The Editorial Notebook: Art for Money's Sake
Huxtable, Ada Louise
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The Editorial Notebook

Art for Money's Sake

There has been a rash of robberies of New York's banks, 46 percent more in 1977 than in 1976, and most of the trouble seems to be that the banks are just too friendly. The low, open counters are easily vaulted; lack of glass or grilles encourages the quick heist. The kind of monumental architecture that used to suggest security, solidity and style has given way to "people" banks that are as chummy as the laundromat and about as distinguished in design.

It is one thing to be friendly and another to be a bore. One wonders how so many of the country's banks managed to arrive simultaneously at the same kind of plastic pablum—the motel-modern décor, the middling green and tan walls, the flat, fluorescent lighting, the stock formica counters and the standard artificial plants.

Who dictates that this year's friendly color is orange? Who supplies the fake flowers fixed like funeral arrangements at the tellers' stations on the vaultable counters? Who is the joker who changes the polyethylene roses for chrysanthemums in a ritual salute to the seasons? What consortium of bankers and advertising agencies decide that ordinary is more welcoming than elegant? That bland is beautiful?

This was not always so. The Federal Reserve, for example, has never felt the need to be anyone's casual acquaintance—but then, it has always

Monumental splendor, overwhelming scale

dealt with bankers, not people. In the first quarter of this century it raised great temples to the gods of money nationwide. Marbles, mosaics, bronzes, murals, wood-carvings, wrought-iron, vaulted and frescoed ceilings and coffered halls, all of genuine magnificence and overwhelming scale, appeared from New York to San Francisco. These banks are palaces worthy of the Medici.

In Cleveland, which has a bumper classical crop from the 1920's, touring the Renaissance grandeur of the Federal Reserve by Walker & Weeks is like visiting the Vatican. And it was not only the Feds who courted splendor. Twentieth-century bankers may not have been popes (the Medici had handy connections), but they built like them. The Union Commerce Bank, designed by Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, and recently restored by Dalton, van Dijk, Johnson, has one of the world's largest banking rooms. No false intimacy here: a 60-foot-high hall is topped by a skylit barrel vault flanked by fluted marble columns worthy of the Acropolis. Murals by Jules Guérin, whose Penn Station paintings lie buried in the Jersey meadows with the rubble of the terminal, glow in the lunettes. One Cleveland bank has a pink marble arcade worthy of Versailles, lit by huge bronze chandeliers that hold life-size Graces (Cash, Credit and Checking?) and another has a balconied rotunda with a Tiffany glass dome. Similar 50-year-old banks are among most cities' architectural treasures.

There is something reassuring about the dignity of banks that counted architecture above amiability. Once a bank robber had to have panache, not just a paper bag. Who would dare hold up the Parthenon? Or the Pantheon? These were banks to fear and respect, not to pal around with. They put their money where their art was, and their monuments on Main Street, and we will never see their equals again.

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE