



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Architectural History of the Renwick Gallery's Historic Building

The Renwick Gallery, a branch of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, features one of the finest collections of American craft in the United States. Its collections, exhibition program and publications highlight the best craft objects and decorative arts from the 19th century to the present.

The Renwick Gallery is located steps from the White House in the heart of historic federal Washington. Its building was begun in 1859 to house the American and European art collection of banker and philanthropist William Wilson Corcoran (1798–1888). It was the city's first art museum. Corcoran engaged the noted architect James Renwick Jr. (1818–1895), who had earlier designed the Smithsonian's Castle on the National Mall and St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Renwick modeled the gallery in the French Second-Empire style that was popular at the time, inspired by the Louvre's Tuileries addition in Paris.

The exterior was completed in 1861. In August of that year, the Quarter Master General's Corps for the Union Army occupied the building to store records and uniforms, and eventually set up offices for the duration of the Civil War. The building was returned to Corcoran in 1869 and extensive renovations began to complete the interior. Corcoran hosted a lavish ball on Feb. 20, 1871 as a preview and to raise money for the long-stalled Washington Monument. The event, called "the most magnificent reception ever given in the United States," was attended by President Ulysses S. Grant and included a special balcony for musicians who were accompanied by live canaries suspended in cages from the ceilings. The interior work was completed in 1873, and Corcoran finally opened his art gallery to the public in 1874.

By 1897, Corcoran's collection had outgrown the building. The trustees of the gallery purchased land at 17th Street and New York Avenue N.W. and hired Ernest Flagg of New York to design a new, larger building—the present day Corcoran Gallery of Art.

The U.S. Court of Claims was located in the building from 1899 to 1964. In need of larger space by the 1950s, the Court of Claims proposed that the historic building be torn down. First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy led the effort to save this architectural and historical gem, and in 1965, S. Dillon Ripley, then secretary of the Smithsonian, met with President Lyndon Johnson to request that the gallery be turned over to the Smithsonian. The Renwick was subsequently dedicated "for use as a gallery of art, crafts and design."

The architectural firm John Carl Warnecke and Associates of San Francisco, in conjunction with Universal Restorations Inc. of Washington D.C., was hired to complete extensive exterior restorations. The well-known architect Hugh Newell Jacobson was hired to lead the interior renovation. The extraordinary Grand Salon—which had been converted into office space for Court of Claims judges—was restored to its original glory. The building, named the Renwick Gallery in honor of its architect, was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1971 and opened in 1972 as the home of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's contemporary craft program.

In 2000, the refurbishment of the building's Grand Salon, a 4,300-square-foot gallery with a soaring 40-foot ceiling, included a state-of-the-art lighting system that re-creates natural light through innovative treatments of the historic laylight, custom-made draperies and gilding of frieze elements. Paintings from the museum's permanent collection are hung salon-style, top-to-bottom and side-by-side, on its rose colored walls recreating the elegant setting of a 19th-century collector's picture gallery.

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum's main building is located at Eighth and F streets N.W. above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station. Hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Its Renwick Gallery, located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W., is open daily 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Web site: americanart.si.edu.