ARCHITECTURE VIEW: FROM GENTEEL MUD TO SHOWY GLITTER ARCHITECTURE VIEW FROM MUD TO
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**ARCHITECTURE VIEW**

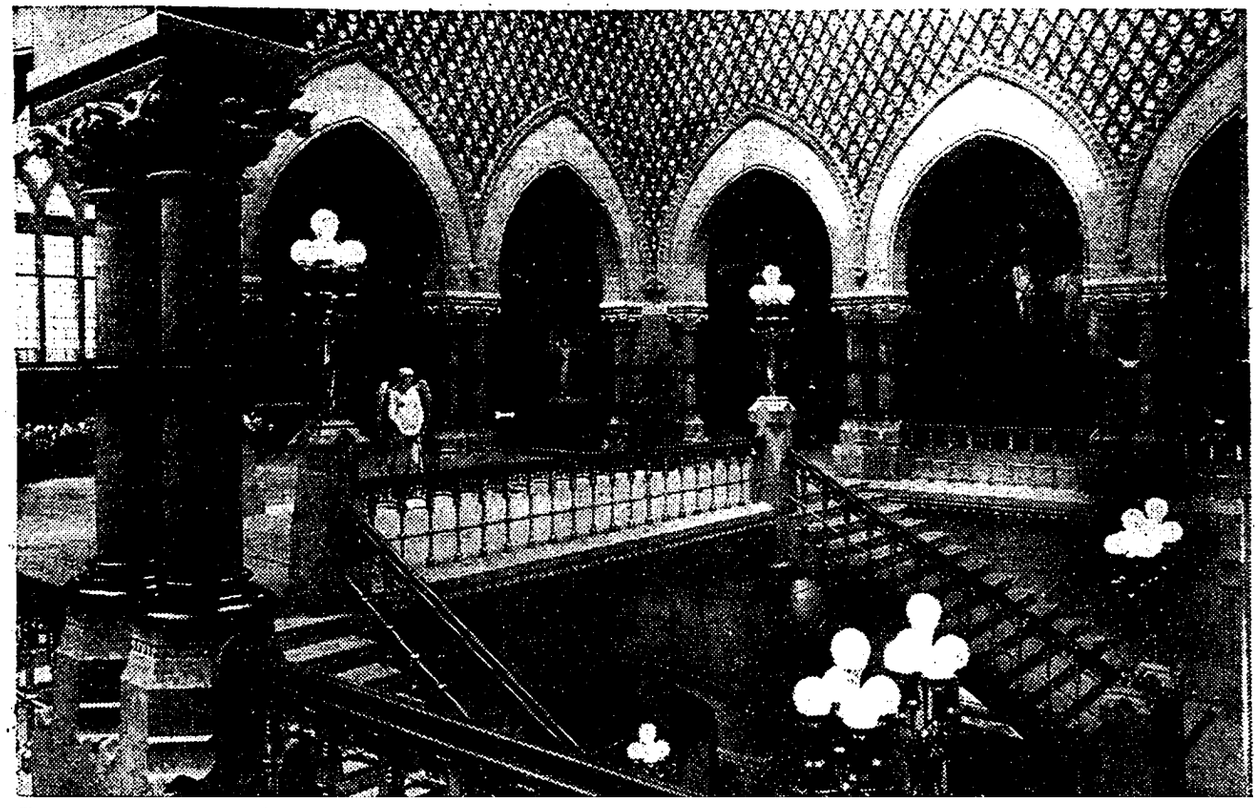
ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# From Genteel Mud to Showy Glitter

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, a quintessential Victorian building by Frank Furness, the Philadelphia master of the style's boldest extravaganzas, opened on April 24, 1876 for the nation's Centennial year. The cerulean blue ceiling of its grand stairhall was studded with silver stars, the walls were a gilded geometry of stylized flowers on a rich, red ground above incised floral patterns; ornamental bronze stair rails boasted bouquets of clustered-globe gas lights sprouting from elaborate, spiky stems. Colors were plum, blue, gold, sand and olive green. There was no "Victorian brown" anywhere.

Exactly one hundred years later to the day, for the Bicentennial, the Pennsylvania Academy has reopened. It had been closed for two years for restoration. By the time the doors were shut, a century of neglect and renunciation of the Victorian esthetic had reduced its showy glitter to genteel mud. What had not been suppressed by changing taste had simply succumbed to grime. If the Academy had been a Furness bank or insurance building, or one of the many Furness works in the path of downtown renewal around that super-Victorian fruitcake, Philadelphia's City Hall (which proved too solid and too expensive to demolish), it would be gone. More than half of Furness's Philadelphia buildings have been destroyed, and much of the rest of his legacy has been severely mutilated. No architect has risen to higher favor in his own time or plunged to greater depths of rejection in later years.

Now the tables are being turned again. By 1973, the fate of the Academy hung in the balance; it was saved by a vote of the Board, advised by arts experts and preservationists. The reopened building is spectacular; the colors glow again, the gold glitters, and all is radiantly diffused with the light of the double skylit roofs that make the structure a giant greenhouse. A little inevitable dust will serve to dim the brand-new luster and place the building and its style more legitimately in time. But the original intent of its superb spatial organization and intricate artisanship is revealed with clarity. This is not only the rehabilitation of a building, and of an extraordinary architect's reputation; it is also a pivotal step in the reevaluation of this country's Victorian architecture.



Grand stairhall of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

The $5.1 million restoration has been carried out by Hyman Myers of the architectural firm of Day and Zimmerman. It involved meticulous research, including scrapings, archeological-type digs, study of old photographs and an obvious devotion to the cause. (That spread to the workmen, as well.)

Construction of the building, which housed both the galleries and an art school founded in 1805, was the last word in fireproofing in the 1870's: shallow brick vaults carried on cast-iron beams. New mechanical systems have been inserted into the ample spaces provided by Furness's ingenious original arrangement for heat and ventilation. There are new skylights and lighting, and some discreet remodeling has added extra levels for the school and a restorer's studio. Polychrome iron columns have been uncovered where encasing plaster was stripped away, as well as chamfered rooms that had been panelled over. Purists will find some fudging where missing, heavy cast-iron parts were replaced by lighter, modern materials. But the 20th century has been as true to the 19th century as it is realistically possible to be.

The timing of the restoration, ostensibly for the Bicentennial, actually coincides with a growing consciousness of the excellence of the best 19th-century architectural design. The zeal of preservationists, based largely on sentiment and history, is being matched by a sharpened and increasingly knowledgeable appreciation of the virtuosities of Victorian work by both practicing architects and architectural historians.

In fact, it is not without significance that the installation of the building's opening show, "In This Academy," which includes the excellent choice of temporary gallery colors from clear white for contemporary work to plum, sand and gray-blue-violet for older pictures, is the work of the Philadelphia firm of Venturi and Rauch, currently embattled for its colors and backgrounds for the

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THROWAWAYS—"American Ephemera," a nostalgic hodgepodge of cigar bands, paper dolls, valentines, invitations, etcetera, spanning two centuries (1765-1935), opens Tuesday at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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# From Mud to Glitter

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Whitney Museum's "200 Years of American Sculpture." (The Academy's refurbishing was started under Tom Armstrong, who moved on to head the Whitney, and has been completed under the current Academy director, Richard J. Boyle.) The younger "Philadelphia school" architects, in today's vanguard, find much to support the Venturian thesis of "complexity and contradiction" in the rediscovery of the Victorian richness that the modernists rejected.

In the past few years there has been a rising tide of interest in Frank Furness's work from the 1870's to the turn of the century, led by a coterie of Furness buffs. The Philadelphia Museum held a Furness show in 1973, accompanied by a fine book and checklist by James F. O'Gorman, working with George E. Thomas, Mr. Myers and Cervin Robinson. Professor O'Gorman has characterized Furness's buildings as "among the most boisterous and challenging in an age noted for aggressive architecture." This exuberant, colorful style died of "good taste" by the end of the century, killed by the proper palazzi of McKim, Mead and White.

The Furness oeuvre is bizarre and eccentric. He was an original, in the sense of a talent that takes the taste of his time and transforms it into an overwhelmingly personal expression. That taste, as the historian Carroll Meeks defined it some time ago, was for the "eclectic picturesque." In the work of Furness it became, in O'Gorman's words, "a bedlam of heterogeneous parts."

Turrets, textures, polychromy, rounded and pointed arches, mansarded and decorated pavilions, dwarf columns, diaper-patterned brick, strangely placed windows, warped levels and fulsome ornament were combined in compositions of almost volcanic intensity. Deliberate oddities of arrangement and scale created explosive visual pressures. This is not the naive "bad taste" that has been so simplistically disdained by later generations; it is a deliberately manneristic style that richly rewards the informed eye. The facade of the Academy, done early in Furness's career when the firm was Furness and Hewitt, is actually one of his more restrained works.

All of these features can be traced directly to the dominant creative strains of the 19th century. Furness's originality is an amalgam of English Ruskinian Gothic, Butterworthian ecclesiology, French neo-Grec classicism, the parallel urges for structural rationalism and decorative romanticism, and the elegant ornament of Owen Jones. His work fuses and transcends it all.

The point to be made is that this remarkable architecture has much to teach us—and surprisingly, perhaps, it is the younger architects who are most aware of it. The danger is that these lessons must be learned without falling into the trap of an eclectic decorative revival or of sacrificing the salient lessons of the modern movement. But those "modern" architects who work on the restoration of these Victorian monuments are particularly impressed. Hugh Jacobsen speaks respectfully of the grand stair in Washington's Renwick Gallery as "that roll of drums, getting you up to the great space." The stairhall at the Academy is clearly one of those great spaces, with involved, rewarding relationships to the rest of the building that are both striking and subtle. The plan is an outstanding example of the Beaux Arts *parti* (Furness studied with America's first Beaux Arts-trained architect, Richard Morris Hunt) in which the function and progression of spaces create the architectural whole.

On entry, the stairhall is experienced on three physical levels; the eye and body and expectations are directed along the architectural *marche* up to the galleries and through them, led on by the patterns of natural light from the skylights and by the color and ornament, all as calculated as they are dazzling. (The artificial light flattens and deadens the building's contrasts and subtleties; it still needs work.) It must be emphasized that this is not decorative excess for its own sake. Each detail is used to enhance, accent and differentiate, to create spatial flow and unity. These are tools manipulated with full awareness.

What we experience in the Academy is not nostalgia; it is architecture. The Victorian building is only beginning to be recognized as good architecture, and even, on occasion, as great architecture. Its richness is a complex system of symbols and meanings, of visual devices and sensuous effects that may have titillated a nouveau riche culture, but that also formed an extremely sophisticated and skillful, erudite and brilliant, highly manneristic 19th-century building art. Many of its monuments have been destroyed out of ignorance. Much of what remains is an abused and irreplaceable heritage.

**The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Broad and Cherry Streets, Philadelphia. Open 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. Monday through Saturday; 1 to 5 P.M. Sunday; Wednesday evenings until 9 P.M.**

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