The Huntington Mansion in New York: Economics of Architecture and Decoration in the 1890s

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News of the Syracuse University Library and the Library Associates
The Huntington Mansion in New York: Economics of Architecture and Decoration in the 1890s

BY ISABELLE HYMAN

In 1889 railroad millionaire Collis P. Huntington (1821-1900) and his wife Arabella (d. 1924) purchased a large property on the southeast corner of New York's Fifth Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street, the most fashionable residential neighborhood of the period, and undertook to build there another of the great stone piles that constituted the habitats of the very rich during the city's Gilded Age. Aspects of the history of the Fifty-seventh Street Huntington mansion have been recounted,1 but supplementary information about its decoration and about the artists and craftsmen who embellished it can be found in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University, where the Collis P. Huntington Papers2 (105 linear feet) are preserved. Among the papers are unpublished documents—ledgers, letters, contracts, lists, certificates of payment, etc.—relating chiefly to expenses for the construction and the interior decor of the Fifth Avenue residence that was designed and built by George B.


2. The Collis P. Huntington Papers, Syracuse University Library. Material regarding Huntington's New York residence was brought to my attention by Kathleen Manwaring, the archives-manuscripts supervisor in the George Arents Research Library, to whom I am grateful for her valued assistance. On the Huntington Papers at Syracuse see also Alice M. Vestal, "'I Am Satisfied with What I Have Done': Collis P. Huntington, 19th Century Entrepreneur", Syracuse University Library Associates Courier 8 (July 1971): 20–29. Some of the information about the house found in the Syracuse material is duplicated in the New-York Historical Society; see footnote 3.
Post, one of nineteenth-century America’s most important architects. Post’s architectural practice can be reconstructed in part from office job records and other material in the New-York Historical Society. By piecing together documents from that collection and from the Huntington Papers at Syracuse, we can enlarge the picture of what it took to put together one of the more opulent Manhattan residences of the 1890s.

Sixty-three-year-old C. P. Huntington married Arabella Duval Yarrington Worsham in 1884, when she was in her thirties, and a year after the death of Elizabeth Stoddard Huntington, to whom Huntington had been married for almost four decades. Regardless of her obscure origins and earlier marriage to John Archer Worsham,


Post had been an associate of Richard Morris Hunt and according to Maher, Twilight, 276ff., Arabella Huntington may have preferred Hunt to be her architect. However, as the result of ambiguous information regarding Hunt’s availability (transmitted in an interview with one of his assistants), she committed herself instead to Post. Conclusions about the Huntingtons’ choice of an architect based on a memoir by Hunt’s widow, in which dates and locations regarding the Huntington mansion are confused (Maher, 277), remain open to conjecture. Also see Maher p. 276 regarding the idea that Post may have been working on designs for a house for the Huntingtons (they had other New York property) three years before the purchase of the Bonner lots.

On the chronology question, it is of some interest that the New Buildings Docket, in New York City’s Municipal Archives, records the filing (#2033) on 27 December 1889 of plans for the Huntington residence by George B. Post. These plans, however, were not approved in this form and, as far as I could determine, there is no record of the submission of plans that were approved. In the June 1889 report of the Huntington property purchase (see footnote 6), it is clear that architect’s sketches for “a handsome residence” were already in existence.

4. Arabella Huntington continued to pursue her rich and full life after the death of Collis in 1900. She became an important collector of art, and in 1913 she married Collis’s nephew and trusted business associate, Henry E. Huntington, who was also her co-heir to Collis’s enormous estate (and after whom the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery in San Marino, California, is named).
Arabella had acquired the urbanity and savoir-faire essential to becoming a force in New York society by the time of her marriage to Huntington (in a ceremony performed by Henry Ward Beecher). With her husband she oversaw the construction and adornment of their mansion, grand and ambitious enough so that when it was finished it would hold its own against the monumental double palace diagonally across the avenue, belonging to Cornelius Vanderbilt II.5

The Fifty-seventh Street property had been sold to C. P. Huntington in 18896 by the sons of Robert Bonner (1824–1899), the editor of the New York Ledger and a multi-millionaire horse fancier, who retired from the Ledger and left its management to his sons in 1888.7 About the same time that Bonner turned over the magazine to his sons, he deeded to them as a gift a plot of fifteen lots occupying 210.10 feet of an entire Fifth Avenue block front, east side, with almost equal footage running east along the boundaries of Fifty-sixth Street on the south and Fifty-seventh Street on the north.8 Soon after receipt of their father’s gift, the Bonner sons sold to C. P. Huntington a plot of five lots from this property—three on the southeast corner of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street, 75.5 feet by 175 feet, and two on the south side of Fifty-seventh Street 125 feet east of the Avenue, 50 by 100.5 feet, for $450,000. The total plot comprised 14,448.9 square feet. This account of the property was published in the 8 June 1889 issue of Real Estate Record and Builders Guide,9 and much of it was repeated (with some inaccuracies) in New York City newspapers on 13 and 14 October 1898,

5. The Vanderbilt mansion, completed in 1882 and enlarged between 1892 and 1894, occupied the full Fifth Avenue block, west side, between Fifty-seventh and Fifty-eighth Streets.

6. Details of the sale were published in Real Estate Record and Builders Guide no. 43 (8 June 1889): 796 in a brief article by Russell Sturgis (“The Huntington Purchase”), where it was reported that title to five lots was taken on 31 May 1889. Sturgis writes that “a reporter of the Record and Guide, in the absence of Mr. Huntington, was informed by his secretary that he intends to build a handsome residence on the property”.


when William Waldorf Astor purchased from the Bonners ("in an entirely cash transaction")\textsuperscript{10} lots adjacent to those they had sold to Huntington nine years earlier (and on which the Huntington mansion was by then built and occupied).\textsuperscript{11} Although the Huntingtons had embarked on the construction of their showpiece mansion soon after purchasing the Fifth Avenue property, the later Astor purchase was to play a role in its history.\textsuperscript{12}

CONSTRUCTION AND DECORATION

The first record of payments made by the architect's office to subcontractors for the Huntington job is dated 27 November 1889 for "excavations and foundations" (Huntington had pushed to get the foundations in before the cold weather); overseeing this work was the general contractor, D. H. King, Jr.\textsuperscript{13} The earliest correspondence between George B. Post and C. P. Huntington preserved among the papers at Syracuse is a letter dated six weeks later, 10 January 1890, from the architect to his client in response to the Huntingtons' impatience about the building's progress: "As it will be impossible to quarry any stones (granite) under any circumstances before Spring, I did not suppose it was a matter of any importance to hurry the specifications, but if you for any reasons desire me to do so I will have them attended to"; six weeks later he could report that "the drawings for your house are in the hands of the printer, and the specifications are completed".\textsuperscript{14} Once begun, construction of the house moved along

\textsuperscript{10}"Real Estate Private Sales", \textit{New York Sun}, 13 October 1898.


\textsuperscript{12}See p. 22.

\textsuperscript{13}George B. Post Job Records, 1888–1901, New-York Historical Society, ledger 2, p. 100. Pages 100–121 concern the C. P. Huntington "dwelling" on Fifth Avenue. And see footnote 21.

\textsuperscript{14}Post to C. P. Huntington, 10 January 1890 and 25 February 1890. Unless otherwise cited, correspondence mentioned hereafter is found in the Collis P. Huntington Papers, Syracuse University Library.
at a rapid pace so that by February 1891 much of the exterior was completed. During 1891 an alteration for "your son's library" (referring to Archer Huntington) was under discussion, and designing the elaborate interior finishes and decor of the house was to become a primary concern. In this matter Post played a strong role, with firm ideas about the character of the decoration, for in houses of this opulence and scale, decoration was not simply the installing of furniture, fabrics, and objets d'art. Just as important was the interior architecture, and the design of ornamental details, finishes, and ensembles of painting and sculpture to articulate the surfaces of all the

15. Archer Milton Huntington (1870–1955), who would become an important scholar of Spanish culture and founder of the Hispanic Society of America and of other cultural institutions, was Arabella Yarrington Worsham Huntington's son from her earlier marriage to John Worsham. He was fourteen at the time of his mother's marriage to Huntington, who raised him as his own son. For an account of his public life see Beatrice Gilman Proske, Archer Milton Huntington (New York: Hispanic Society of America, 1963). Portions of the interior of the C. P. Huntington mansion, some of its furnishings, and a number of its in situ works of art were given by Archer Huntington to the Yale University Art Gallery in 1926 soon after the house was demolished. See footnote 48.

16. Post to C. P. Huntington, 19 February 1891.
rooms and halls. Post wrote on 19 February 1891 that he had “completed sketches to show Mrs. Huntington of my idea of what would be a proper treatment for all of the first floor rooms in your house”. Payments recorded in Post’s job ledger for paintings and sculpture commissioned for some of the mansion’s grandest spaces were made between 1892 and 1894, and almost all the interior work was executed in 1893–94. It was not until 1895 that the building was fully finished. A document of 2 January 1893 refers to “the building being erected” and “Mrs. Huntington’s bathroom to be done”. A photo-

17. Post to C. P. Huntington, 19 February 1891. Some of the sketches prepared in Post’s office are preserved in the New-York Historical Society. See footnote 23.
18. Untitled list of costs beginning “Ellin Kitson & Co.”, Huntington Papers, Syracuse University Library.
graph, published in *American Architect and Building News* of 14 July 1894, illustrates a finished exterior with only the pavement and grand carriage entrance on Fifty-seventh Street still under construction (Fig. 1). Payments to the contractor for granite paving for the driveway and curbing were recorded for 27 June 1894. 19 The 5 October 1895 issue of *Architecture and Building* carried a photograph of the completed mansion (Fig. 2); during the final stages in 1895 a great deal of furniture was ordered. 20 The architect's job records indicate that by 1895 George B. Post was out of the picture, his responsibility successfully discharged. An accounting prepared for Huntington showed total payments for the house, to 13 April 1893, as $1,294,021.75 (including the land), with a balance of $386,427.35 still owed on contracts. 21 Until the installation of finishes and furnishings was concluded in 1895 the Huntingtons lived at 65 Park Avenue, C. P. Huntington's residence before his marriage to Arabella. 22

Although in appearance the Huntington mansion shared with others of similar magnitude the historicizing eclecticism of the period, it was more consistent than many in its references to palatial structures of the Italian Renaissance, both in detail and in character. Post succeeded in reproducing on the exterior the monumental effect of rugged, rough-hewn rustication of the Florentine type, and in adding density and sculptural dynamics to the wall by the use of engaged columns that framed the pedimented windows of the *piano nobile* in the manner of the Roman High Renaissance. Had he not crowned his convincing Italianate structure with the mansard attic and chimney stacks associated with French châteaux, and had he resisted appropriating the idiomatic low, wide arches of Richardson's Roman-

21. Post job records, ledger 2, p. 121 shows that the running account kept by Post's office of costs for the Huntington job totalled $1,148,000 and, in addition, $10,000 for alterations. The alterations were made years later, in 1911 and 1913, and again in 1923 (roof repair, heating work, alterations to the bay windows) and are recorded in the Post job records, ledger 3, pp. 58, 59, 334, 335.
22. The Huntingtons returned to 65 Park Avenue after giving up in 1887 a house they considered unsatisfactory at 5 West Fifty-first Street. In that year they sold the Fifty-first Street house to Andrew Carnegie. See David Lavender, *The Great Persuader* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 346. Also see footnote 89. More on Arabella Huntington and New York real estate can be found in Maher, *Twilight*, esp. pp. 261–68 and in the Huntington Papers at Syracuse.
esque (Fig. 3), then in both format and style the Italian Renaissance image he created would have been impressively coherent and, in comparison to some of the wilder composites of the time, remarkably "classical".

ARTISTS AND DECORATORS

If the appearance, size, and location of the new building bespoke its princely status, no less can be said of its decorative appointments. The Huntington mansion was to be embellished by a corps of artists, craftsmen, and fashionable New York interior decorators, most of them subcontracted by Post and subject to the approval of the Hun-
tingtons.23 These included muralists Elihu Vedder, Edwin Howland Blashfield, Francis Lathrop, and H. Siddons Mowbray, the sculptor Karl Bitter, and interior decorators and craftsmen such as Herter Brothers, William Baumgarten & Co., Ellin Kitson & Co., and Batterson, See & Eisele (for the marble, onyx, and other stone work), and George A. Schastey & Co. (for much of the cabinet work and interior finish). The remarkable sum of $440,000 was expended for the marble, onyx, and cut stone work.

Records of some purchases made for the interior are included among the Syracuse papers.24 In February 1892 the Huntingtons paid $18,000 for a “Boucher Tapestry” and “2 Tapestry Overdoors” from Duveen Brothers, premier art and antique dealers for wealthy collectors in

23. Some sketches produced in George B. Post's office for the Huntington Residence interiors, and some photographs relating to those interiors from Post's photo album, are preserved among the Post papers in the New-York Historical Society. Even though they provide a record that is only fragmentary, these documents still evoke an impression of the grandeur Post wanted to achieve in this house.

Drawings include: dining room, south side, with decorative sculpture and sketches of murals; library fireplace; fireplace (with sketch on verso); library, study for corbel, detail of decorative sculpture dated 8 February 1892; coffered barrel-vaulted ceiling in stairway hall, with fireplace; parlor, showing fireplace, wall and ceiling decoration; parlor, detail of shutters; billiard room, east wall; west chamber, third story, elevation of fireplace and wall hanging lamp; reception room alcove (drawing is lost, only the board remains); bathtub (two drawings: one depicts shell-shaped tub; the other has “OK May 25, 1892” inscribed on verso); dining room buffet, oak with antique finish, dated 17 April 1893; two watercolor sketches for chandeliers [may not be for Huntington job], inscription/sketch on verso of each; dining room sconce; drawing by Elihu Vedder of scheme for allegorical paintings on dining room ceiling; posts at main entrance; gates at main entrance; elevation of fireplace wall of dining room, and decorative panels; elevation of “Mrs. Huntington's second story sitting room” showing wall with onyx mantelpiece and white boisserie with design of holly and silver filigree, upper wall covered in silk with velour cove; three watercolor sketches by Francis Lathrop for the decorative panels of the dining room (coats of arms with mottoes—“security”, “protection”); bronze work for elevator or door; detail of parlor shutters.

Photographs in album: p. 61, colonnaded hall with gallery (main hall/atrium); stair hall with spiral stair; p. 62, classical mirror above fireplace/ frieze with putti; p. 92, drawing of exterior of house; p. 106, two views of dining room, with mantelpiece; p. 109, sketch inscribed “not built” (may represent scheme for library).

Published photographs of the exterior and some interiors can be found also in Maher, Twilight, and in the Sturgis essay.

24. Unless indicated otherwise, references to purchases cited herein are derived from bills and certificates of payment preserved at Syracuse.
Europe and America.  Three years later, in the summer of 1895 while abroad, they purchased through Baumgarten’s agent in Paris Gobelin tapestries, costing $28,000, to be set in frames for the dining room (visible in place in a photograph published with Russell Sturgis’s essay on Post), a Savonnerie carpet for the salon, an antique Persian rug, and many other items.  Most of the non-architectural furnishings were designed and manufactured to order by the Baumgarten firm at 321 Fifth Avenue, with whom Mrs. Huntington appears to have had a comfortable working association. When construction of the house was nearing completion, she put in orders for much of the furniture, to be designed in the era’s preferred eclectic European style—carved and gilt marble-topped tables, marquetry-panelled cabinets with gilt-bronze ornaments, chairs in the “style Louis XV”.  The Baumgarten firm also provided fabrics for the upholstery and for the installation of wall coverings, curtains, and portières: “Interior Decoration, Furniture, Draperies, etc.” their billheads read.

Herter Brothers, today perhaps the best remembered decorative arts establishment of the era, was responsible for a major portion of the mansion’s cabinet work, interior finishes, stucco relief, carved moldings and wainscoting, papier mâché and ornamental plaster, and bronze and iron work. Their contract for executing the decoration of the East Room alone, for example, totalled $72,545.  In these years Herter Brothers was located at 154 Fifth Avenue, not far from Baumgarten in Ladies Mile, the principal commercial district of late nineteenth-century New York. On their billhead (Fig. 4) they described themselves as “Manufacturers of Interior Decorations, Furniture, Stained Glass, Mosaics, Gas Fixtures, Etc., and Importers of

25. The purchase was made on 24 February, a bill was rendered on 1 March, and the receipt for payment was sent on 2 March, signed with thanks from “J. Duveen” (later Lord Joseph Duveen). On the enduring connection between Joseph Duveen as dealer and Arabella Huntington as his client, see S. N. Behrman, Duveen (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1972), 22 and passim.

26. Letter and memorandum, with prices, of the purchases made by the Huntingtons in the summer of 1895 sent to C. P. Huntington by Baumgarten & Co. on 18 September 1895. For the illustrated Sturgis essay see footnote 3.

27. Order dated 20 April 1895 and estimate dated 21 May 1895 from Baumgarten regarding the furnishings. On the style of the interior decor in the context of contemporary revivals, see Maher, Twilight, 279f.

28. The order of 20 April 1895, for example.

29. Francis Lathrop to C. P. Huntington, 21 June 1894.
Fig. 4. Typical billhead, Herter Brothers. Collis P. Huntington Papers, George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University.

Tapestries, Fine Carpets, Curtain Materials, Paper Hangings, Etc.”

Relations between the Huntingtons and Herter Brothers were not always smooth.30 Contracts between them underwent revisions and adjustments during the years of installation of the mansion’s interiors; contracts and certificates of payment preserved at Syracuse record the changes. For example, a small balance charged on 14 May 1895 includes the following description: “... for Cabinet Wk and Interior finish of Chamber N. of Staircase, West Chamber & Mrs.

H's Dressing Room . . . Amount of Contract . . . Deduction—work omitted” etc. A notation on the cover of a contract dated 21 September 1893 tells us that dining room work at $6205 was cancelled, but that work for the reception room at $3443 was not. Apart from information about cancellation of work, these papers are useful for their description of craft processes at this period inasmuch as they refer to the preparation of shop drawings, the making of models for carved moldings and other carved work, clay models for wainscot friezes, and sample panels of wainscot and of inlay work made of specially purchased satinwood. 31

Perhaps the most telling piece of paper in regard to misunderstandings between Herter Brothers and their illustrious clients is a “Memorandum”, signed by C. P. Huntington and recorded in George B. Post’s office, 33 East 17th Street, on 19 December 1893. Both Mr. and Mrs. Huntington were present, as well as the architect and a representative from Herter Brothers.

Mr. Huntington makes the following statement of what he will do in connection with the work of Herter Bros. done or contracted to be done in his house at Fifty-seventh Street and Fifth Avenue: “Although the wood work done in my house by you [Herter Brothers] has not been done according to contract, yet I am willing to accept by way of compromise so much of the work in the halls, reception room and marble room as shall be changed and finished up by you in a manner satisfactory to Mr. Post and approved by him. I will not accept any other of the wood work done or contracted to be done by you (including furniture) in my house. The above does not apply to the plaster work, the metal work, or the marble work, which we will accept if satisfactory. . . .”

Both William Baumgarten & Co. and Herter Brothers continued to carry out commissions for work at the mansion through 1895. The extensive decoration of the mansion’s billiard room in 1895 was consigned to Baumgarten: “5 foot high wainscotting all around, window trims with shutters and shutter boxes for eleven windows, trimmings for doors and pilasters as shown on sketch”. They were to lay a floor of solid oak in herringbone pattern and there was also to be a red

31. Estimate, Herter Brothers to C. P. Huntington, 23 January 1894.
sandstone mantel. The ceiling was to be plastered and painted and ornamented with relief “according to a design submitted”. Baumgarten was responsible, too, for painting the walls and for making a cornice trimmed with egg-and-dart molding. All those services and items were to be provided, along with hardware, for what appears to be comparatively more economical than Herter Brothers bills.32 Furthermore, Baumgarten was responsible for the cabinetwork and interior finish of the parlor and alcove (synonymous with the drawing room, one of the most important of the interior spaces). In May 1895 Herter Brothers received payment for the balance on their original contracted work but during the year Huntington was still making small payments to them for plaster work, papier mâché work, and cabinetwork for the halls “not included in the contract”. This additional labor encompassed “8 ornamental plaster arches of the 1st story entrance hall” and “alteration of back of one wardrobe in lobby of 1st story for electric cut out box”.33 During 1895 Baumgarten & Co. was supplying a great deal of the furniture ordered for the rooms.34 Among the fashionable interior decorators working for New York millionaires in this period, and competitive with Herter Brothers and Baumgarten & Co., was L. Marcotte & Co.35 Because Post refers to Marcotte in his 19 February 1891 letter to Huntington, one must assume either that the Huntingtons (probably Arabella) had considered commissioning the Marcotte firm to do cabinetwork and furniture, or that Adrian Herzog (owner of the firm after founder Léon Marcotte’s death in 1887)36 had gone after the job. Although he had used the Marcotte company in the past for important commissions,37 Post was no longer among its admirers—at least not at this point in the company’s history. He writes:38

I have today received a request from Marcotte for the drawings of some of the rooms. I will have them traced from the

32. Order, Baumgarten to C. P. Huntington, 17 April 1895.
33. 14 May 1895.
34. See p. 26.
36. Information about the history of the firm comes from Rutenberg, “Marcotte”.
37. Ibid., 58.
38. Post to C. P. Huntington, 19 February 1891.

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plan and sent to him [Herzog?] but I am afraid he will make wild work of design for rooms of the character of which these rooms should be, in harmony with the ground plan of the house and the halls.

Post apparently regarded the prevailing Marcotte style as antipathetic ("wild work") to the preservation of the classical harmony he envisioned for both the ground plan and elevations in his Huntington designs. At the time of writing he apparently preferred the work of Herter Brothers and seems to have succeeded in diverting Huntington interest away from Marcotte. Thus, in the Post job records there is an entry posted on 2 February 1894 for Herter Brothers "sketches for furniture as per agreement", although these are the designs that were never realized.

Even though Post's correspondence regarding the finishing and decorating of the mansion is addressed to C. P. Huntington, in all likelihood it was Arabella to whom Post was speaking. It is clear that she made many of the necessary decisions and was involved with the fine points of the cabinetwork and interior finishes. Regarding the work in the salon, for example, Post writes to Huntington: "If it would be satisfactory to Mrs. Huntington I think the best plan would be to prepare the working drawings complete and have estimates by your return. Any modifications or alterations which she desired to make in details could than [sic] be arranged without altering the estimate substantially." By March 1891 Post had been urging that the interior work be begun because "the mantelpiece for the library and dining-room will take longer than any other work to make, and they at least should be ordered as soon as estimates can be procured". He cautioned, too, that the "work in the salon will also be slow, not so slow perhaps in construction as in the preparation of the working drawings. It requires an enormous amount of study and great accuracy."
The program for the ensemble of ornamental sculpture and mural decoration that was de rigueur in a residence of this quality was put into the hands of notable American academic artists who were regularly called upon to collaborate with leading architects such as Post. Among them were his friend and mentor Richard Morris Hunt (preeminent architect for the New York rich and perhaps Post’s closest rival in terms of commissions from the millionaires of the late nineteenth century) and Charles F. McKim. Accordingly, on 10 March 1892 two contracts were signed between C. P. Huntington and the sculptor Karl Bitter. Bitter (1867–1915) was a Vienna-born sculptor who specialized in Neo-classical sculptural ornamentation of architecture. Greatly successful in the United States, he worked extensively for Post and also for Hunt. That Bitter had carved a series of half-length nude figures for the Fifth Avenue mansion Post designed in 1891 for Mrs. William Waldorf Astor and her son, John Jacob Astor, was probably not lost on Arabella Huntington. The contracts with Bitter are interesting documents for the manner in which they were drafted to insure Post’s control over the art work: “. . . said payments to be made upon the presentation of a certificate obtained from, and signed by, the said George B. Post, Architect, and not otherwise”. One contract was for the library fireplace, more accurately for the ornamentation of that fireplace with high relief caryatids and herms “in conformity with the drawings and directions made by George B. Post, Architect” at a cost of $3460. Bitter was also paid $450 for “3 small heads for dining room mantel”. The second contract with Bitter, for $3600 and using the same language insuring Post’s control of the design, concerned “nine ‘Muse’ Panels in the first-story corridor”. During 1893 Bitter received payments for executing a third and much more elaborate and expensive ($15,800) Huntington commission for a series of “12 ‘Months’ panel[s] in marble” replete with Donatellesque putti of the Cantoria type that was destined for the sub-columnar frieze of the double-story main hall (atrium) of the mansion.45

Allegorical subjects executed in a classicizing idiom with putti and

45. Certificate of payment 4799 from office of George B. Post to C. P. Huntington, 2 August 1893.
female nudes would characterize much of the imagery of the interior
decor. Like palaces and villas of Renaissance Italy that were their
prototypes, the Huntington mansion and similar opulent dwellings
of the period were decorated with coordinated ensembles of interior
architecture, relief sculpture, stucco work, and mural painting. The
paintings in the Huntington atrium, commissioned to complement
Bitter’s relief sculpture, were the work of muralist H. Siddons Mow-
bray, who also painted “10 panels in corridor” (where Bitter’s nine
‘Muse’ panels were installed) and superintended the painting of the
staircase hall. Years later, in 1926, when the mansion was demol-
ished to make room for a commercial building, Archer Huntington,
who had received an honorary Master of Arts degree from Yale Uni-
versity in 1897, donated Mowbray’s murals and other works of art
and decoration, furniture, and the panelling and doors from the din-
ing room, to the Yale University Art Gallery. The intention was to
establish a Huntington Room in the Gallery, but this plan was never
realized.48

In July 1892 C. P. Huntington made an agreement with artist
Francis Lathrop for extensive (and expensive) work in the East Room.49
Lathrop had been a student of James McNeill Whistler and of Ford
Madox Brown in London, and by the 1890s had become one of New
York’s most pleasing and versatile painter-decorators, with skills as a
muralist, mosaician, gilder, and designer of stained glass windows.
Lathrop was to be paid $10,000 for supplying “seven paintings on
canvas” for the ceiling of the East Room; $5500 for “painting and
gilding the plaster and papier mâché work on the ceiling and frieze
in said room”; 50 and $3850 for “supplying models for the figures on

47. Post job records, ledger 2, p. 100.
48. I am grateful to Susan Frankenbach, Registrar of the Yale University Art Gallery, for information about the Archer M. Huntington Collection at the Yale Art Gallery. See also p. 21 regarding Huntington’s donation of Blashfield’s paintings to Yale and for an excerpt from the 1926 Bulletin of the Associates in Fine Arts at Yale University, also kindly sent to me by Ms. Frankenbach. Some of the Huntington mansion paintings at Yale are illustrated in Murray, “The Art of Decoration”, 203ff.
49. 15 July 1892. Handwritten by Francis Lathrop.
50. Ibid.
the mantelpiece and over the door in the same room".\footnote{Ibid.} Furthermore, for an additional $8000 Lathrop was to act as Huntington’s agent in order to “direct and supervise the work in East-Room of my house . . . as specified in my contract with Messrs. Herter Brothers” and also to advise Mrs. Huntington in affairs of “color work, or furnishing”.\footnote{Ibid; and 7 April 1893 regarding Mrs. Huntington.}

51. Ibid.
52. Ibid; and 7 April 1893 regarding Mrs. Huntington.
professional all-around artist such as Lathrop—as well as that of his architect—that the craftsmanship he was paying for was "worthy". Lathrop found Herter Brothers' modelling of the ceiling of the East Room to be satisfactory and approved payment\(^{53}\) for that work, executed between April and September 1893, at $9500.\(^{54}\) Their marble work alone for that room, commended by Lathrop in a letter of 21 June 1894, cost Huntington $24,032;\(^ {55}\) for the bronze and iron work ($15,000) crafted by Herter Brothers for the East Room, Lathrop approved payment for the remaining balance on 12 July 1894.\(^ {56}\) Three months earlier, in April 1894, Manfred L. Hillhouse, a lawyer who assisted Huntington with real estate matters, had examined the carved panels and woodwork in the new vestibule and found "the same all in place and so far as I can judge of very superior workmanship".\(^ {57}\) For himself, Francis Lathrop on 12 June 1894 billed C. P. Huntington $5825 for "painting and gilding ceiling and cornice of Main Hall, above capitals of upper columns", the dining room ceiling and cornice, and the ceiling and cornice of the corridor leading to the East Room. The fee represented a $3000 reduction from the original estimate.\(^ {58}\) In August he estimated a fee of $3450 for himself for painting and gilding the ceiling of the third story above the main staircase, decorating the ceiling and cornice of the first-story hall at the staircase landing, touching up capitals with gold, and painting all the staircase walls from basement to top including panel moldings and a border on the wall under the stair run, as well as finishing the plaster cornices in zinc and varnishing the color.\(^ {59}\) Lathrop also had a glass contract for the house. In 1895 he was paid $360 for "eight lights of leaded glass for vestibule",\(^ {60}\) and his letter to Huntington on this occasion includes a request for permission to remove a stained glass window from the parlor at 65 Park Avenue. Possibly it had been made by him in the first place and was to be transferred and reinstalled in the new house.

\(^{53}\) Lathrop to C. P. Huntington, 23 September 1893.
\(^{54}\) Ibid.
\(^{55}\) Lathrop to C. P. Huntington, 21 June 1894.
\(^{56}\) Lathrop to C. P. Huntington, 12 July 1894.
\(^{57}\) J. B. Hillhouse to Mr. T. B. Criss [at Herter Brothers?], 5 April 1894.
\(^{58}\) Lathrop to C. P. Huntington, 12 July 1894.
\(^{59}\) Lathrop to C. P. Huntington, Ibid.; and 7 April 1893 regarding Mrs. Huntington.
\(^{60}\) Lathrop to C. P. Huntington, 22 May 1895.
During 1893 sculptor Karl Bitter and muralists Elihu Vedder and Edwin Howland Blashfield were at work on their individual projects for the Huntngtons: Bitter for the main hall, Vedder for the dining room, and Blashfield for the parlor (drawing room). Karl Bitter on 2 August 1893 was paid a portion of his fee for the Twelve Months Panels, with the balance to be received later (he was paid in November). Vedder is probably regarded today as the most distinguished of the artists who worked at the Huntington mansion. With his own idiosyncratic preference for philosophical and visionary subjects, he was a representative of that genre of American academic painters who were trained in Italy, and he continued to work and reside in Rome for many years. Vedder carried out work on the panels for the Huntington dining room in his studio in Rome, returning to New York to deliver them in August 1893. Blashfield, a leading American mural painter of the period, was trained in Paris by Léon Bonnat and Jean-Léon Gérôme, greatest of the practitioners of nineteenth-century Academic Realism. He was to achieve his highest renown for carrying out grand mural schemes in some of America's supreme architectural monuments, including the Library of Congress and many state capitols. The Huntington residence was an early private commission for him, coming soon after his success as a muralist for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. On 10 November 1893 Blashfield was paid $7000 of his contract for “painting panels on walls and ceiling of the Huntington Parlor and Alcove”. Blashfield's murals (and those of Vedder, Mowbray, and Lathrop) were among the donations of Archer Huntington to the Yale University Art Gallery in 1926. In the December 1926 Bulletin of the Associates in Fine Arts at Yale University, Blashfield's painting was described: “[The] principal canvas, 16 feet 6 inches long by 8 feet 6 inches wide, came from the ceiling of the drawing room which was in the style of Louis XV. . . . Six nude or film-clad nymphs of the dawn and three cherubs recline or play with a sense of joyousness amid clouds of white.”

Although there are photographs and sketches that record and convey to a limited extent an impression of the Huntington mansion

61. See Perceptions and Evocations: The Art of Elihu Vedder, passim.
63. Certificate of payment 4941 from office of George B. Post to C. P. Huntington, 10 November 1893.
64. See footnote 48. The painting is illustrated in Murray, “The Art of Decoration”, Fig. 255.
interior, the most valuable description comes not from a graphic but from a literary source. For the Great American Architects Series, no. 4, of *The Architectural Record*, June 1898, Russell Sturgis wrote a long and thoughtful appraisal of George B. Post's architecture. Sturgis (1838–1909) was a writer, critic, historian of architecture, professor of architecture and design, practising architect, and editor of *The Architectural Record*. His essay on Post included a description of the style of the private houses as well as the commercial buildings; and in those “vast city palaces” it was the interiors rather than the exteriors that he most admired. The Huntington mansion “is hardly attractive in its exterior aspect”, he wrote, “in spite of a certain sombre dignity. . . . Within, however, it presents a larger amount of very successful decoration than any interior in America, always excepting the new Congressional library.”

**POSTSCRIPT**

The last of the Syracuse University Library documents to be accounted for here and relating to the Huntington mansion is a letter to C. P. Huntington dated 11 January 1899 from Charles A. Peabody, Jr., of the Wall Street law office of Peabody, Baker & Peabody. The letter returns us to the beginning of this article, to the purchase by William Waldorf Astor in 1898 of the Bonner properties on Fifth Avenue adjoining that of the Huntingtons. A real estate developer like the rest of his notable relatives, Astor had acquired several lots three years earlier, in 1895, on the same Fifth Avenue block but at the corner of Fifty-sixth Street; on it he had constructed luxurious town houses and leased them to “well-known persons”, as a newspaper article described his tenants. The remaining lots between the first Astor purchase (1895) and the Huntington purchase constituted the property Astor eventually bought in 1898. This particular transaction caused the Huntingtons some consternation because a ten-year restriction made by the Bonner brothers at C. P. Huntington’s request, guaranteeing exclusively residential use of this property, would soon (in 1899) be up. After that, theoretically,

66. Ibid., 83.
68. Ibid.
Astor could build commercial structures there. At the time of the second Astor purchase, the Huntington mansion had been completed for about three years and, as reported in the 13 October 1898 New York Herald, Huntington valued it, with the land, at $2,500,000. In reporting the Astor purchase, the newspaper headlined the words “Will Erect on Property Handsome Residences”, giving prominence to the zoning issue, but making clear that Astor’s declared intention was to construct nothing other than dignified residential buildings with the purpose of leasing them, as he had already successfully done on his Fifty-sixth Street corner.

Peabody, Baker & Peabody, presumably acting on behalf of William Waldorf Astor, enclosed with its letter a sketch, now in the Huntington Papers at Syracuse, of “the north wall of the new houses which Mr. Astor is to build” (Fig. 6). Huntington must have seen illustrations of the new designs or perhaps simply heard tell about them. At any rate he protested (in all likelihood with regard to his privacy) that the north flank of the house destined to be adjacent to his own just beyond the iron fence had too many windows towards the front. The lawyer is placating: “We have tried to avoid having any more windows than were absolutely necessary near the front of the house, that being the place where I understood you to say they were objectionable”. The accompanying sketch, finely drawn in pen and ink on paper, depicts an elegant five-story structure in the highly fashionable nouveau-château mode with a sharply sloped mansard roof. It had one large bay window with ten lights on the first floor and eighteen additional windows of varying sizes and on different levels. Designed by the prominent New York architectural firm of Clinton and Russell (as were many other Astor buildings), Mr. Astor’s 1898 architectural venture on Fifth Avenue is a facile and conventional realization of the features of French château architecture associated with royal life in the Loire Valley. Although styled and scaled for an affluent clientele in a manner that would not diminish the luxurious character of its neighborhood, the proposed Astor residences nevertheless throw into high relief the imposing dignity of George B. Post’s classical palazzo made for their Medicean neighbor.

The mercantile potential of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street

69. Charles A. Peabody, Jr. to C. P. Huntington, 11 January 1899.
70. Ibid.
Fig. 6. Sketch by Clinton and Russell, Architects, of proposed houses for William Waldorf Astor, for rental purposes, 1899. Fifth Avenue between Fifty-sixth and Fifty-seventh Streets, New York City. Collis P. Huntington Papers, George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University.

led, in the 1920s, to the demolition of the great residences that had dominated the neighborhood since the closing years of the last century; in 1926 the Huntington mansion was supplanted by an innocuous four-story taxpayer.71 On this turn of fortune the editors of Vanity Fair reflected in the number of October 1925: “[The mansions were] resold to speculators and traders who only ten years ago boasted of no fortunes at all. . . . To old New Yorkers, the real melancholy comes, not from the fact that the houses are soon to crumble into dust, but that the old and well-ordered social fabric . . . has itself crumbled and vanished utterly from view.”72 In 1940 the taxpayer was replaced by a handsome structure built as the new home of no

less an establishment than Tiffany & Company. It is, at this mo-
ment, still standing.

APPENDIX: DETAILS OF THE RESIDENCE

Below are listed some components of the Huntington residence as
derived from financial accounts, correspondence, memoranda, and
other documents in the Collis P. Huntington Papers in the Syracuse
University Library; job records, sketches, and photographs among
the George B. Post Papers in the New-York Historical Society; and
the "eye-witness" description of Russell Sturgis in his essay, illus-
trated with photographs, "A Review of the Work of George B. Post". 73

VESTIBULE
  leaded glass windows, by Francis Lathrop
  wood panelling
FIRST STORY ENTRANCE HALL, WITH ARCHES 74
  "an anomoly in planning, namely the entering of a corridor at one
  of its long sides, and crossing it to get from the entrance to the
  chief apartments" 75
MAIN STAIR 76
  onyx and marble work
STAIRWAY HALL 77
  fireplace
  coffered barrel-vaulted ceiling
MAIN HALL (also called atrium, central hall, and first story lobby) 78
  two-story structure; upper story with colonnade/balustrade above
  frieze. Paired Corinthian columns of colored marble, trebled at
  corners.

73. See footnote 65.
74. Illustrated in Sturgis, "Post", 85.
75. Sturgis, "Post", 83.
76. Illustrated in Sturgis, "Post", 89.
77. Sketch survives. See footnote 23.
78. Illustrated in Sturgis, "Post", 87–88, and in Murray, “Art of Decoration”,
203.
"The whole of the wall of this lower story is of red Lake Champlain marble . . . affording an admirable background for pictures." 79

gilded ceiling and cornice
"Twelve Months" panels, in marble, by Karl Bitter
sixteen frieze panels and cornice in marble
nine panel paintings by H. Siddons Mowbray in the vaulted ceiling

FIRST STORY CORRIDOR
"Nine Muses" marble relief panels by Karl Bitter
ten allegorical panel paintings by H. Siddons Mowbray

PARLOR, WITH WINDOWED ALCOVE 80 (also called reception room and drawing room) 81
ivory, white, and gold decoration
marble floors
painted panels on walls and ceiling by E. H. Blashfield
furnishings from William Baumgarten & Co. including:
large sofa
eight chairs (two in “style Louis XV”, two with “gilt frames made antique, covered with real tapestry”)
one bench
one round pouf with gilt frame
gilt table with marble top
marquetry panelled cabinet with bronze ornaments

EAST ROOM
marble, bronze, and iron work
modelled ceiling
mantelpiece
seven paintings on canvas by Francis Lathrop

EAST ROOM CORRIDOR

DINING ROOM 82
painted allegorical panels by Elihu Vedder, described as follows:
one ceiling panel 6 feet by 15 feet; 8 semi-circular panels over

80. Sketch survives. See footnote 23.
82. Sketch of south wall survives. See footnote 23. Best illustration is in Sturgis, “Post”, 92.
cornice each 2 x 3½ feet, and one semi-circular panel for mantel 2 feet 8 inches x 5 feet. Ceiling designed by Francis Lathrop "under Mr. Post's direction". mantelpiece, carved by Karl Bitter. "Carried out wholly in Siena marble. . . . This expenditure of time and money is not in itself admirable, but the result is very beautiful indeed." dining table 6 feet wide x 18 feet long of oak with gilding large side table 12 feet long x 27 inches deep of marble with gilt bronze ornamentation serving table of carved oak with three shelves and drawer 2 arm chairs 10 chairs made of oak with some gilding walls covered with tapestries LIBRARY
"occupies the greater part of the front on Fifth Avenue"
mantelpiece, carved by Karl Bitter

ARCHER HUNTINGTON’S LIBRARY
bay window
furnishings from William Baumgarten & Co. including:
library table 8½ x 4½ of Mexican mahogany
two sofas
seven chairs, varied
walls covered with 165 yards of figured velour
iron picture molding along walls

BILLIARD ROOM
eleven windows
five-foot-high wainscotting
red sandstone mantel
oak floor in herringbone pattern
cornice with egg-and-dart molding

CONSERVATORY
stone and marble work

83. Drawing by Vedder survives, showing shapes and allegorical themes. See footnote 23.
84. Sturgis, "Post", 90.
85. Ibid.
86. A study for a corbel in the library survives. See footnote 23.
87. Sturgis, "Post", 83.
SECOND STORY HALL
   parquet flooring
MAIN BEDROOM (also called chamber north of staircase)
EAST GUESTROOM SUITE, WITH BATH
MRS. HUNTINGTON'S BOUDOIR
   marble hearth
MRS. HUNTINGTON'S DRESSING ROOM
   dressing table, chair, lounge
MRS. HUNTINGTON'S SITTING ROOM
   onyx fireplace
   white boiserie with design of holly and silver filigree
   upper wall covered in silk with velour cove
MRS. HUNTINGTON'S BATH
STAIR FROM MRS. HUNTINGTON'S SITTING ROOM "TO HER DRESS CLOSET"
"MISS CAMPBELL'S ROOM" (Mrs. Huntington's assistant?)
ARCHER HUNTINGTON'S CHAMBER AND DRESSING ROOM
   marble hearth
WEST CHAMBER AND DRESSING ROOM, SECOND STORY
   marble hearth
WEST CHAMBER, THIRD STORY
   fireplace
"PRINCESS SUITE": BEDROOM, SALON, BATH
"SMALL ROOM, FIFTY-SEVENTH STREET SIDE"

88. Sketch survives. See footnote 23.
89. An estimate dated 21 May 1895 with a long list of furnishings submitted to C. P. Huntington by Baumgarten & Co. concludes as follows: “Accepted by Mrs. Huntington, Wednesday, May 22, at 11 o'clock at 65 Park Avenue in presence of Miss Campbell, who holds the duplicate of this contract”.
90. Sketch survives. See footnote 23.
91. The designation “Princess Suite” may refer to rooms set aside for visits from Clara Prentice, niece of the first Mrs. Huntington, who was raised by her aunt and uncle (she became known as Clara Huntington) after the death of her parents. Arabella Huntington, following her marriage to Collis, took over the responsibility
OTHER FEATURES

engine and dynamo rooms
cornice lights
kitchen with refrigerator
steam heating
butler's pantry
gate posts
silver safe
two bronze lions for gate posts
jewel safe
lanterns and brackets for
plunge bath
gate posts
elevator shaft with grill work
twenty bronze lions for gate posts
burglar alarms; call bells for
gate posts
butler's pantry
speaking tubes
plunge bath
gate posts
steaming shaft with grill work
servants' stairway
burglar alarms; call bells for
servants; speaking tubes
gate posts
gas outlets; electric light outlets
two bronze lions for gate posts
waterproofed basement
iron railing and iron gates
drying room and laundry
carved stone entrance porch
de clown and laundry
courtyard
bluestone sidewalks
drying room and laundry