

# Chamber Finally Admits Public to Its Great Hall

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Portraits of generations of business leaders look down from the walls of the Great Hall of the New York Chamber of Commerce, at 65 Liberty Street. To picture the vast room, a lens covering an extremely wide angle was used.

The New York Times (by Jack Manning)

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Three generations of Astors and two of Rockefellers, Morgans and Vanderbilts welcomed New Yorkers to one of the city's landmark buildings yesterday.

The occasion was the opening to the public of the Great Hall of the New York Chamber of Commerce at 65 Liberty Street for the first time since the building's completion in 1902, to mark the beginning of the Chamber's 200th anniversary year.

The Astors and Rockefellers, with other leaders of commerce and industry, looked down on the visitors from gold frames on 31-foot-high walls lined, or "skyed," as the expression goes, with three tiers of more than 200 paintings of eminent 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century businessmen stacked from marble floor to gilded ceiling.

### 3 Centuries of Leaders

Their company included Cadwallader Colden, the British lieutenant governor who gave the Chamber its royal charter in 1768, DeWitt Clinton, Peter Cooper, such figures as "the projectors of the Atlantic cable," all the past presidents of the Chamber, and even (in another room) a pillar of the 19th-century financial community with the unlikely name of Preserved Fish.

Three centuries of the city's financial leaders have been assembled in one of New York's most impressive portrait collections, recorded by such artists as John Trumbull, Rembrandt Peale, Charles Willson Peale, John Vanderlyn, Eastman Johnson and Asher B. Durand. There are "deadees" (painted after their lifetimes), and portraits from life.

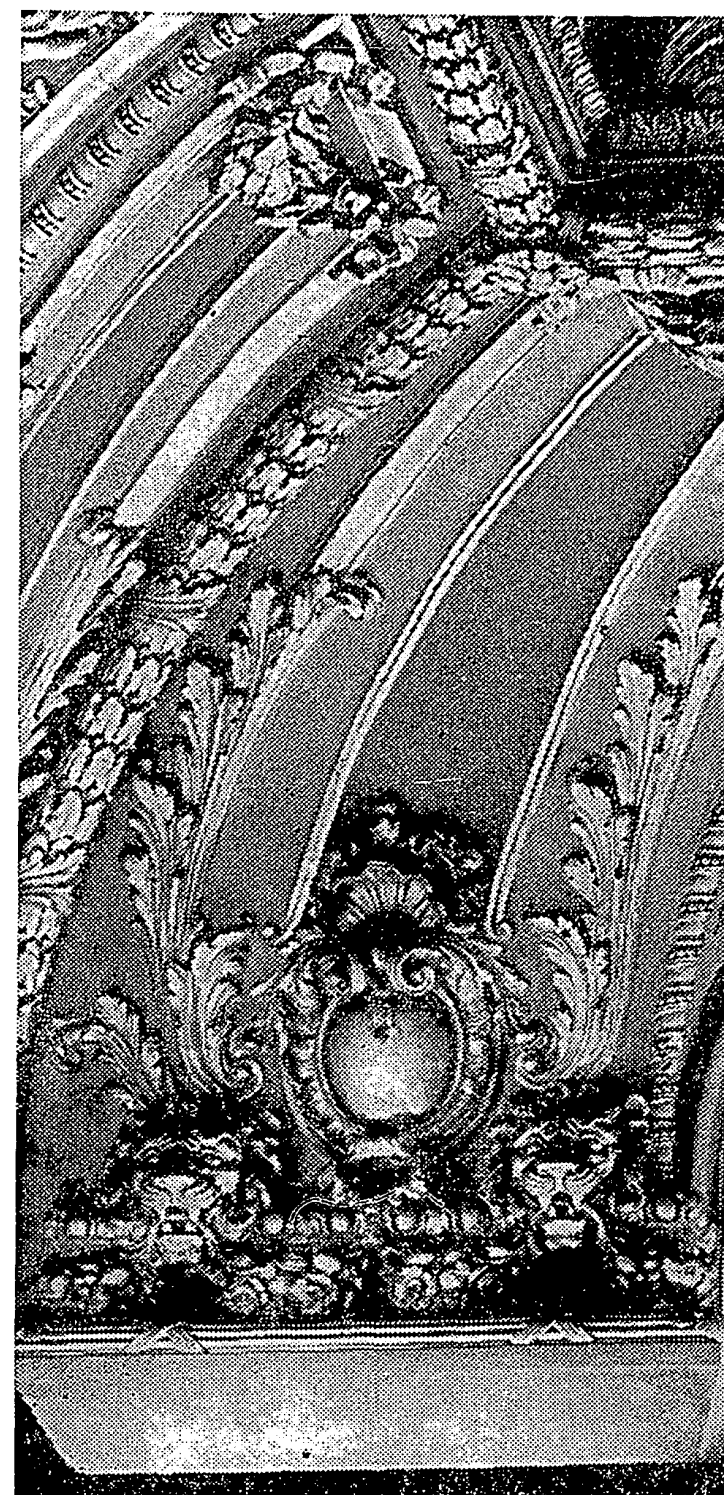
### 2d Oldest in World

The New York Chamber of Commerce is the second oldest in the English-speaking world. Founded on April 5, 1768, it missed being the oldest by just two months, to the Jersey Channel Islands Chamber of Commerce.

Yesterday's visitors, guided by an art historian, were the first of the general public to see the Chamber's collection and one of the city's great landmark interiors, an experience previously limited to members and their guests. The overwhelming effect of power and opulence created by so many distinguished men in so grand a room can now be savored by the public every Friday from 11:00 A.M. to 3:30 P.M.

The Chamber of Commerce is a low structure surrounded by tall buildings in the heart of the financial district. It was designed and built in 1901-02 by James Barnes Baker, an architect who worked in the popular, turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts French classical style.

Cleaned recently, the building's golden-cream marble trimmed with six fat Ionic columns and topped by a copper-crested mansarded and dormered roof immediately evokes the creamy classical



A closeup of ornamentation in the hall's lofty ceiling

monuments of Paris. It is French pastry surrounded by New York's sooty sobriety.

The heart of the building is the 90-by-60-foot Great Hall that rises three stories to a central skylight and a ceiling that must be seen to be believed. Above the portraiture, hung walls of cut wine-red velvet, topping a gilded, bracketed cornice, is a massive burgundy, turquoise and gold confection of heavily ornate coffers, cartouches, wreaths, swags and (appropriately) horns of plenty, with painted panels of rosy clouds.

Inside and out, the building is an example of the kind of period architectural opulence that J. J. Morgan once defined, in a classic riposte about yachting, as something that if you have to ask the cost, you can't afford it. Few could afford it today. It demonstrates that greatest of all architectural luxuries: the extravagant, abandoned use of space for maximum elegance and minimum economic return.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission has cited the building for its grandeur, fine materials and rich detail. On opening day, November 12, 1902, with President Theodore Roosevelt, former President Grover Cleveland and "foreign dignitaries" in attendance, an anonymous New York Times critic was less admiring.

He suggested with some chauvinism that the French "verona velours" wall covering in the Great Hall would better have been an American made fabric, "if indeed we do in this land fabricate anything sufficiently splendid to meet the problem."

In fact, he found splendor lacking. "Woodwork and marbles on the [office] floor and in the committee rooms are the kind supplied to the ordinary office building," he commented, scornfully. Today's critic, faced with 65 years of the conspicuous attrition of splendor in building since then, can only say, somewhat ironically, amen.