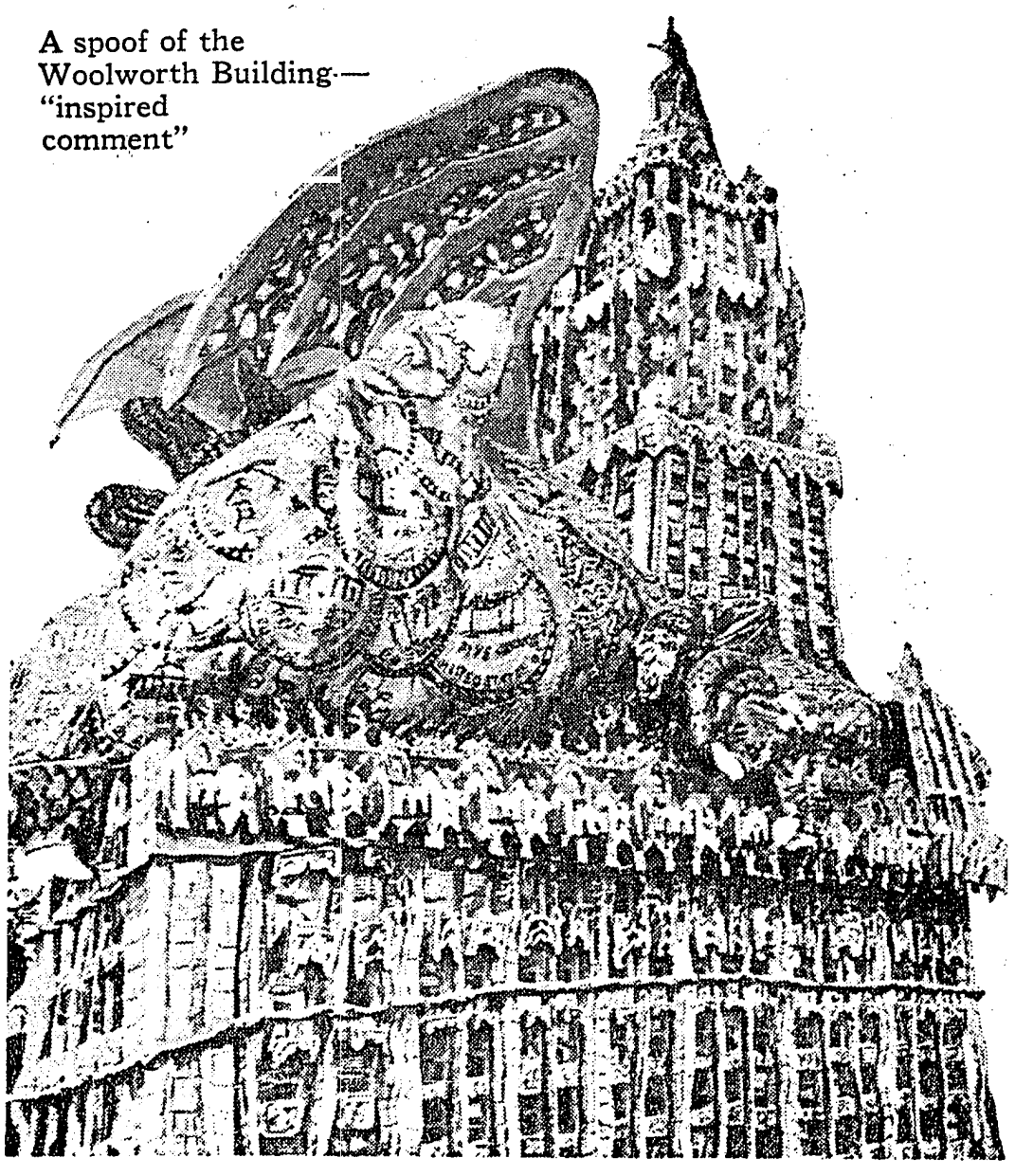

A spoof of the Woolworth Building—"inspired comment"

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Grooms's Zany 'Manhattan' Puts The City in Focus

It is possible, through Jan. 20, to see *two* Woolworth Buildings in Lower Manhattan. The original is in its accustomed place on Broadway at the foot of City Hall Park, having survived, since 1913, the praise of the distinguished critic Montgomery Schuyler (who hailed it on completion as a shapely, satisfactory and eye-filling work of art), the scorn of the modernists (who managed to dismiss its 52 Flemish Gothic stories as a deceitful and ludicrous sham), and an impassioned reappreciation by architects and scholars today.

The second Woolworth Building is to be found on the ground floor of 88 Pine Street as part of "Ruckus Manhattan," a wry sculptural re-creation—if that word can serve a marvelous mélange of art, wit, social satire and succinct architectural observation—of the life and landmarks of Lower Manhattan. The reality and its reinterpretation, which are within walking distance of each other, are the two best shows in town.

"Ruckus Manhattan" is a 6,400-square-foot exhibition by Red Grooms, created with his wife, Mimi Gross Grooms, and 21 helpers (elves?) called the Ruckus Construction Company. This walk-through show of small-scale buildings and full-scale figures has been six months in the making in the unoccupied ground-floor space of I. M. Pei's handsome new skyscraper at Pine and Water Streets, courtesy of Orient Overseas Associates and Creative Time, an arts organization dedicated to bringing the creative process to the public. It is being co-sponsored by Marlborough Gallery and has been supported by grants from the New York State Council on the Arts, the National

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Grooms's 'Manhattan'

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Endowment for the Arts, and numerous individuals and businesses.

The real Woolworth Building is an unparalleled combination of romantic conceit (would you believe Gothic ogival lambrequins, or choir stall canopies, for cornices?) and soaring structural drama. In 1913, the skyscraper was a relatively new achievement, and the steel-framed tower clad in the exquisitely crafted detail of delicate, creamy-white terra-cotta was, briefly, the tallest building in the world. It is still one of the most beautiful and impressive buildings of modern times. Art is alive and well in the Woolworth Building from the brilliant, vaulted mosaics of the richly decorated lobby to the Gothic fancy of the crown at the top. Myth and magic are once again in good architectural repute.

Schuyler, whose judgment was close to impeccable, called the eclectic design a light and suitable way of expressing the thin-walled, powerful metal skeleton that made such height possible, and he praised the building's exotic verticality as a miraculous and appropriate blend of esthetics and technology. Cass Gilbert's masterpiece still "looms in the gray of dawn or haze of twilight, its white spectrality shining over city and river . . . an ornament to the city and a vindication of our artistic sensibility," as Schuyler wrote 62 years ago.

Over at "Ruckus Manhattan," the Woolworth tower bends forward jauntily. Held firmly in the protective embrace of a dragon, the building rises with a cheerful and total disregard for gravity and the plumb line. The dragon's rainbow wings rise and fall gently; its mouth opens and shuts with mock menace. Its painted scales are made of nickels and dimes. A doll-size Frank Woolworth gazes out out of his tower, and in one of those loony shifts of scale that are a Grooms trademark, a revolving door allows one to enter a small, womb-like model of the lobby. Every distorted detail is perfect.

And the building is alive. It glitters and gleams, spoofs and celebrates; it seems inadequate to call it caricature or satire. To this viewer, it is inspired comment. The entire project is carried out with an eye so skilled and sure that it grasps the most salient features of every structure and turns them into a succinct statement on the human and urban condition.

It is a particular delight to have the real buildings just beyond the exhibition space's glass walls. Due west, the twin towers of the World Trade Center rise a blandly undistinguished 110 stories. In the exhibition, the Trade Center towers are 30 feet high and a cockeyed triumph, a lighthearted critique of the skyscraper ego. One shaft narrows in fake perspective, with a canvas cloud pinned to its top, and the other widens in reverse perspective, with an easy disrespect for architectural overreaching—a perfect so-what response to their size.

After all the words that I have wasted in print to suggest that the buildings' weak pin-stripe design is an inadequate expression of some of the world's most massive construction (the Woolworth Building, with all of its delicate romanticism, never made that misjudgment of basic architectonic relationships), the Ruckus artists have achieved the ultimate putdown. They have simply turned the ribbon-thin mullions into looped and tangled spaghetti.

A few blocks away from the exhibition is One Wall Street, the Irving Trust Company headquarters, an Art Deco masterpiece of 1932 by Voorhees, Gmelin & Walker. The show's One Wall Street does a stylish backbend and flies a banner "In Irving We Trust." And around a corner from a Stock Exchange replica with a splendidly disheveled see-through colonnaded facade, a ticker-tape parade plunges down Broadway next to a bone-filled crypt in the Trinity Church graveyard. Figures of loungers on the Federal Hall steps sit beneath the aloof, modeled feet of a George Washington who turns into a painted horizontal flat abruptly at the knees. A crooked West Side Highway, obviously in terminal disrepair, sports bubble-domed cars, a ship in full sail and a Hertz truck. The Statue of Liberty, endlessly intoning Emma Lazarus's doleful doggerel, wears red platform shoes. Beneath it all, sewer alligators embrace.

Throughout the show, the monumental and the human factors coexist in a marriage of screwball scale and evocative detail, using techniques from full sculpture to the comic strip. But the real technique is visual irony. Both people and buildings are lovingly observed—from the cultural microcosm of the New York newsstand (full size) to a fine jumble of old brick buildings (miniaturized) adjoining the Woolworth Building in a nice demonstration of how the gorgeous and the mundane lie down together in city streets.

Like a tipsy matron with a tiara, a small building with a crowning acanthus cornice makes it clear that a shabby old structure has been robbed of its pretensions to dignity. In the same way, the costumes of bravura and outrage of the human inhabitants—in contrast to the building-costumes of institutional solemnity—are presented knowingly as body speech in the New York idiom.

Someone else will have to deal with this work in the proper art-critical context of the Pop art tradition or satirical realism, or whatever framework is appropriate. For me, it is a cultural-esthetic-architectural document that deserves its own permanent room at the Museum of the City of New York. Because it *is* New York, circa 1975. And it is nonpareil architectural criticism.

Outside the elegant building at 88 Pine Street, the somber classical facades jostle the cheap plastic luncheonettes in recognizable street scenes that join magnificence and triviality. Life imitates art.

Correction:

In an article on expendable churches on Nov. 30, St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York was referred to as St. Paul's. I did not mean to rob Peter to credit Paul.

"Ruckus Manhattan" by Red Grooms and the Ruckus Construction Company at 88 Pine Street, through Jan. 20. Open 11 A.M. to 2 P.M. Tuesday through Friday; noon to 3:30 P.M. Saturday; closed Sunday and Monday.