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Echi del passato. Il revival gotico e la ricerca dell'identità culturale negli Stati Uniti

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Gothic Revival, Museum Studies, Architectural History, Medievalism, Boston Fine Arts

Abstract
This paper examines the paradoxical embrace of Gothic Revival architecture in 19th-century America, a period when the nation was defining itself independently from Europe. Americans adopted the medieval-inspired Gothic style despite political separation, drawing on European traditions. This architectural movement, initially rooted in Britain, France, and Germany during the Romantic period, resonated with Americans as they crafted their own cultural identity. Though predominantly Protestant, early Americans adapted the Gothic style, historically linked to Catholicism, to build both public and private structures. Gothic Revival, with its signature pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and spires, became a key architectural feature for churches, homes, and even civic institutions like museums. The design of some of America's first museums — Museum of Fine Arts in Boston being the example here — was heavily influenced by London's South Kensington Museum (known today as the V&A). By appropriating this distinctly European style, Americans not only sought aesthetic inspiration but also aimed to assert cultural legitimacy. The Gothic Revival allowed them to connect their national ambitions with a romanticized past, forging a unique American identity rooted in both historical continuity and forward-looking aspirations.

Biography
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Echoes of the Past: The Gothic Revival and the Quest for Cultural Identity in the United States

At a time when the United States was determined to carve out a distinct national identity, it may seem counterintuitive that Americans would turn to medieval European architecture for inspiration in the form of the Gothic Revival style popular in the 19th century. But this paradoxical adoption speaks volumes about the cultural complexities of the era. The Gothic Revival, with its soaring spires and intricate stonework, offered aesthetic appeal and a way to connect the new nation's ambitions with the historical gravitas of the Old World. This essay delves into how and why Americans embraced this style – particularly when it came to establishing museums – to blend nationalism with romanticized medieval ideals, assert cultural legitimacy, and create enduring symbols of identity.

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, established in 1870, with its original design epitomizes this cultural shift. Its founders explicitly sought to create a South Kensington-inspired institution, emphasizing accessibility, education, and public benefit. The museum's first design in the Gothic Revival style was not a mere aesthetic choice but a deliberate effort to evoke historical depth and inspire visitors to better not only themselves but also they played a part in producing. This article begins by exploring the Gothic Revival and its influence in the United States, followed by an overview of the democratic museum movement – highlighting the South Kensington Museum – before examining the establishment of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

The Emergence of the Gothic Revival

The origins of the Gothic Revival are so complex that it is difficult to distinguish between the last breaths of an era nearing its end and the first attempts at rebirth[1]. It is virtually impossible to identify a breaking point between the two periods, as the Middle Ages ended at different times in different countries. Moreover, when renewed interest in the Middle Ages developed in the 18th and 19th centuries, no two countries reacted the same regarding their pasts. Like their English counterparts, Americans embraced the medieval past through literature and architecture in the 19th century: Gothic novels were readily available from the turn of the century, and Gothic Revival architecture was fashionable from the 1840s onwards[2]. As a result, the Middle Ages were a familiar presence in both body and soul for many people in the United States, starting with those issued from the upper echelons of society, many of which studied in Europe and saw medieval remnants

[1] Charles Locke Eastlake, *A history of the Gothic revival: an attempt to show how the taste for mediæval architecture, which lingered in England during the two last centuries, has since been encouraged and developed* (Longman, Green, and Co. 1872): 22.

[2] Elizabeth Bradford Smith, "The Earliest Private Collections: False Dawn Multiplied," in *Medieval Art in America: Patterns of Collecting, 1800-1940*, ed. Elizabeth Bradford Smith (Pennsylvania State University, 1996): 23.

firsthand. The fact that Romanesque and Gothic architecture 's major monuments result from a Catholic millennium praised in contemporary times by crypto-Catholics and ecclesiologists in England doesn't seem to have bothered the Bostonian Brahmins who patronized the style[3]. Despite this, few Americans actively sought out authentic medieval art at the time – the first major collections of medieval art were not built up until just before 1900. Americans were, however, very accepting of the writings about medieval art, in particular the works of British architect-designer Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) and then British art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900)[4], especially the latter's incorporation of natural theory relating to the Gothic Revival at a time when the Transcendentalist movement was gaining ground in the United States.

Literature once again played a key role in the acceptance of medievalesque esthetics, first in residential areas and then applied to municipal structures. The concept that the pointed arches and exquisite interlacing of the Gothic style originated in "imitation of the groves and arbors under which the Druids performed their sacred rites" gained ground among American writers[5]. According to proponents of this thesis, Gothic was a genuine Teutonic style that was eventually tamed and civilized by pious Germanic Christians of various denominations. Because Gothic's genealogy was grafted onto the seductive story of Anglo-Saxon origins, New England's Protestant consumers of medieval architecture were less disturbed by Catholic foundations than their English predecessors. Unlike their Anglican counterparts, American ecclesiologists saw the Gothic as a symbol of denominational identity rather than as a starting point for the moral regeneration of a rapidly industrializing nation[6]. Despite reading identical books, English readers learned what to look for in their historical environment, while American readers learned how to "historicize" their environment. The most important task for the English in this process was to develop a renewed awareness of the medieval tradition revealed in everyday objects, while the most important task for the Americans was to cultivate allusions to such a heritage so that it would be meaningful within a framework of feeling and aesthetic appreciation[7]. Scottish novelist Walter Scott's effect in America was greater and more lasting than in Europe, due to the wide distribution and limited range of books and other cultural materials available. Samuel Griswold Goodrich (1793-1860), a Boston publisher, gave us an idea of Scott's reputation on this side of the Atlantic: "The appearance of a new novel from his pen caused a greater sensation in the United States than did some of the battles of Napoleon, which decided the fate of thrones and empires. Everybody read these works; everybody – the refined and the simple – shared in the delightful trances which seemed to transport them to remote ages and distant climes"[8]. It's worth noting that the American humorist Mark Twain (1835–1910) later sarcastically referred to America's fascination with the Middle Ages as "Sir Walter Disease"[9].

Initially, just as in England during the 18th century (the first example, and arguably the most famous, being Horace Walpole's *Strawberry Hill*, the Gothic Revival style found expression primarily in American domestic architecture, where its medieval-inspired elements appealed to a romanticized vision of home and hearth. Over time, however, the appeal of Gothic Revival aesthetics expanded beyond private residences, gradually influencing the design of municipal buildings. By the mid-19th century, this stylistic shift became particularly evident in museum architecture, first

1.1

[3] Robin Fleming, "Nineteenth-Century New England's Memory of the Middle Ages", in *Memory and the Middle Ages*, ed. Nancy Netzer and Virginia Reinburg (Boston College Museum of Art, 1995): 77.

[4] Max Donelly, "Poetic and Practical: Gothic for the Modern Home" in *Modern Gothic: The Inventive Furniture of Kimbel and Cabus, 1863-82*, ed. Barbara Veith, Medill Higgins Harvey, (Brooklyn Museum, Hirmer Publishers, 2021): 14.

[5] Fleming, "Nineteenth-Century New England," 78.

[6] Alice P. Kenney and Leslie J. Workman, "Ruins, Romance and Reality: Medievalism in Anglo-American Imagination and Taste, 1750-1840," *Winterthur Portfolio* 10 (1975): 153.

[7] Kenney and Workman, "Ruins, Romance and Reality," 162.

[8] Kerry Dean Carso, "Diagnosing the 'Sir Walter Disease': American Architecture in the Age of Romantic Literature", *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 35, n. 4 (2002): 126.

[9] Carso, "Diagnosing," 126.

1.1
View of Strawberry Hill. ©Chiswick Chap, Wikipedia, 2012.

taking root in England and soon inspiring similar developments in the United States. As museums adopted Gothic Revival elements, they sought to evoke a sense of historical continuity and cultural prestige that resonated with their civic mission.

The Democratic Museum

The museums we know today appeared at the same time as the first encyclopedias, at the end of the 18th century and, like the encyclopedias, were strongly influenced by the radical currents of thought that led to the French Revolution[10]. The specificity of amassing collections largely through the confiscation of objects symbolizing the secular and religious feudalism of the *Ancien Régime*, and looting by the military, differs greatly from German and English procedures, which took place over a long period of time[11]. The Louvre, for example, was founded because of the political relevance of a public art exhibition. In the spirit of the democratic principles of the Revolution, the French royal collections were made available to all French people, for the teaching of the nation's history and arts. The Louvre's exhibitions were not only beautiful, but they were also organized historically and by national school – not unlike some German collections of the time – with French painting at the forefront. This politically motivated deference to the pedagogical ideals of the Enlightenment was also reflected in the French vision of the usefulness of arts and crafts[12]. However, the Jacobin notion that art belonged to the public did not fully take hold. Most European institutions clung to aristocratic traditions rooted in centuries of private expertise, royal patronage, and bourgeois family pride. Even the Louvre, when it opened to the public in 1793, admitted professional artists only five days out of ten. The British Museum, which opened its doors to the public in 1759, could only be visited by written appointment and by people who could be described as "gentlemen" until the middle of the 19th century[13].

[10] Calvin Tomkins, *Merchants & Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2nd ed. (Henry Holt & Company, 1989), 31.
[11] Dominique Poulot, *Une histoire des musées de France: XVIIIe-XXe siècle*. 2nd ed. (La Découverte, 2008), 7.
[12] Michael Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts", in *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, ed. Malcolm Bakerand Brenda Richardson (V&A Publications; Baltimore Museum of Art, 1997), 25-26.
[13] Tomkins, *Merchants & Masterpieces*, 31.

1.2
Charles Marie Bouton (1781-1853), *Alexandre Lenoir dans la salle des sculptures du XIVe siècle au musée des Monument français*, 1817, Paris, Musée Carnavalet.

Galleries of paintings were immediately opened to the public during the Revolution, but it wasn't until after 1817 – a year after Alexandre Lenoir's commendable *Musée des monuments français* closed – that it was decided to display the exquisite Romanesque and Gothic sculptures rescued from ravaged monasteries, such as the *Couvent des Augustins* in Toulouse[14]. In general, these repositories were set up in secularized convents, often on the initiative of local archaeological organizations, which sprang up all over France. Objects were collected haphazardly in these museums, with no concern for display, evoking the ossuaries of medieval cemeteries. 1.2

Lenoir's "Museum of French Monuments" was dissolved by ordinance on April 24, 1816, much to the delight of neoclassical aestheticians and artists, but the loss was keenly felt in Paris[15]. The void was filled in 1832, when Alexandre Du Sommerard (1779-1842) moved his collection to the *Hôtel de Cluny*, the 15th-century residence of the abbots of Cluny. Attached to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Sommerard explained his idea of storing "in a series of more or less obscure garret rooms and to exhibit for the veneration of the initiated the fruits of [my] harvest of *objets* d'art in the hope that these old things would evoke appreciation for all that our arts comport of science and poetry"[16]. The City of Paris purchased the hotel and its collections with the aim of turning them into a museum, welcoming 12,000 visitors at its inauguration on March 16, 1844, and

[14] Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age* (Universe Books Inc., 1967), 218.
[15] Bazin, *The Museum Age*, 221.
[16] Bazin, *The Museum Age*, 221.
[17] Roland Schaer, *L'invention des musées* (Gallimard, 1993): 83.

16,000 the following Sunday[17]. Until modern restoration and reorganization efforts, the *Musée de Cluny* remained a fascinating hodgepodge, feeding the imagination of writers of the day, including Alexandre Dumas and Jules Michelet. Museums of this type appeared across Europe around 1850, fueled by a new wave of nationalism sweeping the continent. These were institutions of a historical rather than artistic nature, with the aim of showing the origin and evolution of a people's existence, including its many social classes, industries, and crafts through decorative art objects[18]. Wherever there has been renewed interest in the arts of the Middle Ages, particularly in Northern Europe, archaeological museums have sprung up. These new buildings were constructed in neo-medieval styles: Romanesque Revival or Gothic Revival.

Museums at the Service of Manufacture

With the advent of the modern economy, industry directly influencing the museum first appeared in England in a paradoxical way: through a heightened interest in the furniture arts[19]. Stimulated by the British government's competitiveness with European countries that had already created schools or societies dedicated to teaching or presenting the industrial arts, design education initiatives in England began in the 1830s[20]. In 1835, the British Parliament appointed the Select Committee on Arts and Manufacturers to study ways of spreading knowledge of the arts and principles of design, particularly among the working class[21]. The fact that knowledge of the arts was spreading abroad was a reason to do the same in England, but it couldn't be the only argument. The Select Committee met in 1835 and 1836. According to its members, the arts tended to be progressive, broadly beneficial, and vaguely benign. Citing an "enlightening influence" and a potential impact on the economy, the arts could serve a particular purpose in a country whose economy depended on the international competitiveness of its industry[22]. The Select Committee reiterated the liberal theory that art has a unique ability to improve individual character and, more specifically, design.

Unfortunately, the Select Committee noted two problems in its report which, when combined, made art unavailable and inaccessible to factory workers, prohibiting their participation in exhibitions and thus their education. "Our exhibitions are generally periodic," they said, referring to the practice of making art available only for a short period; there was also a cost, they noted, "a fee is charged for admission"[23]. Manufacturing workers had little time and little money. The Select Committee concluded that removing these obstacles would allow art to be exhibited without hindrance. They argued that art should be shown continuously rather than periodically, and "accessible after working hours"[24]. In addition to being open for longer durations and later hours, admission should be free. Of course, asserting that art exhibitions should be permanent, open, and free meant that there had to be public museums. To this end, their 1836 report recommended that museums be created and that essentially anything from anywhere be included. This was how art was to be exhibited, and how manufacturing workers were to be educated.

It took twenty-one years for the Select Committee's recommendations on museums to be put into practice. However, it was not the 1836 Report that established a museum, but the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. Held in London in 1851, this "great exhibition" was the

[18] Bazin, *The Museum Age*, 220.

[19] Bazin, *The Museum Age*, 230. Germain Bazin reminds us that the divide between art and technology in the 19th century was still based on the archaic prejudice that the "major" arts were purely intellectual in nature, while the "minor" arts were essentially manual and servile. The Renaissance emancipated the major arts from this "mechanical" state, but not the minor arts, and so the 19th century classified *objets d'art*, handcrafted masterpieces, alongside industrial objects at a time when the latter still made only limited use of machines.

[20] Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise", 33.

[21] Bazin, *The Museum Age*, 230.

[22] Louise Purbrick, "South Kensington Museum: The Building of the House of Henry Cole", *Art Apart: Art Institutions and Ideology Across England and North America*, ed. Marcia Pointon (Manchester University Press, 1994): 70.

[23] Purbrick, "South Kensington Museum", 71.

[24] Purbrick, "South Kensington Museum", 72.

1.3
Planche XVI, *"Hardware,"* par Joseph Nash, *Dickinson's Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851*, London, Dickinson Brothers, 1852.

first of its kind, in which the contemporary world unveiled itself and re-evaluated industrial and technological development in an international competition of a retrospective nature. It was such a success that it was decided to make it a permanent institution. The government appointed Henry Cole (1808-1882) to oversee the creation of a museum, in accordance with the conclusions of the select committee's report. The result was a museum and accompanying education program that was incredibly imaginative in adapting this remit to a wider educational purpose, while considering the museum's target audience of craftsmen, designers, and makers[25].

1.3

Cole and his colleagues clearly believed in the reformative potential of the exquisite and the ancient, given the burgeoning educational philosophy of the time and the enthusiasm for antiquarian collecting that had fueled English museum efforts since the 17th century[26]. According to Cole, visiting the museum was an experience of entering an enlightening environment for the mind. Allowing access to South Kensington meant being able to travel from darkness to light, from drunkenness to moderation, and from misery to pleasure[27]. The museum's admission policy, accessible and free to the public at large, including the poor, fulfilled art's general aim of being progressive, useful, and benevolent. In addition to its ability to enlighten the masses, the South Kensington Museum followed free-market principles of supply and demand[28]. By giving access to works of art that would not otherwise have been available, it awakened an acute desire, a "hunger" according to Cole, that had to be satisfied somewhere, outside the museum, on the market. South Kensington instilled in its visitors the ability to buy wisely. In other words, a state museum used a market mechanism to disseminate information. While the South Kensington Museum's extraordinary collections were presented as pedagogical models necessary for commercial advancement, the complex research and negotiation tactics of the museum's first director, John Charles Robinson (1824-1913), as well as Cole's profound belief in the growth of the collections, reflect a cultural aspiration far more complex than any government acquisition report[29]. The confident, pragmatic operations of Cole and his team inspired an Anglo-American museum tradition. The South Kensington Museum became the most influential and copied museum of the late 19th century: institutions in both the UK and the USA

[25] Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise," 27.
[26] Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise," 30.
[27] Purbrick,"South Kensington Museum," 83.
[28] Purbrick,"South Kensington Museum," 84.
[29] Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise," 32.

had their roots in the liberal, civic-minded social philosophy of the time, with museums in both countries supported by a rising business class, whether through government, as in London, or the private sector, as in America[30]. Nowhere else has collecting become such a national sport, practiced with such zeal and in such diverse ways. No other country uses the term "national treasure" to justify the purchase of objects made long ago and from afar for its public museums as successfully as the United States.

The rise of American art museums coincided with the growth of cities and the emergence of new communities across the country. Many museums founded in the mid-19th century were created to educate growing American immigrant populations by displaying artifacts that conveyed a visual narrative. Successful men of the time supported the movement to add public high schools and state universities to the national system of free education, seeing popular education as the panacea for all the country's major problems[31]. Surely, after twelve years of schooling, coarse, illiterate individuals would become more civilized, especially if they could be exposed to the refined touch of the fine arts. The moral value of art and beauty was strongly emphasized. Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852), who was largely responsible for the Central Park building movement, argued for years that the city's parks would "civilize and refine the national character", and the influential art critic James Jackson Jarves (1818-1888) insisted that "we cannot make the world more beautiful without making it better, morally and socially"[32].

American journalist and author Karl Meyer (1928-2019) pointed out that "even before the American Revolution, the educated classes, composed of professional men, wealthy merchants, and landowners, had begun to establish public galleries"[33]. Individuals willing to offer their own collections and money to improve the knowledge and education of the community were instrumental in founding America's first museums[34]. There were essentially two kinds of museums in the United States in the mid-19th century: the first was an institution built for profit and dedicated to entertainment; the second was a public gallery, which could be found in a library, art academy, historical society, college, or private club [35]. In Boston, the founding of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1780 and the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791 were significant events during and after the American Revolution[36]. The Massachusetts Historical Society, which contained both a library and a public gallery, established the tradition of historical societies: encouraging study as a general practice and documenting the young nation's past[37].

For most Americans in the 19th century, art remained a dubious and European concept; the name museum connoted the natural sciences rather than painting and sculpture. Nearly every major city had its Museum of Natural Sciences, where science was used as a pretext to feed the nation's appetite for the bizarre and the grotesque. Only a few organizations in America presented artifacts considered works of art for the enjoyment and education of the public when the South Kensington Museum opened in the 1850s. One such example is the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, founded in 1842, whose primary purpose was to present a permanent collection of art to the public, much like art museums today[38]. Although Daniel Wadsworth (1771-1848) and a group

[30] Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise," 29.

[31] Mark Mumford, "The Ruskinian Gothic: Architecture as Social Ideology," *Modern Architecture in America: Visions and Revisions*, ed. Richard Guy Wilson and Sidney K. Robinson (Iowa State University Press, 1991), 40; Tomkins, Merchants & Masterpieces, 20.

[32] Tomkins, Merchants & Masterpieces, 20.

[33] Bonnie Pitman, "Muses, Museums, and Memories", *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 128, n. 3 (1999) 4.

[34] Pitman, "Muses, Museums, and Memories," 2.

[35] Pitman, "Muses, Museums, and Memories," 5. For further reading on the history of American museums: Edward Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* , 2nd ed. (2008); Nathaniel Burt, *Palaces for the People: A Social History of the American Art Museum* (1977); Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (1998); Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (1990); and Karl Meyer, *The Art Museum: Power, Money, Ethics* (1979).

[36] "The Librarian", "The First One Hundred Years of Athenæum History", *The Athenæum Centenary: The Influence and History of the Boston Athenæum from 1807 to 1907 with a record of its officers and benefactors and a complete list of proprietors* (Boston Athenæum, 1907), 21.

[37] Pitman, "Muses, Museums, and Memories," 4. By 1876 there were seventy-eight historical organizations, and most of them contained a museum with art and history collections, as well as a library with a variety of materials.

[38] Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise," 3.

1.4
Hartford (Connecticut), façade of the Wadsworth Atheneum. ©thewadsworth.org

of Hartford colleagues appropriated the Greek title *Atheneum*, they commissioned Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-1892) to design a structure in the Gothic Revival style. With its harmonious massing and picturesque details, the subtlety of the design managed to conceal three completely independent sections: the galleries for the fine arts collection, space for the predecessor of the Hartford Public Library, and rooms for the Connecticut Historical Society[39]. 1.4

The Boston Museum Initiative

Another example is the Boston Athenæum, the successor to several attempted public libraries and literary societies spanning the 17th and 18th centuries, and predecessor to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Founded in 1807, the Athenæum experienced rapid expansion resulting in it having to repeatedly relocate to larger spaces over a short period of time. To illustrate, the Athenæum opened a cast gallery in its new building in December 1826, and to test public interest, a loan exhibition was held in 1827 consisting almost entirely of paintings on loan from private owners. Attendance was so good that within two months admission sales had reached $4,000[40]. By 1830 the Athenæum had a commercial gallery that sponsored a series of exhibitions, including one of 317 works ranging from Old Masters to contemporary Americans whose works were for sale[41]. Having become very popular, the art gallery served both to foster the study of art and to develop interest in collecting. Three artists' societies were formed in the 1840s and 1850s to hold annual painting exhibitions. Art dealers from abroad arrived in Boston in the 1850s with inventories of contemporary French paintings; by the 1860s and 1870s, many Boston painters had moved abroad to serve as intermediaries for Boston clients at European auctions[42]. 1.5

The cornerstone for the present Athenæum building on Beacon Street was laid on April 17, 1847[43]. By July 1849, the library had been moved from Pearl Street to the new structure, but it took a few months for the artwork to be moved as well. The move was completed by late spring, in time for the twenty-third Athenæum Exhibition, which opened on May 27, 1850[44]. The sculpture gallery on the first floor was remodeled in 1868 to accommodate books. Although the principle of separate buildings for the library and art gallery was generally accepted, even in 1867, there was

[39] The Hartford Public Library and the Connecticut Historical Society have since moved into their own independent structures, leaving the Wadsworth "castle" to be filled with the art collection.
[40] "The Librarian", "First One Hundred Years," 31.
[41] Jay Cantor, "Temples of the Arts: Museum Architecture in Nineteenth-Century America," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, n. 8 (1970), 337.
[42] Bainbridge Bunting, *Houses of Boston's Back Bay: An Architectural History, 1840-1917* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), 13.
[43] Walter Muir Whitehill, *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: A Centennial History* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), 1-2.
[44] Whitehill, *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, 1:5-6.

G..LLERY OF PAINTINGS AT THE ATHENÆUM.

1.5
"Boston Athenæum," *Ballou's Pictorial*, 1855.

some doubt as to the size of the adjacent Tremont Place property. Was it large enough for the new gallery? Apprehensions were raised when Colonel Timothy Bigelow Lawrence (1826–1869) bequeathed a large collection of armor and weapons to the Athenæum[45]. Since no room was available, Madame Lawrence pledged $25,000 toward the creation of a new space, provided that an additional $75,000 be raised by the trustees[46]. Although there had been an earlier petition to the General Court requesting land for a public museum in the recently filled Back Bay, it was Colonel Lawrence's gift that finally sparked a broader discussion about the future of the fine arts in the city of Boston[47]. The Athenæum's Fine Arts Committee concluded that by housing the armory and paintings in a separate museum, "the conflicting needs of the galleries and the extension of the library could be reconciled"[48].

A twelve-man board of trustees – including members of the Athenæum and other civic organizations previously cited – for the future Museum of Fine Arts, Boston was incorporated by an act of the Massachusetts legislature on February 4, 1870[49], the same year that the Metropolitan
1.6 Museum in New York[50] – also designed in the Gothic Revival style – and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.[51] were founded. The charter provisioned "to erect a museum for the preservation and exhibition of works of art," and to "make, maintain, and constitute collections of such works" and "to afford instruction in the fine arts"[52]. The act of incorporation required that the museum be open at least four times a month, free of charge. However, the buildings and property were placed in the hands of a self-perpetuating board of trustees, under the direction of Martin Brimmer (1829-1896)[53]. The death of one trustee and the election of three others brought

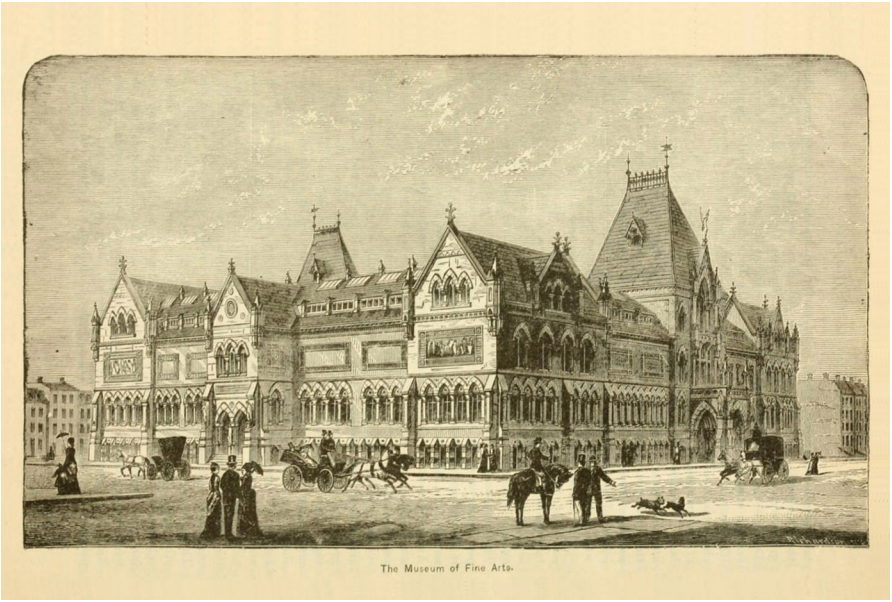
[45] Whitehill, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1:6.
[46] Maureen Melton, *Invitation to Art: A History of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 2009), 7.
[47] Neil Harris, "The Gilded Age Revisited: Boston and the Museum Movement," *American Quarterly* 14, n. 4 (1962): 549 .
[48] Harris, "The Gilded Age Revisited," 548.
[49] Margaret Henderson Floyd, "A Terra-Cotta Cornerstone for Copley Square: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 32, n. 2 (1973): 83.
[50] Dominique Poulot, *Patrimoine et musées. L'institution de la culture* (Hachette, 2001), 92.
[51] Tomkins, *Merchants & Masterpieces*, 21. Banker William Wilson Corcoran (1798-1888) had donated his art collection to the U.S. capital and funds to build a museum to house it, but the Civil War foreclosed on the building and delayed incorporation. The Corcoran Gallery was dissolved by court order in 2014.
[52] Harris, "The Gilded Age Revisited," 548; Melton, *Invitation to Art*, 8.
[53] Harris, "The Gilded Age Revisited", 549. Martin Brimmer became the first president of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

1.6
New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art: the first Museum building in Central Park, 1880, designed by Calvert Vaux (American, 1824-1895) and Jacob Wrey Mould (English, 1825-1886). ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

the number to fourteen by 1876, the year the museum was inaugurated. In addition, Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Athenæum were each given the power to appoint three trustees. In addition, a provision added five *ex officio* members: the mayor of Boston, the chairman of the trustees of the public library, a trustee of the Lowell Institute, the secretary of the State Board of Education, and the Boston Superintendent of Schools. Their positions on the board reflected the priority given to the museum's educational duties and signified the desire to integrate the museum into the public school curriculum.

At this time, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, concerned about the state of local industrial design, had decided to impose stricter regulations requiring the teaching of art in public schools. Indeed, an 1870 act of the legislature made the teaching of art mandatory in all Massachusetts schools in towns with more than ten thousand inhabitants; in 1873, a normal school was established in Boston to train art teachers and supervisors; and in 1876, the Museum School was established as a complement to the new Museum of Art[54]. By contrast, the Metropolitan Museum of Art gave more prominence to professional and political figures than to pedagogues. At first glance, the Boston Museum's board of trustees appeared to be little more than a group of well-to-do "Brahmins": nearly all of the twenty-three chosen trustees were descended from old Yankee families (a good many were blood relatives) and were wealthy men; however, while reputation and financial stature were both necessary and inevitable factors in their selection, each participant possessed unique knowledge, talents, or interests that would contribute to the success of the new institution[55]. Three months after the Museum of Fine Arts was incorporated, the city of Boston gave the museum's board of trustees an oblong property in Copley Square, southeast of the junction of Huntington Avenue and Dartmouth Street[56]. A competition for the museum's design attracted ideas from fourteen prestigious firms. After considerable deliberation, the board awarded the commission to the firm of John H. Sturgis and Charles Brigham in 1871[57]. The trustees immediately began soliciting public

[54] Bunting, *Houses of Boston's Back Bay*, 13.
[55] Harris, "The Gilded Age Revisited," 550.
[56] Floyd, "A Terra-Cotta Cornerstone", 83.
[57] Julia de Wolf Gibbs Addison, *The Boston Museum of Fine Arts: Giving a descriptive and critical account of its treasures, which represent the arts and crafts from antiquity to the present time* (L.C. Page & Company, 1910), VIII-IX.



1.7
Design proposed by Sturgis & Brigham for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

funds for construction, a task already difficult given the fragile post-Civil War economy, made even more precarious by the Great Fire of 1872 and the Panic of 1873[58]. As a result, only the first segment of the building was completed on July 3, 1876, in time for the museum's dedication, more than six years after the competition had ended[59].

The influence of the South Kensington Museum was felt early in Boston. In a letter dated January 1870, Martin Brimmer, later chairman of the museum's building committee, wrote to architect John Hubbard Sturgis (1834-1888) about "project of a South Kensington Museum to be established here on a scale proportioned to the modest capacities of the place [about 100,000 square feet]"[60]. As noted earlier, Sturgis and his partner, Charles Brigham (1841-1925), were commissioned to design and build the museum. For Sturgis and Brigham, it was not only Boston's first museum, it was also the first building constructed on Copley Square. The plan that Sturgis submitted to the competition in 1870 presented a Victorian Gothic design reminiscent of the north central section of the South Kensington Museum, incorporating lecture theatres and art training rooms. More regular than its English model, the rectangular plan, bisected by an east-west bridge forming two inner courts measuring 70 by 100 feet, was well suited to the site measuring 350 by 250 feet[61]. The building was intended to be as inexpensive as possible while still announcing its purpose from the outside. "No intelligent person, seeing it for the first time," the trustees exulted, "could possibly take it for anything but a Museum; and such revelation of the end in aspect is a cardinal virtue in any piece of man's work"[62]. The architecture was eclectic, but the rhetoric (and purpose) was quite modern: it was a well-planned, practical, and inexpensive structure. In the end, it was none of these things.

1.7

Aside from the design he submitted, Sturgis was an ideal candidate for the undertaking. Despite his Boston upbringing, he considered himself an Englishman. His first trip to England took place in 1850, right in between the publications of John Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), and just before the Great Exhibition of 1851. Although a handful of English architects had been practicing in the United States from the mid-19th century through the 1860s, by 1870 they were still as dependent on publications to keep up with architectural trends abroad as their American colleagues[64]. Given the tensions of the Civil War and the financially difficult years of the mid-1870s, regular travel to Europe was understandably unusual for the average professional. The firm of Sturgis and Brigham, established in 1866, was unique among its contemporaries in that Sturgis moved to England that same year, working

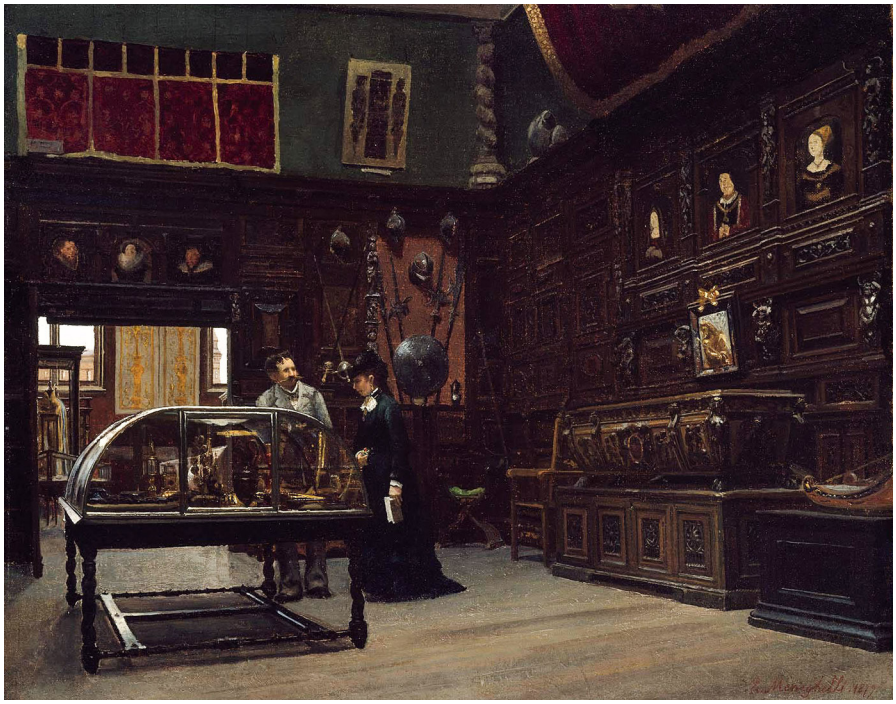
[58] Harris, "The Gilded Age Revisited," 552.
[59] Floyd, "A Terra-Cotta Cornerstone," 84.
[60] Floyd, "A Terra-Cotta Cornerstone," 83.
[61] Floyd, "A Terra-Cotta Cornerstone," 99.
[62] Harris, "The Gilded Age Revisited," 556.
[63] Floyd, "A Terra-Cotta Cornerstone", 86. This is a fundamental facet of Sturgis's life and his architecture, however, although he had occasional commissions in England, he was unable to fully establish himself there.
[64] Floyd, "A Terra-Cotta Cornerstone," 84.

1.8
Boston (Massachusetts), photo of the first segment of the Museum of Fine Arts completed on Copley Square, circa 1876. ©Boston Public Library.

on mail-order projects[65]. The distinctive feature of Sturgis's design was the use of ornamental terracotta on the exterior. This was a technological feat because the material – developed in England but only in its experimental phase at the time – was then virtually unknown in America[66]. Not only did architectural terracotta require a highly specialized application technique, but there was no labor available for the task in the United States. Not surprisingly, this contributed to delays in construction. As a result, only the first segment of the building was completed on July 3, 1876, in time for the museum's opening to the public the following day, July 4, 1876, the centennial of the American colonies' declaration of independence from England[67]. It was the third art museum in the United States to open that year. Although it was never completed to Sturgis's design (the main elevation was never executed)[68], the building's grandeur made it one of the jewels of Copley Square. This truly Bostonian construction indicated a devotion to Ruskinian Gothic forms[69]. 1.8

Charles C. Perkins (1823-1886), the leading proponent of a South Kensington-style museum in Boston, earned his devotion through direct knowledge of the English museum, making his lobbying the most sophisticated of any founding trustee of American museums. Perkins had built relationships with every constituency for a project that required the fusion of commercial, artistic, and social enterprise interests. In 1869, as chairman of a special committee of the American Social Science Association on art from an educational point of view, he praised the value of appreciating the beauty of nature and art as a prelude to proposing the creation of institutions across the country based on South Kensington. In 1870, he stressed that the special mission of any art museum movement in the United States should be "to collect materials for the education of a nation in art, and not to constitute collections of objects of art"[70]. Since Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology were among the many institutions of higher learning that contributed to the Boston museum initiative, Perkins' views must have been in keeping with those of his other trustees, some of whom preferred the British Museum model to that of South Kensington. The Museum of Fine Arts succeeded in blending the two museological approaches in its early years thanks to Perkins' efforts. Under his leadership, no institution was more devoted to the educational value of plaster casts than the Museum of Fine Arts.

[65] Floyd, "A Terra-Cotta Cornerstone," 87.
[66] Floyd, "A Terra-Cotta Cornerstone," 84.
[67] Addison, *The Boston Museum of Fine Arts*, IX.
[68] Floyd, "A Terra-Cotta Cornerstone," 84.
[69] Cantor, "Temples of the Arts," 349.
[70] Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise," 37.



1.9
Enrico Meneghelli (1853-after 1912), *The Lawrence Room, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, 1879, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

Following the model of Henry Cole in South Kensington, Perkins organized exhibitions according to the materials of the objects rather than period or provenance. He too believed that the museum's purpose was to improve the level of craftsmanship in the United States by elevating the artistic tastes of the general public: discerning customers would want better-quality and better-designed products, making American companies more competitive in the international marketplace[71]. At the museum's opening, Perkins expressed his hope that it "would be a rival [...] to the great industrial museums of Kensington and Vienna"[72].

The building was reminiscent of South Kensington not only in its exterior but also in its efforts to organize the installations inside. The ground-floor galleries were devoted to a few antiques and many casts of sculptures, while the second-level galleries displayed a variety of Western and Eastern objects, as well as the old paneling never before mounted in an American museum intended to highlight an installation of furniture, sculpture, and armor. Commenting on the efforts of his city and other American art institutions at the time, one Boston museum supporter observed that "the success of the South Kensington Museum is the cornerstone of our art museums"[73].

The Museum of Fine Arts was almost immediately popular, with over seventeen thousand paying visitors and over one hundred and forty thousand free visitors in its first full year of operation[74]. Because free days were limited to Saturday and Sunday, this amounted to as many as four or five thousand people each weekend; complaints of overcrowding in the galleries soon followed. The museum's founders had anticipated that it would house modest works of art, perhaps largely ornamental pieces loaned or contributed by local individuals. They had greatly underestimated the generosity of their fellow citizens. Wealthy Bostonians rummaged through their parlors and attics, offering paintings, sketches, and sculptures of exceptional quality from their own collections[75]. New Englanders began to travel to Europe and Asia to purchase works of art with the express intention of filling the galleries, much to the astonishment of the trustees. By the time the museum was ready to open in 1876, the collection numbered more than 5,400 artifacts[76].

Charles Greely Loring (1828-1902), the museum's first director and chief curator, sought to find exhibition space for all the pieces in the fledgling collection, as was the custom at the time. However, as the collection grew, this proved increasingly difficult. A further 1,500 pieces were donated

1.9

[71] Kathryn McClintock, "The Earliest Public Collections and the Role of Reproductions (Boston)", *Medieval Art in America: Patterns of Collecting, 1800-1940*, ed. Elizabeth Bradford Smith (Pennsylvania State University, 1996): 55.
[72] Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise", 41-42.
[73] Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise", 42.
[74] Harris, "The Gilded Age Revisited", 557.
[75] Melton, *Invitation to Art*, 8-9.
[76] Melton, *Invitation to Art*, 8-9.

1.10
Boston (Massachusetts), Baldwin Coolidge, view of the completed building, 1890-1911. ©Boston Public Library.

in 1878, filling all the galleries and storage facilities[77]. In 1879, a new wing was built and inaugurated. In 1890, the building was enlarged to provide a better, less cluttered layout. Part of the major gifts and bequests, when not otherwise designated, were used to purchase items to enhance the collections where reinforcements seemed necessary[78]. By the turn of the century, the museum's collection of original works of art had grown considerably, and it was clear that the Copley Square buildings were no longer sufficient[79]. Contradictorily, we would have to wait until the turn of the 20th century, when the museum left its Copley Square holdings for its current placement on Huntington Avenue in a neoclassical construction[80], before authentic medieval artifacts began to enter the collection, marking the transition from luring citizens to cross the threshold of the museum by presenting these *milieux* as morally uplifting by renewing aesthetics of a glorified past – maintaining the Americans' attachment to the Old World first through Gothic Revival constructions – to the increasingly specialized study of the Middle Ages through its collection conserved within. 1.10

Conclusion

The Gothic Revival movement in 19th-century America highlights a compelling paradox: a young, independent nation seeking to distance itself from Europe while simultaneously drawing deeply

[77] Melton, *Invitation to Art*, 9.
[78] Addison, *The Boston Museum of Fine Arts*, IX.
[79] McClintock, "The Earliest Public Collections", 57.
[80] Becki Denise Melchione, "The History of the Collection of Medieval Art in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston" (Master's diss., Tufts University, 1998), 29. The medieval collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston is unique compared to the collections of other institutions in that it was neither assembled nor donated by a single person.

on European traditions. Far from a superficial aesthetic choice, the adoption of Gothic Revival was a calculated effort to assert cultural legitimacy, bridge historical continuity, and forge a distinctive American identity.

The architectural narrative of Gothic Revival museums in the United States reflects broader cultural aspirations. Buildings like the first Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the original building of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, with their intricate detailing and imposing facades, stood as physical manifestations of intellectual ambition. They appealed to visitors regardless of education and social status because the Gothic Revival was a part of the public imagination. Crossing the thresholds of these institutions housed in medieval-inspired constructions allowed any visitor to be transported to far-off places and by-gone eras, inspiring them to elevate the minutiae of their days.