

# The Museum's Birthday Cake

For its centennial celebration the Metropolitan Museum has come up with a giant birthday cake that can be sliced two ways. The skillful design for completing its physical plant, part of a carefully studied master plan for its second century, is a rational, thoughtful and architecturally sensitive solution.

There are many things to recommend it. The transition from the monumental classicism of the Fifth Avenue facade to a delightful kind of greenhouse architecture on the park side, the elimination of the unsightly, unfinished back and the provision of new park entrances, are all notable features.

The addition of the Lehman collection, the Rockefeller primitive art collection, and the Temple of Dendur make for a concentration of splendor that undeniably will give New York one of the most spectacular art palaces in the world. The urban condition changes, but that kind of treasury is permanent.

But the cake is already being cut in the other direction by conservationists and advocates of decentralization. The museum was deeded its right to expand in the park in the 1870's. In the 1970's, a century of urban growth has made every blade of grass more precious. Even the most scrupulously calculated plans involve elements of encroachment. And at some point, the balance does tip toward engorgement, and opportunities are missed for other forms of urban enrichment. In a museum as elsewhere, there can be a surfeit of treasures, a true *embarras de richesses*.

Inevitably, questions arise about the huge project that have little to do with the quality of the design. Does large-scale, permanent construction replacing parking lots really cancel itself out as encroachment on the park? Should the interior grand stairway, with which Richard Morris Hunt obscured the original Vaux and Mould building, now be removed to create still more monumental space as access to the Lehman collection? Has the question of centralization versus decentralization of collections in New York really been resolved?

These questions cannot be brushed aside. They require further careful study and review to insure that all of the public interests involved receive adequate consideration before final commitments are made.

The museum's plans deserve public exhibition. This is the mandatory procedure in London for any public institution or area involved in planning studies. The procedure of public display and debate, for example, solved the difficult Tate Gallery expansion. This is the time for civilized discussion as to whether the new plans serve the museum, and the city, in the best possible way.