

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
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THE CLOISTERS (Metropolitan Museum of Art), Fort Tryon Park, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1934-38; architect Charles Collens of Allen, Collens and Willis.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2179, Lot 701 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On September 25, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of The Cloisters and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 17). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Thomas Hoving, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, spoke in favor of designation as the representative of the Board of Trustees of the Museum. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

In his testimony before the Commission, Thomas Hoving "heartily recommended that the Cloisters be made a Landmark for this city and its citizens", but he wanted to place on public record certain facts. Several years ago, because of air pollution, the Museum was forced to put up a temporary surrounding structure in order to preserve the stones of the Fuentiduena Apse which appeared to be wearing away. Mr. Hoving indicated that several studies have been done to find a solution to this problem, but as yet, no definitive answer has been found. He feels that it may be necessary "to put up some sort of a temporary structure of glass manufacture" to protect the stones until the air has been cleaned up. Although he recognizes that this would not be in keeping with the feeling of the Middle Ages that one gets from the architecture of the Cloisters, he believes that it is preferable to the deterioration of the stones.

In addition, Mr. Hoving mentioned that the Museum has been looking for a fine late or mid-14th century Chapel to replace the present Gothic Chapel built in 1938. He wishes the Commission "to look with sympathy upon getting something old, genuine and fine and putting it in place of something which is 1938 and fine."

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Cloisters, designed by architect Charles Collens of the Boston firm of Allen, Collens & Willis, was completed in May 1938. It is a part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and houses a large portion of the Museum's medieval art collection.

The collection at The Cloisters had its beginnings in the sculpture and architectural artifacts acquired by sculptor George Grey Barnard (1863-1938), who initially opened his collection to the public in 1914 in an exhibition building at 698 Fort Washington Avenue. In 1925, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., donated funds to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to enable it to purchase Barnard's collection, which was reopened in 1926 in the same building as a branch of the Metropolitan Museum and called "The Cloisters."

Rockefeller had purchased the Fort Tryon property--notable as the site of a Revolutionary War battle--and gave it to the City of New York in 1930, reserving a four-acre site at the north end of the park for a museum building.

Rockefeller wanted The Cloisters to be a place where people, who were not scholars of the Middle Ages, could enjoy and benefit from seeing superb examples of that period. At the same time, he wanted a museum where students and scholars could view the collections under ideal conditions, combining quiet study and good visibility. He wanted the objects to speak for themselves in harmonious surroundings that were not subject to modern whims or fashions. The Cloisters has been described: "as a structure...integrated with its monuments and objects, the reciprocal relationship being fundamental to the whole."

Rockefeller chose Charles Collens, the same architect whom he had commissioned to design Riverside Church, to carry out his conception for The Cloisters. Collens' perception of The Cloisters accorded with Rockefeller's, to whom he wrote in 1931: "...whoever does that building would have to work out all the

individual exhibits in such a way as to place them to the greatest advantage and give each one a setting which would minimize the fact that it was an exhibit, but a part of a composition and naturally fitted into the particular spot best adapted to the conditions under which it existed in its original state." With greatly enlarged collections, The Cloisters opened at its present location in May 1938, and in 1952 Rockefeller endowed The Cloisters with a large grant to assure its permanence.

One approaches The Cloisters from the south through the park, either on foot or via the driveway. The composition is dominated by a four-story square tower modeled after that at the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa. The tower with its arched openings and corbelling provides an effective focal point as it rises above the entrance lobby.

Loosely based on prototypes presented by medieval monasteries, the structure of The Cloisters incorporates into its design a number of diverse architectural elements, both Romanesque and Gothic in style, most notably parts of cloisters from five French monasteries--Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert, Bonnefont-en-Comminges, Trie-en-Bigorre, and Froville--which are responsible for the name. Other medieval architectural features are the chapter house from Pontaut, the stonework from the choir of the church at Langon, the apse from the church of San Martín at Fuentidueña, and about thirty doorways and windows from various buildings. The modern architectural setting was kept unobtrusive by following medieval precedents. The exterior walls are constructed of millstone granite from New London, Connecticut. The dimensions of the wall blocks were patterned after those of the church at Corneille-de-Conflant near Cuxa. The interior stonework is of Doria limestone, quarried near Genoa, Italy. Sand-sawn, it has the appearance of weathered stone and harmonizes well with the medieval elements. The red roof and floor tiles were copies from examples excavated at Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa.

The various cloisters of the museum occupy a unique position architecturally. While enclosed within the building, all but one have open courtyards.

The Cuxa Cloister, which forms the core of the Cloisters structure, is the most notable of the cloisters. Its medieval architectural elements are from the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa near Prades in the French Pyrenees, one of the most important abbeys in the Roussillon region of southern France and northern Spain in Romanesque times. Dating from about mid-12th century, the capitals, carved with plants, grotesque figures, and animals, are the most unique elements of the arcades enclosing the courtyard.

The Saint-Guilhem Cloister, at the northwest corner of the structure, has been planned around a series of capitals, shafts, and columns from the cloister of the Benedictine abbey of Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert near Montpellier. The elaborately carved double columns supporting intricate twin capitals date from the late 12th century. The courtyard is covered over by a skylight which allows natural illumination.

The Trie Cloister, on the south side of the building and adjoining the Bonnefont Cloister, contains capitals on three sides of its arcade which came from the convent of Trie-en-Bigorre near Toulouse. These Gothic capitals, dating between 1484 and 1490, contain religious scenes and coats of arms from families in the area of the convent.

Adjoining the upper level entrance on the east side of the building is the Froville arcade formed by nine pointed, cusped arches from the 15th-century cloister of the Benedictine priory of Froville. Rising above the arcade and forming a clerestory are four pointed-arched 15th-century windows from the refectory of the Dominican convent at Sens in Champagne.

The most prominent feature on the north side of the building is the Fuentidueña apse from the church of San Martín in Fuentidueña in Segovia, dated c.1157. The semi-circular apse, built of smooth-faced golden limestone, projects from and contrasts with the simple rough-faced wall of the main building. Capitals

carved with real and imaginary birds and beasts, are fine examples of the Romanesque vocabulary. These capitals crown the exterior engaged columns and support the window arches. A temporary structure presently covers the apse to protect the stonework from pollution.

An apsidial projection, designed by Collens, effectively encloses the Langdon Chapel on the west side of the building. It rises impressively above the West Terrace.

The south facade, which is best seen from the park, presents a striking series of horizontal rooflines accented by several projecting features and dominated by the four-story tower. The Gothic Chapel at the southwest corner is constructed of smooth limestone and was inspired by two 13th-century French Gothic chapels. The pointed-arched windows, set between sturdy buttresses, are typical of this early phase of the Gothic style. Adjoining the Gothic Chapel to the east is the Bonnefont Cloister--the only cloister which is visible from the exterior of the building. The prominent pointed-arch arcades, supported on twin columns with capitals, were inspired by Gothic monasteries of the late 13th and 14th centuries in Toulouse. The twin capitals of gray-white marble, installed in the two sides of this cloister, originated in the ruins of the abbey of Bonnefont-en-Comminges. From behind the arcades, one looks out into a medieval-style garden. Immediately to the east, rising behind the north wall of the Trie Cloister, are six 15th-century stained-glass lancet windows, set within a broad gable, from the Carmelite church at Boppard on the Rhine.

The Cloisters, impressively situated on a hilltop at the north end of Fort Tryon Park, commands excellent views of the Hudson River, the New Jersey Palisades, and the George Washington Bridge. Rampart walls enclosing a courtyard provide a promenade on the north and west sides of the buildings. The courtyard and entrance driveway are paved with the original Belgian blocks from old New York streets. The extensive plantings, both on the exterior hillside and in the cloister gardens, are based on medieval sources.

#### FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that The Cloisters has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, The Cloisters houses a large part of The Metropolitan's Museum of Art's famed medieval art collection, that the architect Charles Collens designed a structure which blends effectively with the medieval architectural features, that among these features are the various cloisters which are responsible for the name of the museum, and that the building is beautifully situated in Fort Tryon Park on a hilltop, in keeping with medieval precedent.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark The Cloisters, Fort Tryon Park, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2179, Lot 701 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.