



Archd ceilings of a corridor adorn the setting of Hiram Powers's "Temptation of Eve"



S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of Smithsonian, showing President and Mrs. Johnson Emanuel Leutze's "Heading West" last night at opening of the collection, homeless since 1846.



Busts by Hiram Powers, the 19th-century American sculptor, await exhibition. They were bequeathed to National Collection of Fine Arts by the artist.

Architecture: Tribute to a Landmark's Survival



By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 3—Ten years ago, the two square blocks of solid sandstone, granite, brick and marble built and rebuilt as the Patent Office by Robert Mills, William Elliot, Edward Clark and others from 1836 through the 1880's, a monument in the noblest of Washington's classical styles, was scheduled to be pulverized and replaced by blacktop. To a lot of people, particularly parking lot operators, blacktop is the most beautiful thing in the world.

Ten years ago, the choice between landmark preservation and parking was made almost automatically in favor of the latter, and the ghosts of monuments past occupy parking lots in every American city. But the Old Patent Office cheated fate. Today it houses the Smithsonian Institution's National Collection of Fine Arts (north wing, opening to the public on Monday) and National Portrait Gallery (south wing, to open later this year).

In 1958 the Old Patent Office was given to the Smithsonian Institution. Six years and \$6-million after conversion to a museum began, give or take a few unhappy Government Issue design details, the orphan Smithsonian art collection has a stunning home, its first since the collection's founding in 1846.

Waste Space to Some

To architectural historians, the building is a fine example of 19th-century style from Greek Revival to Victorian Renaissance. To management experts, whose pragmatism is usually matched only by their spiritual poverty, the name of the style is Waste Space.

Corridors, used as galleries, average 17 feet wide and 17 feet high. Where cool abstractions now hang, beds for the wounded and dying were improvised on the marble floors after Antietam and Bull Run.

The Lincoln Gallery, named for its use as the promenade for Lincoln's second inaugural ball, is approximately 60 by 300 feet and has 64 white marble columns and pilasters rising in cathedral-like groined vaults.

The present library, three stories high, elaborately balconied, colonnaded and skylit, is sumptuously Victorian; the kind of waste space (vide also the high-rising, marble-clad, mural decorated rotundas of old courthouses and city halls) that makes men at least seem noble.

Vaulting Rediscovered

The building had been unbelievably abused. The great spaces were cut up into small Federal offices. One eighth of an inch of Government Green paint had to come off those marble columns. The Granite Gallery, now used for sculpture, has heavy, square, gray granite columns and architraves that support solid brick barrel vaults, rediscovered in the paint-removing process.

The graceful stairs had elevators rammed into the stairwells. Marble floors were all but destroyed by partitions and electrical and heating conduits.

In the restoration and conversion, the Government almost ruined the building again. As the Federal agency in charge of construction, the General Service Administration had the job of turning the Old Patent Office into a museum for the Smithsonian. Most of their work has had to be undone by the museum administration, under its director, Dr. David Winfield Scott, and its architectural consultant, Bayard Underwood.

The G.S.A. knows how to build the world's most banal office buildings. It has cornered the market on all of the ugliest standard fixtures made anywhere, and no matter what architect designs the buildings it constructs in any city of the country, the G. I. equipment appears and covers them like a slow ooze. (The thought of its warehouses is numbing.)

As work proceeded on the

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National Collection's New Home Stands as a Tribute to Survival

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new museum, office clocks were suddenly and mysteriously smashed into the center of 60-foot exhibition walls. Fire hoses, alarms and air grilles were dotted about like pop art in prime exhibition spaces. The clocks were pulled out and safety equipment moved when possible. Standard anemostats for the air-conditioning appeared like tin platters as the focal point where the handsome groined ceiling vaults meet.

But what should really be preserved in some branch of the Smithsonian (they are being removed as rapidly as possible) is the all-purpose monster of a hanging ceiling fixture devised by the G.S.A., which runs on by the mile embroidered with endless outlets for plugging in the worst of everything ever designed for museum use. Its greatest feature was instant and total interior sabotage.

At some point the fact must be faced that the G.S.A. has absolutely no taste. It also knows nothing about historic preservation.

The new museum, therefore, is virtually a rescue operation. Fluorescent fixtures by the yard have been replaced by curved lighting tracks that follow the line of the vaulted ceilings to hold a variety of incandescent spots. Considering the buildings conversion history, the majority of the struggles between archeology and adaptation to modern use have been resolved successfully. Only the Lincoln Gallery, that self-sufficient, magnificent architectural space, holds out. Fully furnished with columns, it rejects any installation.

Until recently, mere mag-

nificence was no reason for keeping an old landmark around. The Smithsonian has not only brought this prime Robert Mills building back to life (he was also the architect of the Treasury Building and the Washington Monument), but is even well along on the restoration of James Renwick's original Corcoran Gallery, the old Court of Claims, on Pennsylvania Avenue, for a museum of Art and Crafts.

This may not be a preservation avalanche, but in Government circles, where change comes like treacle and culture is often equally sticky, it is an indication that the United States is coming of architectural age.