

Landmarks Preservation Commission
January 29, 1985, Designation List 175
LP-1534

FORMER COTY BUILDING, 714 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1907-08; Architect Woodruff Leeming

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1271, Lot 39.

On January 8, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a Public Hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the former Coty Building and proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Thirty-four witnesses spoke in favor of designation; there were seventeen speakers in opposition to designation, including three owners of the property and six representatives. Numerous letters and statements have been received both supporting and opposing designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The former Coty Building, built in 1907-08 is a significant reminder of Fifth Avenue at the turn of the century, when the avenue, south of 59th Street, was shifting from residential to commercial use. Designed by Woodruff Leeming, the building employs French design details which visually link it and harmonize it with its Fifth Avenue neighbors. Commissioned by real estate investor Charles A. Gould, the entire building was leased to perfumer François Coty in 1910 to serve as his American headquarters. Shortly after acquiring the building, Coty commissioned the great 20th-century glassmaker René Lalique to design a set of decorative glass windows which extends from and unifies the third through fifth floors, creating an overall composition. These windows, in their form and design are an extraordinary survivor and are unique in New York.

Fifth Avenue and the Site

For much of the 19th century, successive portions of Fifth Avenue enjoyed the reputation of being New York's most prestigious residential street. As the street was developed northward from Washington Square in Greenwich Village, its character reflected the growth and change of Manhattan. Residential enclaves moved northward, followed closely by the inroads of commerce. The area of Fifth Avenue between 42nd Street and 59th Street was built up for residential use in the years following the Civil War, yet by 1900, the commercial changes which had occurred on the avenue beyond Union Square were inevitably wending their way northward. Writing in Scribner's in 1900, Jesse Lynch Williams describes "The Walk Up-Town" from 42nd Street:

When a "For Sale" sign comes to one of these (old comfortable places) you feel sorry, and when one day in your walk up-town you see it finally irrevocably going the way of all brick, with a contractor's sign out in front blatantly boasting of his wickedness, you resent it as a personal loss. It seems all wrong to be pulling down those thick walls. . . . Soon there will be a deep pit there with puffing derricks, the sidewalk closed, and show-bills boldly screaming. And by the time we have returned from the next sojourn out of town there will be an office building of ever-so-many stories or another great hotel.¹

Continuing change led to A.C. David to describe "The New Fifth Avenue" in 1907:

Among the many radical changes which have been brought about during the past six years in New York City, the most radical and the most significant are those which have taken place on Fifth Avenue. That thoroughfare has been completely transformed. It has been transformed economically by an increase in the value of real estate, amounting to 250 per cent and over. It has been transformed architecturally by the erection of a score of new and imposing buildings and twice as many small ones. It has been transformed in use by the intrusion of a large number of more popular stores. And finally it has been transformed in the human spectacle it presents by a great increase in the number of pedestrians. From being a comparatively quiet avenue, occupied in part by old brownstone residences and in part by a carefully selected group of special stores, it has become a bustling thoroughfare, jammed with carriages and motors, crowded with shoppers and passersby and redolent with the names of wealth and business.²

When the west blockfront of Fifth Avenue between 55th and 56th Streets was developed, it exemplified that "comparatively quiet avenue." The earliest construction on the block was a group of three brownstone-fronted houses, Nos. 714, 716 and 718 Fifth Avenue, with two additional houses at 2 and 4 West 56th Street, built in 1871 by architect-builder Charles Duggin.³ The blockfront immediately to the south was occupied by St. Luke's Hospital. In 1873, the Presbyterian Church in Fifth Avenue, then located at 19th Street, motivated by a need for a larger church and the desire to escape the commerce then encroaching on that part of Fifth Avenue, purchased a large corner parcel at 55th Street.⁴ When it was completed to the designs of Carl Pfeiffer in 1875, it also changed its name to the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. A photograph in the collection of the New York Public Library shows the residential character of that section of the street at that time.⁵ No. 712, the remaining vacant parcel on the blockfront was purchased by the church in 1886, and a parsonage was constructed.⁶

Yet despite the major changes taking place on Fifth Avenue in the early years of the century, not all believed that a shift from residential to commercial use was inevitable. The editor of Real Estate Record, writing in 1907, stated:

Of course no one can tell what will happen in New York real estate at the end of thirty years, but certainly for a long time to come the development of Fifth Avenue for business purposes is not likely to extend north of Fiftieth Street. It will be stopped by the influence of the Vanderbilts and of several rich men who have of late years bought and built in that neighborhood. At the present time the property is really more valuable for residential than for business purposes, and this fact will have a decisive influence upon the immediate future of the avenue. On no other avenue in Manhattan are there any important shops situated north of Forty-second Street, and it is not to be expected that the transformation of Fifth Avenue in this respect will push far ahead of the other important avenues to the east and west. . . . In the long run doubtless there will be fewer private residences in New York south of Fifty-ninth Street, but, this result will take a great many years to accomplish.⁷

Yet even as this was being written, Fifth Avenue, north of 50th Street, was beginning to experience an influx of commerce, in the form of such buildings as No. 714, that presaged the transformation of Fifth Avenue into an elegant boulevard of shops, department stores, hotels, and clubs. Indeed, the Fifth Avenue Association was founded in 1907 to provide for orderly growth and expansion of trade on the avenue, as well as to promote civic improvements.

Charles Duggin had sold the brownstone-fronted house at No. 714 to Harrison Durkee in 1872.⁸ By 1898 it had been purchased by Charles A. Gould (1849-1926), a Buffalo manufacturer and founder of the Gould Coupler Co., the Gould Steel Co., and the Gould Storage Battery Co., who had branched out into New York City real estate.⁹ Recognizing the changes that were taking place on Fifth Avenue, Gould commissioned architect Woodruff Leeming to completely redo the front of No. 714.¹⁰ Work began in December 1906, about six months after new construction for a commercial building was begun at No. 712.

The Building and its Tenants

Woodruff Leeming (1870/71-1919) received his architectural education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology¹¹ and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Returning to New York he entered the offices of Heins & LaFarge, working on plans for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. He opened his own architectural office in 1894.¹² Most of his known work is in Brooklyn, including the Beecher and Arbuckle Memorial Buildings and the Grace Presbyterian Church, and on Long Island. His work at No. 714 is a straightforward commercial design of the type described by A. C. David in 1907:

...in certain instances the whole front has been ripped out, and only the old floor levels retained. Then a new front has been built, better adapted to the new uses of the building and more expressive thereof. These buildings, as we shall see, are often the most interesting on (Fifth)

avenue, and they are the only ones which employ a comparatively new and valuable architectural type. . . . The object of a business front on an avenue of this kind is, of course, to afford a large amount of light, so that the floor space in the interior of the building, which is denied the advantage of side windows, will obtain as much illumination as possible. Furthermore, the large windows afford the occupants of these floors a better chance of displaying their names and even their wares to the crowds on the street below. The front, consequently, is designed simply as a frame for an array of window glass extending through three stories, and as such is cheap to build, and strictly utilitarian in purpose, while at the same time it may well be not unattractive in design.¹³

Leeming's design, with its handsome French-inspired details and mansard roof is indeed attractive, and the large expanse of glass admirably served the purpose of commerce.

The building seems to have remained vacant until Gould leased the entire building to perfumer François Coty in 1910.¹⁴ Late that year the decorating firm of L. Alavoine & Co., by the located at No. 712, began to carry out interior work on the building.¹⁵ Here François Coty established his American headquarters, and here he installed a major work by René Lalique. In 1906, Coty had written, "Give a woman the best product you can compound, present it in a perfect container (beautifully simple but of impeccable taste), charge a reasonable price for it and a great business will arise such as the world has never seen."¹⁶ That year Coty is believed to have commissioned his first perfume bottles from René Lalique; the bottles were on display in Lalique's Paris shop in the Place Vendome in 1907.¹⁷

René Lalique (1860-1945), one of the great artists and craftsmen of this century, was born in Ay in Champagne and studied in Paris and London. Beginning his career as a jeweler, he created exquisite work in the Art Nouveau style, and he began to experiment with the use of glass in jewelry. Gradually he branched out into glass work of various kinds, giving up the jewelry field entirely in about 1910.¹⁸

Lalique's earliest work in architectural glass appears to have been the entrance door he designed for his studio at 40 Cours la Reine (now Cours Albert I) in Paris in 1905.¹⁹ Percy describes this entrance: "The branches of the two pine trees, set in high relief, their needles and cones laden with snow, converge from the two sides of the tall stone frame and spread onto the very glass of the door, creating a winter landscape. . . ."²⁰ Lalique was to work extensively in architectural glass in the 1920s and 1930s, following his exhibitions at the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs and the Exposition Universelle, both in 1925. Prior to the 1920s, however, Lalique's windows for Coty and his studio entrance are his only known architectural designs. Thus, they achieve special interest in his overall work. The Coty windows are believed to date from 1912.²¹ These windows are decorated with an overall floral design which extends from the third through the fifth floors and is meant to be viewed from the exterior as well as the interior. Regardless of who the artist was who created them,

these windows are unique in New York City. Intrinsically linked with Coty, they are an important architectural feature of the building which give it special character and significance.

While Coty occupied three floors of the building, it in turn subleased the ground floor and mezzanine and the attic floor to other tenants.²² Coty's original lease ran until 1931; this was extended until 1952²³ but cancelled in 1941²⁴ when Coty consolidated its operations at 423 West 55th Street.

Thus, the architectural design and the history of No. 714 exemplifies the character of Fifth Avenue as an exclusive shopping street. Only seven years after the building was completed, Fifth Avenue was described as:

. . . one of the world's famous streets.

What Regent and Bond Streets are to London, the Rue de la Paix to Paris, the Unter den Linden to Berlin, the Ringstrasse to Vienna, Fifth Avenue is to New York. It is the most aesthetic expression of the material side of the metropolis . . . from 34th to 59th Streets, department stores and exclusive shops now predominate, having either swept away or flowed around churches, clubs, hotels and residences. . . establishments wherein may be found products of the greatest ancient and modern artisans make this part of Fifth Avenue one of the most magnificent streets in the world.²⁵

No. 714 remains as an excellent example of the type of building which led to of Fifth Avenue originally made in 1915, and causes Fifth Avenue still to be perceived "as one of the most magnificent streets in the world."

Description

The six-story former Coty Building is designed as a frame, setting off a wall of glass. This composition proclaims the commercial use of the building while retaining a basic residential height and scale. The first two stories are designed as a unit framing a shopfront. The current shopfront is a recent installation. Flanking limestone-faced piers set on paneled bases support a modillioned cornice carried on console brackets which flow over simple capitals. The third through the fifth stories are also handled as a unit, surrounded by an overall limestone enframingent with architrave motif and bell-flower pendants. Crisply modelled cast-steel spandrels separate the third and fourth, and fourth and fifth stories. Keystones in the spandrels accent several of the windows. Each floor contains five window bays, separated only by vertical steel mullions; the outer mullions have decorative motifs. The central bay at the third floor is accented by an arched pediment with scallop motif, carried on diminutive brackets. This window bay articulation is original to the building, but the original casements were removed for the insertion of the Lalique glass windows. Each bay contains a multi-paned casement set below a multi-paned transom. The central bays contain clear glass, while the side bays contain the decorative glass. The glass forms a continuous overall design extending up through all three floors and is composed of intertwining vines and tulips, recalling Lalique's earlier Art Nouveau work. Only from the

exterior can the overall effect of the design as it extends upward be perceived. The glass itself is approximately one-half inch thick, set in metal frames, with the raised portion of the design facing the exterior.²⁶ A modillioned cornice with console brackets which supports a balustrade sets off the sixth, attic story. The sloping metal-covered roof of this story contains two segmental arched dormers which flank skylights set flush with the roof. The roof features are a major element linking No. 714 with its neighbors, while the slope of the roof creates a sense of depth for the building. An elevator penthouse rises slightly above the roof at the south. The northern party wall is partially exposed and has been painted.

Conclusion

Today the former Coty Building survives as a reminder of that period when this section of Fifth Avenue was shifting from a prestigious residential precinct to an elegant shopping street. Its overall form was specially designed to enhance commercial use, yet its elegant details allowed it to harmonize with its residential neighbors. Associated for some 40 years with the firm of Coty, it incorporates as an architectural feature a set of decorative glass windows, commissioned by that firm, which are unique to New York City. The construction of the building in 1907-08, was a herald of the changes that were about to transform the character of Fifth Avenue. Since 1908, the distinguished design of the building has added to and enhanced the continuum of Fifth Avenue and has typified an architectural style which has created the perception of Fifth Avenue as New York's and the nation's premier shopping street.

Report prepared by
Marjorie Pearson
Director of Research

Report processed by
Barbara Sklar

FOOTNOTES

1. Jesse Lynch Williams, "The Walk Up-Town," Scribner's Monthly, 27 (January 1900), 59.
2. A. C. David, "The New Fifth Avenue," Architectural Record , 22 (July 1907), 1.
3. New York City, Department of Buildings, New Building Docket 206-1871.
4. A Noble Landmark of New York: The Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church: 1808-1958 (New York: Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, 1906), p.47.
5. New York Public Library, Photographic Views of New York City, 0362-D4, 1876, Ewing Galloway.
6. See Photographic Views of New York City, 0362-C6, c.1886, New-York Historical Society, and 0363-C5, 1894, Brown Brothers, for representative photographs.
7. Real Estate Record and Builders Guide, 79 (April 6, 1907), 669.
8. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds, Liber 1204, p.388.
9. National Cyclopedia of American Biography, vol. 21, p.395.
10. New York City, Department of Buildings, Alteration Docket 2811-1907.
11. Leeming was presumably a classmate of Albert Gottlieb, architect of No. 712, at MIT. Gottlieb was born in 1870.
12. Dennis S. Francis, Architects in Practice New York City, 1840-1900 (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1980), p.49.
13. David, pp.5,8-10.
14. Section 5, Liber 159, p.2387; Fifth Avenue: New York from Start to Finish (New York: Welles & Co., 1911) shows a photo of a vacant building.
15. This work is listed in the Alteration Dockets, Alt. 2557-1910, but its exact nature is not specified.
16. Quoted by Christopher Vane Percy, The Glass of Lalique: A Collectors Guide (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), p.91. Percy's sources are not especially precise; however, he does acknowledge the help of Coty Ltd., p.188.
17. La Renaissance de l'Art Francais (Paris, 1919), p.29; cited in Sigrid Barten, René Lalique: Schmuck und Objets d'Art, 1890-1910: Monographie

- und Werkkatalog (München: Prestel Verlag, 1977), p.13, footnote 33).
18. Lalique par Lalique (Paris: Societé Lalique, 1977), p.29.
 19. Ibid. dates it as 1905, p.22; Percy says 1902, p.109.
 20. Percy, p.111; it is illustrated in Lalique par Lalique. pp/154-155.
 21. Percy gives this date, p.110. They were certainly not installed when photos of Fifth Avenue in 1910 and 1911, cited above, were published. Coty is believed to have occupied the premises in 1913. He is first listed in a 1914/1915 New York City Directory. A volume for the previous year does not exist. Evidence for the attribution of the windows to Lalique comes from several sources. Although the windows are not visibly signed the style of the glass is clearly characteristic of Lalique, and the design is visually related to that he did for his studio. The authorship of the glass is further cited in Fifty Years on Fifth 1907-1957 (New York: The Fifth Avenue Association, 1957), p.96. Written statements by a leading glass historian and two Lalique scholars further confirm this attribution: Dwight Lanmon, director of the Corning Museum of Glass, January 3, 1985; Nicholas Dawes, decorative arts expert and Lalique scholar, January 11, 1985; and Felix Marcilhac, decorative arts expert and Lalique scholar, January 20, 1985. These statements are in the files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. In addition, Jean Despres, retired executive vice-president of Coty has cited the windows as Lalique's work.
 22. See, for example, Sect. 5, Liber 193, p.399; Sect. 5, Liber 194, p.211; Liber 3188, p.494; Liber 3192, p.414; Liber 3409, p.41.
 23. Liber 3744, p.405.
 24. Liber 4096, p.235.
 25. Fifth Avenue (New York: Fifth Avenue Bank, 1915), pp. 5,6.
 26. Detailed condition reports on the glass, noting cracks and missing panes at the time of designation, are available in the files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 Former Coty Building 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 former Coty Building is a significant reminder of Fifth Avenue at the turn of the century when the avenue, south of 59th Street, was shifting from residential to commercial use; that as designed by architect Woodruff Leeming, the building employs French design details which visually link it with and harmonize it with its Fifth Avenue neighbors; that the building is of the architectural type described in 1907 as "a frame for an array of window glass extending through three stories" to "obtain as much illumination as possible" for the purposes of business; that the entire building was leased to perfumer François Coty in 1910 to serve as his American headquarters and was associated with the firm for some 40 years; that Coty commissioned a set of decorative glass windows which extends from and unifies the third through fifth floors, creating an overall design, from the great 20th-century glassmaker René Lalique; that these windows as an architectural feature are an extraordinary survivor and are unique in New York and give the building a special character and significance; and that the construction of the building played a role in the transformation of Fifth Avenue, while its distinguished design adds to and enhances the continuum of Fifth Avenue as New York's and the nation's premier shopping street.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 former Coty Building, 714 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1271, Lot 39, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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Former Coty Building
714 Fifth Avenue
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Photo Credit: Landmarks
Preservation Commission



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Detail: one of windows by Rene Lalique

Photo Credit:
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