the art gallery. He immediately established a board of trustees and placed the building in a trust when it was returned to his control on May 10, 1869. In May 1870, it was chartered by act of Congress, by which act the gallery was free from government taxation and by which the gallery was able to recover the back rent due it. Corcoran rushed to restore the building for the purpose of an art gallery from 1869 to 1873. Work continued on the interior of the building from February 1871 to January 1874. The building was first opened as an art gallery for private viewing on January 19, 1874. At this time three rooms had been finished and arranged with art for viewing: the Hall of Bronzes on the first floor and the Main Picture Gallery and Octagon Room on the second floor. A contemporary review of this opening mentioned that the building was of "pressed brick and freestone, in Renaissance style of architecture." The front and side niches for statues were still empty at this time. On April 29, 1874, the Hall of Sculpture was opened. The last of the galleries to be finished, the two small rooms of sculpture adjacent to the staircase on the first floor, were opened in December 1874. The Hall of Bronzes was located in the room to the left on the first floor, which contained the four great Corinthian columns. Many of the bronzes displayed were of animals modeled by the French sculptor, Barye. At the rear of the first floor was the great Hall of Sculpture. In 1874 workmen were installing copies of the frieze from the Parthenon on the upper walls. The famous 18-foot cast of the Ghiberti Door of Florence would be in place shortly, covering most of the end wall. Plaster casts of ancient busts were placed here also, including Apollo, Homer, Diana; the Venus de Milo was also in the group.

In the vestibule in 1874 were a colossal bust of Napoleon by Canova, copied from the original in Milan; on the right was a bust of Humboldt by Rauch. Most of the first floor was devoted to sculpture.

The major room in the building was the Main Picture Gallery or the Hall of Paintings as it was sometimes called, at the north end of the second floor. The walls were painted a light maroon (as they had been in 1871), with heavy walnut wainscoting. The paintings exhibited were mostly from

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Old Corcoran Art Gallery

8. Significance (2)

Corcoran's own collection, worth \$100,000 when he gave them to the gallery in 1873. Also in 1873 one of the trustees, Henry Walters of Baltimore, went to Europe to purchase additional items of art for the gallery. The pictures of prominence in 1874 were Gerome's "Death of Julius Caesar," "The Drought in Egypt" by Portaels, and "Adoration of the Shepherds" by Rafael Mengs, all in the Main Picture Gallery. The Octagon Room, also on the second floor, contained five pieces of sculpture—four in niches: a bust of Shakespeare, "Il Penseroso," "The Veiled Nun," and "Bacchante." In the center stood Powers' original "The Creek Slave," purchased in London by Corcoran for \$5,000. It was undoubtedly the most famous piece of art in the Museum in 1874. Additional pictures were to be purchased from the annual income of \$50,000 from the endowment.

Plans were announced in 1877 by the trustees for a new school of art to be established at the Gallery. This school was opened in January 1890 in an annex at the rear of the building.

The collections of the Gallery grew rapidly; in 1874 there were 93 oils and 7 pieces of marble sculpture in comparison to 1878 with 145 oils and 19 pieces of marble sculpture. By 1878 there was a large collection of casts of Roman and Greek statues. Many of the bronze casts in the Hall of Bronzes were copies of medieval bronze statues. In the Main Picture Gallery the oils were hung immediately adjacent to one another in the 19th century manner, those considered the more important were hung "on the line" or at eye level. The 1878 catalog for the Gallery indicates that the exhibition was opened free to the public three days per week, on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. Artists were permitted to copy the oils and casts in the Gallery three days per week. The number of visitors increased steadily: 1874 - 66,000, 1875 - 68,000, 1876 - (Centennial celebration) 117,000 and 1877--77,000. Soon after opening in 1874 the Gallery sold photographs of its most interesting statues, bronzes, and By 1878 over 100 photos were on sale. A set was given to every American art gallery then in existence.

During the 1880's many improvements were made to the building. The decorations for the front facade were completed. A bronze plaque with the profile of Corcoran, cast in Rome by Moses Ezekiel of Virginia, was placed on the front facade. Two bronze monograms of Corcoran's initials were also put in place on the front. The great sandstone niches on the building were filled with seven foot high marble statues also made by Ezekiel (1879-1884) in Rome, these were added in the 1880's. The four on the front of the building contained statues of Pheidias, Raphael, Michael Angelo, and Durer. The niches of the west side contained statues of Titian, Da Vinci, Rubens, Rembrandt, Murillo, Canova, and Crawford.

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Old Corcoran Art Gallery

8. Significance (3)

Two bronze lions, one asleep and one half-asleep, were placed on either side of the front entrance in 1888. These were purchased by the Gallery at the auction of the Ben. Holiday Mansion at 1311 K Street, N.W. (near the Franklin School) in Washington, D.C., on May 15, 1888, for \$1,900. They had been bought by Holiday some years before for \$6,000 and were copies of the original marble lions carved by Canova (1757-1822) in 1792 for the cenotaph of Pope Clement XIII in St. Peter's, Rome. The pair of original cast iron gas lamp posts on the steps, erected in 1860-1861, were discarded when the lions were set in place. The lions were removed from the building to the present Corcoran Gallery in 1896-1897 when that structure was completed.

In 1889 a large annex was erected to the rear of the Gallery, 24 feet x 106 feet, for the Corcoran School of Art. The building was one story in front and contained three classrooms, lighted by skylights. In the rear of the first floor was located a room 24 feet x 44 feet, containing the bequest of art works left the Gallery by Mrs. B. O. Tayloe of Washington (this room connected with the main building). Above this room was another room of the same size constituting the second story, for the life classes of the school.

The Gallery grew so rapidly that the trustees began making plans in 1890 for expansion. On April 3, 1891, three years after Corcoran's death (at the age of 89), land was purchased by the new Gallery at 17th St. and New York Avenue, N.W. A design by Ernest Flagg of New York won the competition for the new building. Flagg's careful study of existing museums resulted in the most advanced museum design in the United States at the time. The structure progressed as follows: June 26, 1893--ground broken, May 10, 1894--cornerstone laid, January 8, 1897--building completed and the move began from the old building. A great opening reception occurred on February 22, 1897, at which 3,000 guests attended, including President and Mrs. Cleveland.

During the years 1899 to 1964 the Old Corcoran Gallery was the home of the U.S. Court of Claims. The physical quarters of the Court of Claims have always been under the jurisdiction of the Architect of the Capitol. The Court never had a permanent home between 1855 when it was established and 1899 when it occupied the Gallery. In 1899 it moved into the first floor rooms of the Gallery, used at that time mainly as a storage place for government records. In 1912 the Court expanded into part of the second floor and gradually took over the entire building including the annex.

The Court felt that it needed additional quarters in the early 1950's. In 1956 hearings were held by the Senate Committee on Public Works, Sub-committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, on Bill Number S.R. 3445 (and companion Bill Number N.R. 9873), which was for the destruction of

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Old Corcoran Art Gallery

8. Significance (4)

Gallery and erection of a modern building on the site for the use of the U.S. Court of Claims. The main supporters of the bill were Chief Justice Marvin Jones of the Court of Claims and Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas. During the two days of hearings, June 5 and July 2, 1956, Mr. David E. Finley of the U.S. Fine Arts Commission and Mr. John Nolen, Jr., of the National Capital Planning Commission objected to the bill. They argued that the block on which the Gallery was situated should be reserved for the future expansion of the Executive Branch of the government. They also urged that the U.S. Court of Claims should be moved to one of either two locations, on Second Street, N.E., behind the U.S. Supreme Court Building or to Judiciary Square with the other courts there. Judge Jones insisted that the Court of Claims remain on the block on which the Gallery was situated since it was necessary constantly to have access to files of the Executive Offices nearby.

The Court of Claims felt that the Gallery should be pulled down for several reasons; the building was a fire hazard, there was a great demand for additional space which the Gallery wasted because of 20 foot ceilings on the first floor and 30 foot ceilings on the second floor, and danger of falling stones from the building. Part of the sandstone decoration was removed in 1947 and 1951 because of deterioration. Between 1951 and 1956 a number of pieces of the stone had broken away and fallen onto the sidewalk, creating a serious hazard. Judge Jones also pointed out that the annex building at the Gallery was in poor condition. The west section of the annex was one story in height and used as a garage in 1956. The second floor over the east end was used for offices, and the basement used for storage. He mentioned during the hearings that the north and south walls of the annex bulged four inches in the center section.

Because of plans formulated during President Kennedy's administration, Lafayette Square has been restored and developed for offices of the Executive Branch. Most of this work was accomplished during President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration. The Court moved out of the Gallery in 1964 to temporary quarters in an office building at 1325 K Street, N.W. In July 1967, the Court moved into its new office building at 717 Madison Place, N.W., which it shares with the U.S. Court of Customs and Patent Appeals.

In 1965 S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, met with President Lyndon B. Johnson and requested that the Gallery be turned over for use to the Smithsonian. In a letter to Dr. Ripely from President Johnson, dated June 23, 1965, the President turned the building over to the Smithsonian "for use as a gallery of art, crafts, and design." He further stated: "no more appropriate purpose for the building could be proposed than to exhibit in the restored gallery examples of the ingenuity of our people and to present exhibits from other nations whose citizens are so proud of their arts." The building will be used by the President

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Old Corcoran Art Gallery

8. Significance (5)

and other distinguished government figures to entertain heads of state. President Johnson referred to this use of the building in the same letter: "I would hope that the tours of this gallery might play a memorable part in the official Washington visits of foreign heads of state, offering them not only a glimpse of our arts, but an opportunity to enjoy the friendliness and hospitality of our people." Restoration of the building for the Smithsonian Institution was begun in 1967 by the firm of Universal Restoration, Inc., 1010 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. The Gallery should open in 1972 to the public. The exterior of the building has been restored carefully to its original appearance of 1861. The iron cresting which was erected on the tops of the pavilions in 1861, and connecting crestings erected in the 1880's were removed in the early 1940's for scrap iron for the war effort. These will be replaced at a later date by the Smithsonian Institution. The interior floor plans have been carefully restored, mainly to their 1861 arrangement (except for minor small rooms). The name of the building was changed by the Smithsonian Institution to the Renwick Gallery, both to honor the architect and to distinguish between the Renwick Gallery and the present Corcoran Gallery, one block to the south.

