

Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church

Individual Landmark

467 West 142nd Street

Designation Date: July 22, 1975



*Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church October 1, 1984
Image courtesy of the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission*

Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church, located on West 142nd Street near the Hamilton Heights Historic District and the uptown campus of City College, is one of the earliest and most notable examples of adaptive reuse in New York City. Built in 1902-1904, the architectural firm of O'Reilly Brothers, of Paterson, New Jersey, imaginatively incorporated into the new ecclesiastic structure stones salvaged from three of the city's most famous 19th century edifices: the National Academy of Design, St. Patrick's Cathedral, and the A.T. Stewart Mansion.

The picturesque National Academy of Design, designed by P.B. Wight in Venetian Gothic style, which since 1865 dominated the northwest corner of East 23rd Street Street and Park Avenue South (formerly Fourth Avenue), provided the chief design elements and the main fabric of the church. The entire north end (apse) of Our Lady of Lourdes and a section of the east wall, visible from the cloister, is composed of architectural elements transposed from the original east end, facing Madison Avenue, of St. Patrick's Cathedral. The graceful late Gothic style windows became available for reuse after Charles T. Mathews's plans for the new Lady Chapel, completed in 1906, were accepted by the Archdiocese.

Our Lady of Lourdes thus preserves an original portion of St. Patrick's Cathedral, a designated New York City Landmark, which was designed by noted Gothic Revival architect, James Renwick Jr., and erected between 1858 and 1870. The elaborately carved pedestals flanking the terraces of the steps leading to the entrance of the church were originally part of A.T. Stewart's grandiose Marble Palace, designed by John Kellum, which had stood on the northwest corner of Fifth Avenue and East 34th Street since c.1867, and was occupied by the prestigious Manhattan Club from 1891 until its demolition in 1901.

The resurrection of the old Academy of Design, some six miles away from its original site, was welcomed by the public. Although the church is not a duplicate of the original building, it still provides an interesting contrast in style and color to the buildings in the immediate vicinity. In addition, the city was proud to retain even a portion of a building associated with the National Academy of Design, which has been so singularly important to the cultural and artistic life of the metropolis since 1824, when it was founded.

The society was an outgrowth of the earlier New York Academy of Fine Arts, founded in 1802, and later chartered in 1808 as the American Academy of Arts. Primarily an elite organization, members would gather together to admire the polite arts. In 1816, when DeWitt Clinton was its president, the American Academy obtained the Alms House, on the site of the Tweed Courthouse, for exhibition purposes. A dissident splinter group, led by the artist and inventor Samuel B. Morse, angered by the restrictive policies of the Academy, succeeded in 1824 in organizing the New York Drawing Association, which a short time later acquired the more imposing name National Academy of Design. Chartered by the New York State Legislature in 1826, the aim of the new organization was stated in its charter as "the cultivation and extension of the Arts of Design, and its funds shall be employed in promoting that object."

The Academy flourished, engaging from the beginning in two principal activities: art classes and lectures for students, and an annual exhibition of the work of its members. These annual exhibitions drew large crowds and, more importantly, popularized the work of such artists as Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, and founders of the Hudson River School of painting, George Caleb Bingham and William Sidney Mount.

The Academy's first permanent home was at 663 Broadway, near Bleeker Street, and extended through to Mercer Street. Its second was at Fourth Avenue and East 10th Street. Finally, after a succession of moves to temporary leased headquarters, the site on East 23rd Street and Fourth Avenue was purchased in 1860. A competition was held the following year to determine the design of the new building and, notwithstanding entries by noted architects Richard Morris Hunt, Leopold Eidlitz, J. Wrey Mould and Henry Van Brunt, the design of Peter Bonnett Wight, a young, relatively unknown architect, was chosen.

P.B. Wight (1838–1925) was a native New Yorker who graduated in 1855 at the age of 17 from the Free Academy (later renamed City College). The Free Academy, formerly located at the southeastern corner of East 23rd Street and Lexington Avenue, just two blocks east of the National Academy, was then only a few years old. Designed by James Renwick, Jr., it was described in 1865 by the eminent American architectural critic, Clarence Cook, as a building in the "Gothick" rather than in the "Gothic" style. Judging from old prints and photographs, it was a prime example of "facade" architecture.

After graduation, Wight did some graduate work and then worked as a student draughtsman before setting up an architectural firm in Chicago in 1858. Upon his return to New York the following year, he received commissions for a bank in Middletown and a hospital in Binghamton. As a result of his hospital design experience, with the onset of the Civil War he was appointed architect to the United States Sanitary Commission in Washington, D.C., where he designed the first government field hospital.

In 1862, Wight returned to New York and took in Russell Sturgis as his partner. The National Academy of Design, whose construction had been delayed by the outbreak of the war, was begun in October 1863, and completed in April 1865. It was the first of several important commissions, notably for the Brooklyn Mercantile Library, and the School of Fine Arts at Yale. During this period, Wight was also editor of *The New Path*, an avant-garde periodical which was strongly influenced by the ideas of John Ruskin and the pre-Raphaelites in England.

Following the disastrous fire of 1873 in Chicago, Wight returned to that city and, as a partner in the firm of Carter, Drake and Wight, he devoted himself to the development of fireproof methods of construction and materials. In 1881, he developed a new type of terra cotta structural tile and, still later, working with John W. Root, he perfected the reinforced concrete slab technique for use in commercial buildings. Wight was instrumental in the formulation of the law requiring the examination and registration of architects in Illinois, the first such law in the United States, and served as editor of *Fireproof Magazine* from 1904 to 1907. He retired in 1918, and died at the age of 87, after a remarkably productive career.

The National Academy of Design, which dictated the general design of Our Lady of Lourdes, was important as the first example of Ruskinian High Victorian Gothic in New York City. It was common knowledge that the prototype for Wight's design was the Doge's Palace in Venice, Ruskin's favorite building, which he admired for its extraordinary use of color and its naturalistic carved detail. Indeed, in *The Stones of Venice* (1851, 1863), which Wight had eagerly read as an undergraduate, Ruskin had cited the famous palazzo as "the purest and most chaste model" he could name.

It would be difficult to overestimate the enormous influence of John Ruskin (1819-1900), the eloquent English writer and critic, whose books, beginning with *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) were read as eagerly by architects, artists, and the educated layman in the United States as across the ocean in Britain. In addition, the editor of *The Crayon*, then the leading art periodical in the United States, idolized Ruskin and extracted at length from his books, for the benefit of the readers of the journal. In his brilliant discussion of "*The Modern Architecture of New York*" in a leading New York literary periodical of 1855, Clarence Cook, the American critic, paid homage to Ruskin, "the mystic lamp-lighter [who] has done much and striven hard to illuminate our understandings" [of] "the mysterious principles whence spring architectural life and power of expression...[and who] carries us along with him by his enthusiasm...to gaze at new beauties and brilliant combinations of light and shade and color..."

Ruskin's theories were an outgrowth of the preoccupation of his contemporaries with Gothic architecture. Playful "Gothick" buildings, such as Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill, had been

erected in England since the 18th century. The picturesque qualities of the style appealed to romantic sensibilities. In 19th century England, however, the Gothic mode received additional impetus from three important sources: from a strict interpretation of the principles of Christianity, from the rise of nationalism, and from the revolt against the Industrial Revolution.

Anglo-Catholic churchmen, who viewed the Middle Ages as an age of purer faith, argued that the Gothic style was the only really appropriate one for churches. The influential architect, Augustus W. N. Pugin, a convert to Catholicism, was a leading exponent of this view, which he cogently expressed in two books, *Contrasts* (1836) and *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841). Second, British nationalists lauded the Gothic style as truly British, in contrast to such imported styles as the Greek Revival or Italian Renaissance. As a result, the Houses of Parliament were built in the Gothic style, not in the Renaissance design, as originally planned by Barry. Third, those opposed to the standardization and mechanization of the Industrial Revolution saw in the hand-carved Gothic detail an expression of the respect for craftsmanship characteristic of the Middle Ages. Ruskin, followed in the next generation by William Morris (1834-1900) and the Pre-Raphaelites, drew upon this background for their political, socio-economic and aesthetic theories.

Unlike the architects who took English or French Gothic as their model, Ruskin lavishly praised the Italian version, particularly as it had developed in Venice. To him, Venice represented one of the three great civilizations in the history of man, Tyre in the distant past, and 19th century England being the other two. Venice, located on the Adriatic, was favorably situated geographically, historically, and economically to promote the assimilation of cultural influences from Byzantium, the Arab world, and the Lombard (Romanesque) and Gothic of northern Europe. As Ruskin saw it, Venetian civilization reached its height during the Gothic period.

The basis for his analysis was not only esthetic, however. Politically, he argued that the Romanesque period in Venice coincided with an unwieldy democracy, the Gothic with an elective monarchy, and the Renaissance with a despotic oligarchy. In contrast to the art and morals of the Renaissance in Venice, which he considered decadent, he felt that the Gothic period displayed the highest moral values. Thus, Gothic architecture, which reflected those values, was to be preferred over all other styles and was especially worthy of emulation.

It is also important to realize that Wight was deeply indebted to the work of contemporary British architects, as well as to the Ruskinian principles of Truth, Beauty, etc. His original competition design of 1861 for the National Academy, which used the round-arched Romanesque style, was undoubtedly directly inspired by two churches designed by J. Wrey Mould, a British architect who had come to New York in 1853 at the invitation of the merchant Moses Grinnell to design All Soul's Church (Unitarian). Erected in 1854-55 on Fourth Avenue and East 20th Street.

All Soul's Church, affectionately or sarcastically referred to as the "Church of the Holy Zebra," was vaguely Byzantine in plan but marked the first appearance in this country of horizontal banding. Achieved by the alternation of light and dark stone, this striped effect is a reflection of the influence of the color theories of Owen Jones, with whom Mould had worked, and of Butterfield's polychromatic churches, which set the course for High Victorian architecture in

England and, allowing for a lag of a few years, in the United States. Mould's Second Unitarian Church in Brooklyn (1857-1858) was inspired by the famous Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals of northern Italy, so much admired by Ruskin.

Wight's shift between 1861 and 1863 from Romanesque to Venetian Gothic in his studies for the Academy, and the utilization of coloristic banding of contrasting white and gray Westchester marble with dark Hudson River bluestone, also reflected the influence of British architects of the late 1850s, notably of Deane & Woodward and G.E. Street. In 1855, Street published an important book, *Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages*. The use in the National Academy by Wight of the arch with voussoirs, which increase in depth from the springing to the crown, derives from Street. Deane & Woodward's designs for the University Museum in Oxford, the naturalistic details of the capitals of Trinity College, Dublin, and the designs for the Foreign Office, London, were all published in the influential British architectural periodical, *The Builder*, between 1855 and 1857.

The Foreign Office, like the National Academy, was inspired by the Doge's Palace. In his superb folio volume, *National Academy of Design: Photographs of the New Building*, with an Introductory Essay and Description by P.B. Wight, Architect 1866, Wight made direct reference to the work of Deane & Woodward, whom he identified as the architects of the new museum at Oxford, who found that capitals carved from nature were not only more beautiful but cost less than ordinary carving, paralleling his own experience. Unfortunately, the exuberant, hand-carved capitals of the Academy, so faithfully copied by his workmen from nature, drawings, or photographs of native American wild flowers, trees and shrubs, did not survive the move uptown from East 23rd Street.

A fine diagonal view of the National Academy, together with a long description of the building, was published in *The Builder* in January 1867, an indication that its fame had quickly reached Britain. Of special interest is the notation in the text that the Academy is more richly decorated with sculpture than the exterior of any building in America. It was Wight's stated aim to revive the Gothic system of constructive building and of natural decoration. In the folio volume on the Academy, he wrote: "I believe that there is great hope for art in the future..., and that the day will come when modern Architecture shall attain its greatest glory from the association of all other arts..."

His 1866 description of his plans for the unfinished parts of the building included a design in the tympanum above the main entrance representing the "*Union of All the Arts* [Wight's italics], as exemplified in the life and works of Giotto." He planned to set panels in the spandrels of the Fourth Avenue front to contain bas-reliefs of artists who had served the Academy with distinction and last, but not least, the two great buttresses flanking the main doorway had pedestals for statues which were to be seven feet high, one for an American painter, the other for a sculptor, or for two citizens who have done the most for the fine arts.

Viewed against this Ruskinian and British architectural background, the National Academy of Design takes its place as one of New York's most evocative buildings of the Civil War period. It seems to answer Clarence Cook's call of 1855 for a new style of architecture:

“Let men only build well and according to the true principles of art and science and then a new want must of necessity induce a new expression of it. We have the right metal among us out of which to stamp the new coin. We are comparatively untrammelled by antiquity or association. Educate our architects thoroughly, let them draw as from a mine the rich stores of art accumulated through untold centuries in the old world, let these be fused in the crucible of their imagination, and these eastern shores may soon again see another Venice arising from her waves, and New York be as celebrated for her triumphs in architecture as she now is for her unrivaled commerce.”

The National Academy, completed 10 years after this was written, achieved immediate recognition as one of the most novel buildings in the city, quite possibly in the country, according to the *New York Times*. A month before the dedication of the new building, the editor of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* described how "its pure white marble walls, rising from the white snow, are contrasted with the blue sky in a more daring manner than most of our architects have attempted." He continues:

“White marble, indeed, is no longer a novel building material in New York; but it is always striking, and its treatment in this structure is original in this country...More than once...we have stopped to observe and to delight in the ornaments cut upon the marble, freshly copied from nature. After Egyptian and Roman and Grecian and Gothic abominations in brick and plaster and wood with which this city abounds, the decoration of which is purely conventional...here is the return to nature for which the best art of modern times has been sighing. And how rich, how graceful, how honest, is the effect!” [Note the typically Ruskinian emphasis on nature, truth to materials, honesty and morality]

“The building is sure to provoke censure...the passengers in the street cars 'don't like such a queer looking thing!' There are others who will see in it a little Doge's palace. And certainly it recalls that famous building, although its color and proportions are so different...

When it is fully finished, what a joyous dedication there ought to be!”

With this building, Wight established himself as one of the young New School architects of the day. Despite its obvious Venetian Gothic derivation, the design displayed a freedom of decorative detail and boldness of form that was characteristic of the High Victorian Gothic period. Here, Wight made dramatic use of polychromatic materials of varying textures, as advocated by Ruskin and his disciples.

In addition, one of the most interesting claims Wight made was that, although the National Academy had presented the competing architects with a complete floor plan and specifications, and asked them to merely design a facade, his design did, in fact, reflect the interior functions of the building. In an article in *The New Path*, an art magazine he edited for several years, he explained how the ground story, slightly below grade, was used for janitor's quarters and evening art classes, which required artificial illumination in any case. The second story, used for reception, meeting, and council rooms and for a library, was well lit by a long series of arcaded windows. The diapered walls of the top story, pierced only by oculi

with stained glass, were perfect for the large exhibition hall, lit from above by means of skylights.

The same article is also important as an exposition of his aesthetic theories. His views at that time were:

“First, that all buildings should be designed in the medieval spirit, in other words should be ‘Gothic’ and not revived classic of any school; second that all carved ornament should be designed by the workmen who cut it, under such superintendence and instruction as the artist may find necessary.”

A full account of the splendid ceremonies which accompanied the laying of the cornerstone of this remarkable building, on October 21, 1863, is provided by a book on the National Academy published in 1865. Speeches by Wight, Daniel Huntington, the Academy's president, the Rev. Dr. Bellows, the historian George Bancroft and William Cullen Bryant, among others, followed. The dedication of the Academy, delayed by the death of President Lincoln on April 15, 1865 and the subsequent period of national mourning, took place on April 27.

The Academy continued to occupy the building until 1898. The following year, the land was sold to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company for construction of its new building. The Academy moved uptown to West 109th Street, near Morningside Heights, in the expectation that the neighborhood, then the site of construction of Columbia University and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, along with the anticipated construction of a bridge to New Jersey along Cathedral Parkway, would develop into the new center of New York City. The Academy's present headquarters is at 1083 Fifth Avenue.

When the National Academy sold the East 23rd Street land to Metropolitan Life, the Academy retained the right to keep portions of the building when it was torn down. Monsignor Joseph MacMahon obtained portions of the building for the projected Our Lady of Lourdes Church, either directly from the Academy or, as an article in *The Architectural Record* of 1907 suggests, from the wrecker who was tearing it down.

The parish had been organized in 1901 to serve the Catholic residents of Hamilton Heights, and services were originally held in a converted dance hall at Amsterdam Avenue and West 145th Street. Lawsuits from local residents, opposed to having a Catholic church in the neighborhood, halted construction briefly, but on May 18, 1902, the cornerstone was laid at the original site of Hamilton Grange, a New York City Landmark.

Monsignor MacMahon, the founder of the parish, was a noted liturgist and supporter of liberal causes, including women's suffrage. In addition to obtaining parts of the National Academy building, he also secured for the church the former east end of St. Patrick's Cathedral, including its stained glass. This had been designed by James Renwick, Jr., in a more traditional Flamboyant Gothic style, and was removed from St. Patrick's in 1902 to accommodate the Lady Chapel. The entire north end of Our Lady of Lourdes, along with one window on the eastern side, comes from St. Patrick's. Another bit of reuse of architectural

elements occurs in the front of the church, where the two stone pedestals flanking the steps come from the A.T. Stewart Mansion.

An unfortunate accident took place during the construction of the church. Cornelius O'Reilly, the architect who had combined the portions of the various buildings and designed the church, slipped from a ladder while inspecting the work. He was carried across the street to the Rectory, and died there. A plaque to his memory appears on the church. Our Lady of Lourdes was dedicated by Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York, on December 20, 1903, and was completed in early 1904.

The church, located on the north side of West 142nd Street, faces south. The two carved stone pedestals from the A.T. Stewart Mansion flank a broad flight of steps which leads to a terrace. This arrangement is, of course, far less imposing than the original u-shaped, double staircase, with fountain beneath, at the former National Academy. The lower part of the church, which incorporates many original elements, is of white marble with darker stone banding. Two pointed-arched windows and a door flank the main entrance.

Linked by alternating light and dark voussoirs and a naturalistic foliate extrados, this level retains much of the flavor of the Academy, although the proportions are different and the elements have been reduced to adjust to the narrower site. The main entrance doorway, wider and taller than the doors at the side, also is enlivened by alternating light and dark voussoirs and carved extrados. In addition, there is carving on the intrados and around a statue of the Virgin Mary in the tympanum.

The relatively plain upper part of the church is dominated by a high, steeply pitched central gable which pierces the cornice line. This gable encloses a single bull's-eye opening, as in the original. At each side of the gable, at gallery level, are three simple Gothic style windows unified by a continuous band of dark stone at the springing of the arch. The section of wall above is blank, in contrast to the rich diaper pattern, worked out in white and gray marble, at the Academy. The ornamental cornice is similar to, but not identical with, the original: the lower section has brackets instead of corbels supporting the small trefoil arches, while the upper part consists of crestings in the form of stylized, cross-shaped fleur-de-lis.

The eastern facade of the church, now fronting on an alley, is similar to the front. It has a series of pointed-arched windows with voussoirs in alternating colors and arched heads with tracery. Above, there is a row of plain windows unified by a single dark band course. In addition, on this side there is a row of basement windows with segmental arches which were salvaged from the Fourth Avenue facade of the Academy. Toward the north end of the church, on the same side, there is a single large window with elaborate Flamboyant Gothic tracery, surmounted by a gable and pinnacle. A large central window with tracery is flanked on each side by two buttresses, terminating in pinnacles, which frame lancet windows.

Architectural critics of the early 20th century, writing in *The Architectural Record* and *The American Architect*, approved of the reuse of parts from demolished buildings in the new church. Along with other New Yorkers, they smiled fondly upon seeing familiar details which had been saved and reused creatively. The author of an article on the Church of Our Lady of

Lourdes in *The Architectural Record* of April 1907 cites the church as a commendable and even exemplary departure from the customary structure of its type..." He continues:

"It is a pity, of course, that it should not have been practicable to reproduce the Academy in its entirety. If Mr. Wight ever...makes his way to the remains of his beautiful building, he would no doubt suffer over the truncations to which it has been subjected. But one imagines he would agree that it was more desirable...that it should be thus partially preserved that it should be utterly destroyed. Certainly, from the point of view of the architectural pilgrim, looking for bits of beauty and picturesqueness in our street architecture, it is so. Such a pilgrim feels indebted to the ingenious and appreciative pastor, the Rev. Mr. MacMahon, for a work of architectural as well as devotional piety. It is quite plain that by picking the architecture of this church off the scrap-heap, so to say, he has managed to get an edifice for better worth looking at than he could possibly have obtained at the same cost, or even at a considerable multiple of it, by building it 'de novo.' And one feels moved to commend his example to other clergymen similarly situated."

Today, some 70 years later, Our Lady of Lourdes continues to serve its congregation and to enhance the entire neighborhood, including the adjacent Hamilton Heights Historic District.

[Read the full NYC LPC designation report here.](#)