Modernist Medieval: Historicism and Modernism in the Metropolitan Cloisters

by

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The Where, What, and Why of the Cloisters

My exploration of the Cloisters germinated during a week where I, hosting someone in New York City, went to six museums in five days, and a week after, could only remember the Cloisters as anything more than a vague blur of objects. The image that lingered then and is still lingering now is not of Madonna and Child sculptures, the central cloisters, or even the famous Unicorn Tapestry, but of standing at the edge of the museum, looking out to the Hudson River and the George Washington Bridge in the distance (fig. 1). I stood by a stone wall surrounding by medieval apothecary plants, looking at a symbol of modern human ingenuity, a steel-cabled bridge that my grandfather saw being completed less than a mile from where I was standing. This vista, of stone, nature, and steel, is key to understanding the Cloisters, the Metropolitan’s branch of medieval art and architecture in northern Manhattan.

Like that view of shimmering blue water, gleaming steel, green foliage and hard grey cliffs, which reminds New Yorkers of both the nature that existed before the building and the engineering feats that conquered it, the Cloisters juxtaposes the modern with remnants of a former world. The Cloisters is a site of tension between Revivalist and Modernist architecture, where the past is alternately recreated and held at arm’s length. As a museum, it oscillates between exhibiting art within a recreation of its original context and exhibiting art as an object to be contemplated independently against white or neutral walls that convey no historical associations.

At first, it seems to be a totally historicized museum, influenced by Gothic and Romanesque Revivalism and the popularity of period rooms in museums.
However, between 1931 and 1938, when the Cloisters was being built and designed, the International Style, exhibited by the MoMA in 1932 and shown in its 1939 building, was revolutionizing architecture, and art museums were turning away from elaborate recreations of distant times and places towards simple, neutral settings without the ornamentation shunned by Modernism. The creators of the Cloisters felt the tide of modernism. They sometimes rejected it, forcefully, preferring a charming medieval atmosphere and historical evocation, but they also conformed to new principles of design by rejecting imitations of historical ornament and simplifying interior surroundings for displays of art not unlike those in modernist museums of the period.

Both documentary evidence and the design and architecture of the Cloisters show this tension between historicism and modernism, and show how the Cloisters was not just a final hurrah for medievalism, but a forward-looking museum rich in contradiction and theory. In a “walk” through the museum and through its first reviews, readers will see how this mix of styles affects the experience of the Cloisters and will consider the implication of the heterogeneous design. The transformation from Revivalism to Modernism, and from museums as collections of elaborate period rooms to museums as white boxes, is told in the current Cloisters, which uniquely mixes these opposing modes. I will then consider how this framework of Revivalism and Modernism can be used to explain how The Getty Villa, completed in 1975, is interpreted by visitors at its creation and today.
Seeing the Cloisters

The Cloisters is perched on top of a large hill upper Manhattan, less than a mile from the very tip of northern Manhattan (fig. 2). From the Cloisters, you can look south to the George Washington Bridge and over the protected cliffs and forests of the Palisades across the Hudson River. This view, over seemingly timeless nature, interrupted by the sweep of steel cables and uncovered towers, was envisioned long before the Cloisters was erected. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the heir to the Rockefeller fortune and New York philanthropist, had conceived of Fort Tryon Park before considering the Cloisters. Fort Tryon Park, made up of three grand estates bought by Rockefeller to form a park and developed in the late 1920s and 1930s, uses the careful landscaping reminiscent of Central Park (designed by the older generation of Olmsted Brothers) to compose a series of dramatic river views on its west. The streets surrounding the park, the neighborhoods of Washington Heights, Hudson Heights, and Inwood, were being developed with six-story apartment buildings to be inhabited by middle-class immigrants, especially refugee German Jews, at the very same moment the park was being imagined and created (fig. 3). While the park lovingly frames the Hudson, it conceals the view of the city on its east side with trees.

The Cloisters is perched to maximize the astonishing southwestern view of river and bridge (fig. 1). The view is sweeping in a way that is rare in New York, where even views from the top of tall apartment buildings are interrupted by the possibility or reality of other skyscrapers. On a clear day, feeling the wind from the river, leaning over a stone wall of indeterminate age, the Cloisters feels like a liminal space, within but not quite part of the city. This view was essential enough that Rockefeller
climbed on top of the ramparts of a full-sized cardboard mockup of the Cloisters to experience it, and was pleased with the museum after that.

Turning away from the view, you look past the medicinal and other useful medieval plants of one of the three gardens in the Cloisters to one of its four cloisters, collections of medieval capitals, bases, and columns, each uniquely carved (fig. 4). These four cloisters, which were once in the private interiors of monasteries in covered walkways surrounding a garden, give the Cloisters its name and are the core of its collection and architecture. The Bonnefont Cloister inverts the relationship between traditional cloister and outside world: rather than being a hidden sanctuary protected from the outside world, it now lines only two walls of an otherwise-open square open to a soaring view. Instead of encouraging monks to appreciate the “Heaven on Earth” of a secluded paradise, it encourages anyone who comes to the Cloisters to gaze upon and appreciate the grandeur and beauty of the outer world. On the floor above the Bonnefont Cloister is the nucleus of the Cloisters: the Cuxa Cloister. The Cuxa Cloister, while half the size of the original French site, functions most like a medieval cloister in providing a garden surrounded by medieval-style buildings (fig. 5). In warmer months, it is open to the air, and covered in glass in winter. Two paths create a cross, with a fountain in the middle, and the columns, which are carved with plants, animals, humans, and monstrous creatures, separate the garden from the covered walkway surrounding it. Within it, one can understand why medieval monks saw the cloister as an example of heaven on earth.

Surrounding the Cuxa Cloister, going counter clockwise, is a series of roughly chronological galleries which show medieval art from about 1000 to 1500, from
architecture to sculpture to painting, with a brief dip to the smaller lower level (figs. 6, 7). Starting from the entrance hall, a visitor is supposed to begin in the Romanesque hall, which features three different doorways charting the path from Romanesque to Gothic design and two large wall paintings. Then one is supposed to continue through the galleries, cloisters, and medieval rooms, dismantled in Europe and carefully rebuilt stone by stone on-site. It is also possible to begin in the Late Gothic Hall, to the right of the main hall, and proceed backwards through time: there are no explicit directions or signs. The galleries are not uniform in size, design, or feel. Some are small and intimate, but the Late Gothic Hall is towering; some are stone, like the Gothic Chapel, while others are plastered like the Unicorn Tapestry room; some feel like modern rooms with a few medieval architectural fragments, while others feel totally medieval with authentic or reconstructed interiors.

From the exterior, the Cloisters resembles a fortified Romanesque monastery (fig. 2). It has one main floor, arranged as an irregular square with chapels and a terrace around the Cuxa Cloister, the largest of the cloisters. There is a tower on the northeast corner of the cloister, based on the tower at Cuxa, with administrative offices within, and a lower level consisting of two cloisters, a small ornamental garden that mimics a mille-fleur tapestry background and a larger one with strictly medieval plants used for magic, medicine, art, and other uses, and three galleries, one of glass, one mimicking a Gothic chapel, one a “treasury” first constructed in 1988. The exterior walls are constructed of Connecticut granite, and the interior of Italian limestone. The galleries are alternately stone- and plaster-walled with mostly wooden ceilings and tile, stone, or wood floors over a concrete base. Many people think it is a total blending of
medieval sources, but it is primarily modern, with medieval architectural elements as small as a window or as large as a chapter house, mostly from France and Spain.

The main features of the gallery are sculptures, almost all religious in nature: the Early Gothic Hall holds multiple Virgin and Child images, the Gothic Chapel holds two tomb carvings, and the Late Gothic Hall is primarily sculptures, like a Christ on a donkey used in German church processions, with some paintings and a magnificent tapestry. Most rooms feature medieval doorways, window carvings, or stained glass which are both functional parts of the building and objects on display. The other famous category of holdings of the Cloisters is its tapestries: there are three rooms of tapestries, and one, the Unicorn Tapestries, originally privately held by Rockefeller and only reluctantly donated to the Cloisters, are some of the finest medieval tapestries on earth in both quality and preservation. The tapestry of the unicorn in its pen is the most iconic artwork in the Cloisters, particularly beloved by children.

The core of the Cloisters’ collection, including all its cloisters, much of its sculpture, and some of its architectural fragments, were collected by 1914 by George Gray Barnard. Barnard, a sculptor, medieval enthusiast, and notoriously unreliable character, began buying medieval sculpture in France in the first decade of the 20th century, when it was somewhat less prized by French artistic institutions. Barnard presented himself, and the Cloisters still presents him, as a daring go-getter, rescuing priceless works of art from rivers, barns, and ignorant peasants, but much of his work was bought from established dealers. When Barnard opened his museum in Washington Heights in 1914, down the hill from its current location, it was the first institution in America dedicated to medieval art, which was not even well-represented
in the Metropolitan yet, and it was surprisingly popular (fig. 8). When the Metropolitan acquired the collection and building in 1925, funded by Rockefeller, it was already an important collection of medieval art and architecture. The most notable additions, as identified by James R. Rorimer, curator of Medieval art at the Metropolitan and first director of the Cloisters, in a Metropolitan Bulletin at the opening of the Cloisters, in May 1938, were two large frescoes, multiple doorways, windows, and stained glass, the well-loved tapestries, and a particularly well-preserved and beautiful Madonna and Child that retains much of its original paint.¹

The Cloisters is easy and enjoyable to wander through and experience, but when it is analyzed, it proves surprisingly complex. In the Saint-Guilhem Cloister, the modern and the medieval are clearly differentiated, and the room feels stark, not atmospheric: the Romanesque Langdon Chapel next door blends medieval and modern stonework seamlessly and feels like a church, particularly in 1938 when a cross hung above the place where the altar would have been (fig. 9). Multiple modes of reconstruction, exhibition, and reality-making coexist within one museum, unremarked upon by the museum. The Cloisters feels both modernist and medieval, both functionalist and revivalist. Different actors in the creation of the Cloisters had opposing views of Revivalism, Modernism, and the nature of a museum, and their views, overlaid without total synthesis, created the jumble of the Cloisters.

The Cloisters combines divergent modes of thought about architecture and museums that were shifting during the time of its design and construction. Although both the Metropolitan and John D. Rockefeller had just finished buildings which

attempted to fully recreate the architecture, experience, and imagined values of the past, the Cloisters tempers its recreation with a sense of self-conscious modernity. This was due to the rise of Modernism in architecture at the time, and the move in the museum world away from elaborate period room recreations and towards the white-walled, object-focused display. I will track how the design development of the Cloisters’ building moves from Revivalism towards Modernism. Finally, I will analyze whether a museum with ideologically and stylistically opposing spaces and ways of displaying art can give all visitors a coherent, successful experience.

Historiographic Background

The Cloisters has been the subject of a fair amount of scholarship. The Metropolitan has published several articles detailing the process of design of the Cloisters, with different focuses, throughout the decades. In 2013, Timothy Husband wrote “Creating the Cloisters” in The Metropolitan Museum of Bulletin as a comprehensive and illuminating description of the genesis of the Cloisters, both in its original form created by George Gray Barnard and the Metropolitan’s recreation of it. Husband lays out the interests and occupations of each important player in the Cloisters, and shows how their convictions, personalities, and abilities influenced the final form of the Cloisters. Husband’s account explains the choice of site and layout in detail, and how it relates to Rockefeller’s broader interests. However, it does not take a particularly strong stance on the architecture of the Cloisters, instead focusing on the process of creation. Earlier accounts, like Mary Rebecca Leuchak’s article

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“The Old World for the New: Developing the Design for the Cloisters” (1988), also from the Bulletin, emphasized different parts of the same story. Leuchak has an interesting analysis of the conflicting ways that the different designers attempt to evoke the medieval, but she underrates the theoretical importance of simplicity and modernism. In The Cloisters: Medieval Art and Architecture, written by Peter Barnet and Nancy Wu and published by the Metropolitan in 2012, gives a standard narrative of the construction, devoid of overarching themes or complications, before diving into the specifics of pieces in the museum. None of the Metropolitan’s accounts analyze the result of the design or place it fully into dialogue with architectural developments in 1930s New York.

Out of the twenty-two essays commissioned for the fiftieth anniversary of the Cloisters in 1988, printed in The Cloisters: Studies in Honor of the Fiftieth Anniversary, eighteen are about specific objects in the Cloister’s collection, and only two are about the architecture of the Cloisters. In “The Cloisters or the Passion for the Middle Ages,” written by Hubert Landais, honorary director of the Musées de France, Landais defends the Cloisters from European accusations that the Cloisters used “modern elements to stimulate the medieval, which the purists found excessive,” saying that the Cloisters “let the objects themselves create the desired ambience.” Landais defines the museum as a “site” and “ambience” museum and then looks for museums which may have inspired the designers of the Cloisters. He identifies three

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in Europe, including the Musée de Cluny, and then casts for antecedents in America, including ones opened in the 1930s, over a decade after Barnard’s Cloisters were opened. William H. Forsyth, assistant curator at the Cloisters when it opened in 1938, wrote “Five Crucial People in the Building of the Cloisters,” an effectively primary text describing the patron, original creator, architect, and the first two curators of the Cloisters and how their visions combined to create the Cloisters. Both essays are useful, but do not provide a great amount of critical guidance in reading the Cloisters.

Outside of the Metropolitan, the Cloisters has received limited, but interesting, scholarly attention. In *New York 1930: architecture and urbanism between the two world wars*, last updated in 2009, the Cloisters is presented as an alternative to the nationalism of the 1920s and 1930s. That nationalism was expressed positively in the American Wing, Museum of the City of New York, and the Whitney and negatively in the isolationism, xenophobia, and racism, of the 1920s and 1930s. Stern, Gilmartin, and Mellins focus on a review by Lewis Mumford, the architectural critic for the *New Yorker*, and how he saw the building as modern yet spiritual, opposing both the fake medievalism of Riverside Church and the soullessness of office buildings.5

Shirin Fozi’s article “American Medieval: Authenticity and the Indifference of Architecture” (2015) also focuses on Barnard’s Cloisters, specifically analyzing the logic of his medieval recreations as part of a broader tradition of American medievalist fantasies in architecture. Fozi mentions the ways in which the Metropolitan’s Cloisters focus on the object in more modern ways, and compares

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Barnard, Breck, and Rorimer’s different definitions of authenticity. Fozi’s few paragraphs about the difference between the Metropolitan’s focus on the object and Barnard’s focus on atmosphere are interesting, but this is not her main point. Risham Majeed, a lecturer at the Met Cloisters, explores the current visitor experience of the Cloisters in another recent article, “Excuse Me, Is This a Church?: Display as Content in the Metropolitan Museum of Art” (2017). Both the Cloisters and the African art collection in the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of the Metropolitan are based on now-outdated modes of exhibition, and Majeed emphasizes that museum educators must understand and convey the histories of those permanent exhibits to visitors, along with discussing the objects on display. Majeed shows how the Met Cloisters creates both a clean focus on the object and a medieval atmosphere which is created from mixing original and modern materials. Although brief, her discussion of the history of the Cloisters highlights some of the tensions I will explore from other angles.

Leuchak, who wrote a history of the Cloisters for the Metropolitan Museum Journal in 1988, wrote a much more critical article entitled “Imagining and Imaging the Medieval: The Cloisters, Virtual Reality and Paradigm Shifts” for Historical Reflections in 1997. This article sees the Cloisters as a seductive pretend-Medieval world that, while seemingly authentic, is in fact more reflective of the fantasy medievalism of the 1920s and 1930s. The “multisensorial celebration of the

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concretely physical character of the medieval artifact and its simulated environment expressed the Museum founders’ cultural values,” Leuchak says, and hiding the cracks and fragments of the medieval objects with “deceptively authentic-looking passages” gives the visitor a feeling of a “magic carpet ride” to the Middle Ages and away from the failures of modernity. The visitor ends up not with knowledge of appreciation of any specific medieval object, but with a romanticized fantasy of the Middle Ages. Leuchak’s criticism is valuable, particularly in questioning the cultural values imposed by the Cloisters and whether the mix of modern and medieval objects is clear enough for the visitor, and she points out the ways that different spaces are different degrees of medieval. However, she only describes Collens’ desire for completely immersive period rooms, and not the conflicting views of the Metropolitan’s directors, who pushed against that view. By only presenting one of the competing visions for the Cloisters, Leuchak herself creates a false sense of harmony surrounding the design process.

My study of the Cloisters involves several new lines of analysis, particularly in seriously reckoning with the influence of simplicity and Modernism, two distinct yet related modes of architecture, as these concepts emerged contemporaneously with the design of the Rockefeller building. With some exceptions, the Cloisters has been analyzed as a purely historicized, period-room, “atmospheric,” “magic carpet ride” building, but that misses a crucial element of its design. I will look at the influence of Modernism, particularly in the International Style shown by the MoMA in 1932 and the shift in discussions of “modern” museums in architectural journals, in order to

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build a complete picture of the atmosphere that influenced the design the Cloisters. The Cloisters emerged at a moment in architecture where a century-long tradition of Revivalism was colliding forcefully with a radically new Modernism, and I will show through a walk-through of the museum how different spaces evoke those two seemingly-opposed styles. I am also examining the importance of “simplicity” as an aesthetic and moral value found in two radically divergent buildings, the Metropolitan’s American Wing and the Museum of Modern Art’s 1939 building, and how and why the creators of the Cloisters emphasized simplicity. Rockefeller’s patronage is a key part of any narrative of the Cloisters, but I will include other Rockefeller projects, like Colonial Williamsburg and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller’s MoMA, to give context to and clarify the purpose of the Cloisters. By examining reviews of the Cloisters in the first years it was opened, I will be able to illustrate the varying significances the museum had to viewers with different interests and agendas.

The Cloisters is a museum of contradiction and complexity, and this thesis will reckon genuinely with that complexity. I will first provide a fuller picture of the world the creators are emerging from and reacting to, then an analysis of the design process which highlights both Revivalist and Modernist tendencies of each creator, then a final analysis of the resulting building and how visitors at its opening and today react to it.

Related Scholarship

Recent literature on museum display has been integral to my research and to understanding the contentious moment which the Cloisters emerged from. By
focusing on how museums exhibited their objects, these works reveal how the understanding of art, visitors, museums, and the mind changed over time. Most crucial has been Kathleen Curran’s *The Invention of the American Art Museum: From Craft to Kulturgeschichte, 1870 to 1930* (2015). This book traces the beginnings of American art museums through their origins in both craft museums, like the South Kensington Museum, and *Kulturgeschichte* museums, which tried to logically evoke an object’s original context. Curran traces these threads as they influence the evolving world of American museums during a period of rapid growth, pre-Depression twentieth-century America. Throughout the book, she illuminates the professionalizing and artistic desires of museum professionals to display works of art in interesting yet logical ways to visitors.

Charlotte Klonk’s book *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interior from 1800 to 2000* (2009) focuses on the display of paintings, and sees changing display modes as reflective of “the historical nature of experience” and “what Michael Baxandall once called the ‘period eye.’” Klonk’s work shows how museums display practices reflect broader social changes. Depending on external society, the ideal spectator of a museum might be a liberal citizen, a person considering communist collectivization, or a consumer, and museums will display paintings to those imagined audiences differently. Her discussion of how the collectivist, avant-garde, Modernist art exhibitions of Europe, particularly Weimar Germany, turned into the individual, capitalist, Modernist exhibitions pioneered by the MoMA and now found all over the world is particularly illuminating. Klonk demonstrates connections between

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museums, science, and marketplaces, and takes museums not as an anonymous tool of state power, but as contentious sites of experience with shifting goals.

The MoMA, which I use as both the originator and the epitome of the Modernism that the Cloisters is influenced by, is discussed in great detail in Mary Anne Staniszewski’s *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (2001). Staniszewski traces the origin of the “white box” approach that the MoMA is now famous for. She explores the universalizing and commercializing tendencies of the MoMA: how objects with previous specifically cultural, historical meaning were turned into examples of a universal aesthetic, and how MoMA blurred lines between art and department store by elevating everyday commercial objects into examples of design, and therefore art. Each of these books has allowed me to more fully understand the complex and sometimes contradictory display strategies of the Cloisters.

For a broader understanding of the importance of display practices, I turned to Victoria Newhouse’s *Art and the Power of Placement* (2005). Newhouse focuses on the ways that art is shaped by its surroundings, focusing on specific works of art throughout their histories, rather than institutions or styles. By looking at an object first, and then its surroundings, Newhouse gave me a new perspective on the Cloisters and its contents. The book is decisive without being polemic, suggesting not hard-and-fast rules but careful consideration of what the work of art needs and questioning the dominance of the tall, white box for all types of art. Newhouse’s interest in works of art both within and on the periphery of galleries is relevant to the objects in the
Cloisters that exist outside of galleries, or hover between exterior and interior, architecture and object.

**Authenticity, Aura, and “Musealization”: Museum Theory Issues in the Cloisters**

Within the architectural history and present of the Cloisters are multiple, interrelated theoretical issues, some of which are common in museum studies literature and some of which are less so. The transition from revivalism to modernism in the early and mid-twentieth century redefined the purpose of museums and the central meaning of art, and the Cloisters reflects multiple views on what museums and art “do.” A central problem of the Cloisters is that it is made up, by definition, of art that was not meant for a museum, and most of the art was not considered “art” at the time of its making, but objects of religious purpose and veneration. The problem of art that was not made as art is an often-studied problem in museum studies, without a clear consensus, but the Cloisters’ solely medieval focus shifts the conversation. The Cloisters also confronts shifting meanings of the art object and of authenticity, both of which are crucial to consider when looking at its historical creation and present functioning.

When objects are reclassified as art objects within museums, they undergo a process of “musealization.”¹⁰ They may gain aesthetic value and visibility, being removed from isolated or private spaces to public museums, but they lose whatever the meaning they had within their original homes and cultures. How to properly

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display objects now classified as art, or whether they should be in a museum at all, is a problem that dogs museums and has no resolution, just ever-shifting responses. This is a well-documented problem in museum studies, clarified in André Malraux’s *Voices of Silence* (1985), and acknowledged and grappled with by many scholars.11

Often, one problem is whether they should be displayed similarly to other objects within the museum that were consciously created as art to be hung and displayed as an aesthetic object, or whether they should be displayed in recognition of their previous contexts and meanings. One. Many museums, including the Uffizi, the Louvre, and the Metropolitan grapple with these issues of musealisation, but few museums have so few objects created for any type of secular display. Other museums have significant percentages of work created for princely palaces, the institutional precursor to large state museums. In the Cloisters, there is no almost no “art” created so self-consciously, for aesthetic, public display. No object was made for a museum, and each one had its own use and importance in medieval culture, often a religious meaning. Unlike in other museums, where the religious elements of objects are totally separated from their spiritual meanings by curators who do not follow the faith the object was represented from, in the Cloisters, the religious intents were not totally disregarded. The museum’s creators identified with the values and traditions of these Christian objects, and therefore were naturally more able and amenable to placing them in the pseudo-religious contexts of simulated chapels. By and large, the Cloister’s solution to the problem of these objects-as-art was to take a middle path: to

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show the objects aesthetically without completely alienating them from their original contexts architecturally. Some objects are more facetiously put in a “context,” while others are against white walls, but the general attempt is to see the object as art without putting it in a too obviously modern setting. My final walk-through and analysis of reviews and experiences in the Cloisters will analyze whether this balance is effective.

In the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Gardner used medieval architectural fragments as Renaissance builders used them, for decorative effect without regard to context. The Cloisters, whose creators were aware of the Gardner Museum and wanted to differentiate their effort from it, consciously moves away from this decorative use of fragments, but it creates other issues of how architectural fragments function as both architecture and art. In the contemporary museum world, there is concern that “starchitects” building ever-more-spectacular buildings are not building effective containers for art: the architecture becomes the exhibition at the expense of the collection. In the Cloisters, parts of the architecture, like original windows, doors, and cloisters, are core parts of the collection, and the question is how to distinguish them from the modern parts of the architecture, which is not supposed to be on exhibition, and yet, in a sense, still is.

Alfred Barr, first director of the MoMA, took objects that may have in other museums at least somewhat contextualized by being with other objects from their location (which was, for non-Western societies, often broadly defined) and transformed them into proof of a universal aesthetic experience. This practice was found in avant-garde exhibits from 1914 on, but Barr institutionalized it and
combined it with his de-politicization of often deeply political modern art movements. In Barr’s 1936 show *Cubism and Abstract Art*, he hung modernist chairs on the walls, attempting to remove their obvious functions by distilling them to only their aesthetic qualities, and juxtaposed African cultural objects with Picasso’s paintings to highlight their aesthetic similarities. Objects were no longer best seen in their original cultural contexts, but as individual objects studied by the consumer/viewer. This fetishization of aesthetic forms, to the exclusion of social, cultural, and historical meanings, is taken to the extreme in the former Nelson Rockefeller (an early president of the MoMA) Wing of African Art at the Metropolitan, which, in its quest to ensure that African art was being looked at “seriously,” isolated art objects and reduced their complex meanings to only the obvious aesthetics. Today, this fetishization of the aesthetic is being pushed back upon, although the standard museum display of an isolated object against a white or otherwise neutrally colored wall encourages it.

The Cloisters works to demonstrate the value of ritual, moral art. Barr removed the political from works where he could, replacing their social (and often socialist) meanings with an ethos of individualism available in a liberal consumer democracy like America. But for many, that ethos of individualism lacked community and meaning. Ironically, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., whose father was the wealthiest man on earth due to American lassie-faire, individualist capitalism, disliked the individuality of modern art and looked back longingly on the anonymous, communal craftsmanship

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13 Staniszewski, 81.
represented by his porcelain vases and by medieval art. The Cloisters presents an escape from both the competitive, individual world and the ethnic, racial, and class tensions of the late 1930s and 1940s in New York City by presenting a homogenous past of medieval Christianity where art is produced anonymously and sometimes communally, and even the secular art has assumed meanings and values. In a neighborhood that was, at least by one calculation, three-eighths Jewish and rife with tension between Irish Catholics, German Jews, Eastern European Jews, Greeks, who were only united in refusing housing to African Americans, the Cloisters represented a model of communal harmony and peace without any of the difficulties of a multiethnic metropole.\textsuperscript{14} This was not the warring Middle Ages of the Metropolitan’s famous Arms & Armory collection: violence was shown almost only in the suffering of Christ, saints, and the Christ-figure unicorn who is tormented by hunters coded as Jewish.

Gottfried Korff, John Bendix, and Regina Bendix, in “Reflections on the Museum” (1999), attempt to explain why museums have seen such a drastic increase in both popularity and critical thought, and their insights help explain the preoccupations of the Cloisters. According to “compensation theory,” articulated by Gerhard Ritter (1974), museums are increasingly valued in modern society because they compensate for the modern world’s “abstract nature and lack of history.”\textsuperscript{15} Hermann Lübbe expanded upon Ritter’s theory, writing in 1982, “Historical consciousness considers it possible to appropriate a past that has grown alien as its own past, or to ascribe that


alien past to others” and, “Through a progressive musealization we compensate for the burdensome experience of a loss of cultural familiarity brought about by change.”\footnote{Korff, Bendix, and Bendix, 268.} In the Cloisters, the medieval, “a past that has grown alien,” can be re-appropriated by an America in search of familiarity in the face of a rapidly modernizing and defamiliarized city. A plaque carved into the stone wall of the lobby of the Cloisters thanks John D. Rockefeller, Jr., “whose generosity has made it possible to give reality to the past.” What reality can be given to the past through money? Walter Benjamin, when considering what makes materiality into an affective experience of the past, explains: “The trace is the appearance of nearness, no matter how far that which made it may be. The aura is the appearance of distance, no matter how close that which evokes it may be” \footnote{Korff, Bendix, and Bendix, 269.} (1982). In the Cloisters, some objects have a “trace,” a feeling of being brought closer cognitively and affectively to their origin; others have “aura,” which highlight the insurmountable distance between the viewer and an object that is spatially near, but cognitively far. The Cloisters brings visitors into an imagined, appropriated past through the authenticity of its objects, but it also transforms them into unreachable symbols of a lost world.

**Archival and Affective Narratives in Architectural Theory**

A crucial theoretical backdrop for my architectural analysis is recent work which emphasizes the multifaceted, heterogeneous, socially influenced lives of buildings. These works combine a great depth of theoretical knowledge with innovative new ways of seeing buildings as temporally and ideologically complex structures. In
Building Histories: The Archival and Affective Lives of Five Monuments in Modern Delhi (2016), Mrinalini Rajagopalan critically deconstructs the definition of a “monument” as it was imposed by British colonial order and reproduced by the Indian post-colonial independent government. Rajagopalan approaches the sites not chronologically, with the building as documentary evidence of a specific past, a form of the archive, but from a social viewpoint that takes into consideration “unpredictable, messy, and vibrant histories of affect that give the monument new lives.”

Influenced by Sara Ahmed’s work on affect theory, Rajagopalan defines affect as a “sticky” bond that connects monuments to their various communities, particularly those who were not involved in the process of “monumentizing” the building. Rajagopalan sees the monuments as a synthesis of both the “state-led projects of preservation,” which “have sought to fix monuments within a rigid archive of India’s past,” and the often-ignored “affective framing” by non-state actors and communities which create “parallel worlds of meaning around the monument.”

Like the state-sponsored architectural archive Rajagopalan on which focuses, the Metropolitan temporally and spatially ordered the architectural fragments in the Cloisters, severing the affective bond between the European community and the original site of the monument and replacing it with identifying panels. Rajagopalan’s articulation of Foucault’s archive, and Derrida’s archon (those who guard access to the archive) in relation to architecture helps me recognize the critical implications of

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19 Rajagopalan, 2, 5.
removing architecture from its original site to place it in a museum-archive. I am also striving to include the affective ties that are critical to understanding the Cloisters, as articulated by Rajagopalan: how do visitors experience the Cloisters and the architectural fragments within it? What emotions, expectations, and beliefs do they bring? How does that shift the meaning of a cloister, or doorway, from its original meaning as embedded in a medieval monastery, church, or home? Rajagopalan’s flexible and insightful view of a monument as encapsulating multiple contradictory meanings within a single site allows me to see the Cloisters itself, and the objects in it, as a place where multiple meanings—some intended by the creators, some not—coexist.

*Palimpsest: Buildings, Sites, Time* (2018), a book edited by Nadja Aksamija, Clark Maines, and Phillip Wagoner, also helped me consider ideas of authenticity and originality within architecture. The book focuses on “three-dimensional palimpsests,” sites that were built, partially destroyed, and rebuilt on the same site with traces of the first building. The Cloisters is closer to spolia, new products created from the reuse of old material, than to palimpsests, as it is a collection of architectural fragments greatly removed from their original site. Even so, the book lays out modes of understanding and analyzing multiple historical and temporal layers of a building. The book understands the “original” layer as one part of a complicated building, rather than the only authentic or worthwhile part, which is an

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illuminating contrast against the museum practices of the 1930s that were beginning to prioritize originality to the exclusion of any later addition. The Cloisters was modeled on medieval monasteries where additions of different times and styles would be placed next to or within an original building, and uses that model to create a building which is both old and new, of its time and of the medieval. In the beginning of the design process, the curator of the Cloisters highlighted the layered quality of a medieval monastery as one of the factors that makes it suitable as a model for the new museum. The different architectural styles of fragments and cloisters can, rather than detracting from the building’s sense of wholeness, enhance the fiction of the building as organically growing over centuries. In the introduction, Aksamija, Maines, and Wagoner write, of a French Abbey Church with a Romanesque base and a Gothic chevet (apse), and Gothic layers on it wall: “The resulting old/new ‘cumulative’ monument, therefore, simultaneously is and is not of its own time. It remains both embedded in the past and unfolding in the present.”22 By keeping in mind this syncretic duality, where a building’s narrative is equally composed of both new and old parts, I can analyze as complementary both the past the Cloisters absorbed and now evokes and the present it is constructed on and from.

Nadja Aksamija’s essay in *Palimpsest*, “Buildings and their Doubles: Restoration, Authenticity, and the Palimpsest in Italian Renaissance Architecture” confronts Renaissance architectural history’s “chronophobia,” their focus on the design and idea of a building on paper and avoidance of the physical changes the actual building

22 Aksamija, Maines, and Wagoner, 2.
inevitably experiences. From this essay, I have investigated whether the Cloisters’ attempt to resituate objects as they were in the Middle Ages, without reference to centuries of use and misuse, is also a form of “chronophobia.” Askamija also identifies the site of an architectural object as the most crucial element for it to retain its aura and authenticity. This calls into question whether any authenticity can be present in an American recreation of a European medieval structure and site.

A more direct attack on the premise of the Cloisters comes in the form of Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney’s *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine* (2016). This collection of essays, which investigates *spolia* from ancient Rome to postmodern art, discusses how *spolia* can create a sense of “fictive continuities” . . . “between the present and cultures and values of the past.” In Brilliant’s chapter “Authenticity and Alienation,” he shows how institutions that purport to be solely “relocating” objects or architecture, like the Cloisters, result in “the total substitution of extrinsic (new) values for the intrinsic values of the originating circumstance [that] converts the building into an object for view, both as an artwork for viewing and as an historical/cultural presence,” and therefore the “illusion of wholeness” through recreating a “whole” building is “fundamentally counterfeit.” The creation of the Cloisters, caught between an era of accepted appropriation and one in which that appropriation has notes of falseness,

24 Aksamija, 112.
26 Brilliant and Kinney, 175.
constitutes a wholesale transformation of the objects, and particularly the architecture, within it, not matter how unchanged the material nature of the object.

**Why the Cloisters?**

This thesis will investigate the idiosyncratic nature of the Cloisters as a product of historical forces large and small, and then analyze how those impulses relate to the Cloisters. More broadly, the thesis will investigate how individual actors and buildings fight against, accept, and influence societal, aesthetic, and architectural trends. The opposition and combination of historicism and modernism, and period rooms and “white box” museums, will be considered on large and small scales, focusing on the Cloisters as a case study of the dynamic trends of the 1930s. There will be three chapters on the Cloisters, with a final section considering the implications of this framework more broadly, and how it can be applied to another museum, the Getty Villa (1974). In the first chapter, I will analyze the disparate influences of the Cloisters within the museum world of the 1920s and 1930s: George Gray Barnard’s original Cloisters, medievalism and gothic revivalism, the shift in museum design between the 1920s and 1930s and the rejection of period rooms, Rockefeller’s history as a patron, and two museums representing extremes that the Cloisters responded to, the Metropolitan’s American Wing and the new Museum of Modern Art. Following that, the second chapter will trace the design history of the

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27 Although the major political, social, and economic event in America and New York between 1929 and 1939, the period I am examining, is obviously the Great Depression, the specifics of the Cloisters make it relatively uninfluential to the specifics of the design process. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., although somewhat affected by the Depression, did not decrease his philanthropy significantly. Because he was the sole patron of the Cloisters, the economic fortunes of other New Yorkers did not affect it as they affected the rest of the Metropolitan. The Great Depression is, therefore, somewhat exterior to the...
Cloisters from Collens and Rockefeller’s initial historicist conceptions to the rejection of modern ornamentation to Rorimer’s attempts to create a modernist museum within a historicized framework. In the third chapter, the reader will “walk” through the Cloisters, exploring the places where the tension between historicism and modernism is particularly evident, and analyze early reviews of the Cloisters and varied experiences of the museum, probing the implications of this heterogeneous design. Finally, the Getty Villa will be considered as another museum whose patron and architect have historicist views of reviving the past but, due to the drive of architecture towards modernism, cannot fully perform a Revivalist function. In the case of the Getty, rather than including Modernist architecture, it becomes an early, unintentional example of the postmodern interpretation of the past.

The Cloisters, and to some extent, the Getty Villa, give a worm’s-eye-view of the collateral collisions that occur in times of great architectural shifts. Architectural history often focuses on buildings with grand ideological and stylistic statements, where iconic architects set out to declare what architecture should be. The majority of architecture, however, has idiosyncratic purposes and ideas: this is especially true during times of great architectural shifts, like America in the 1930s. By considering a building tugged between two styles that are framed as polar opposites, the tail end of Revivalism and the beginning of Modernism, the social meaning of both styles are illuminated, and the narrative arc of architecture is complicated.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, museums are designed to exhibit works of art in a particular way: in well-lit, usually rectangular or square

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scope of this thesis, although it affected factors from the availability of art to the WPA workers who were model-builders for the Museum.
galleries, against neutral, usually white, walls, with space between each piece to allow for independent contemplation. Although things like the material of the wall and the lighting change, and site-specific exhibitions from a single artist can combine multiple works or create immersive rooms, the “white box” of art, popularized by the Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s and 1940s, is still taken as the default. Clutter has been banished, unless the artist has specifically invited it back in. In this thesis, I explore other historical modes of exhibition, where the object is best contemplated within an atmospheric context, rather than as a singular piece of aesthetic value, and how and why those methods were replaced by the contemporary mode, which is often coded as neutral, objective, and correct. In doing so, I want to destabilize the assumption that object-focused exhibition better serves either the visitor or the object. What is lost when atmospheric recreation period rooms are shunned? “White box” museums construct a space that is, in content and form, unconnected from other spaces of experience like homes, parks, schools, offices, or anywhere else a visitor may be familiar with, which can widen the gulf between visitor and object. One goal of the period museum was to give the visitor clearer connections between their lived experience and the experience of a museum. In a garden, the behavioral codes of a museum are relaxed, and the museum can be a space of living, rather than looking.

What is the significance of having a space where visitors can affectively experience an atmosphere without constantly observing, looking for, or studying art? As the meaning of a building is co-created by both the creators and the communities who use it, I suggest that the Cloisters and the Getty Villa, which are centered around spaces where visitors are people with full sensorial stimulation, rather than the
disembodied eyes and brains implicitly expected in most modern and contemporary art museums, allow visitors to impart their own meanings and affects into the space in a freer and more established manner. Even though historically specific settings seem more prescribed than a large, open gallery, the ritualized behaviors in a gallery are so stringent that historically specific settings which evoke less formalized places than a museum or gallery allow more freedom. Museums generally demand that visitors stand, or sometimes sit, and look at objects in isolation, becoming nothing more than a moving eye and brain. In historically specific settings like the Cloisters or the Villa, visitors can more easily connect the museum to a non-museum experience, and operate with those behavioral codes instead. Visitors are encouraged to experience a space where art objects interact with their setting and each other and can use senses beyond vision to interact with the environment. An exhibit that centers on the object, to the exclusion of the visitor, underestimates the importance of atmosphere and affect in the museum space. Although the Cloisters was influenced by the “cult of the object,” I will be investigating spaces where an atmospheric, affective experience is prized. In doing so, I will wonder, has the cult of the object ruled long enough?
From the American Wing to the MoMA: the historicist and modernist factors influencing the Cloisters

The Cloisters is a museum that feels like a step out of time towards the Middle Ages, without the constant new wings and buildings and Instagrammable temporary exhibits of other museums. But it is uniquely representative of the moment of its creation, when the major tenet of several centuries of architecture and museum design—that a building should look to the past for inspiration—was being overthrown.

The Cloisters was influenced by a number of different developments of the early twentieth century, from German art museums to American architectural journals. In this chapter, I will lay out the major developments, chiefly within museums and architecture, that influenced the Cloisters’ program and design. In the twentieth century, particularly before the 1930s, historicism was a major feature in American museums and architecture. The various forms of Revivalism extended the nineteenth century architectural interest in styles of the past, and Gothic and Romanesque Revivalism helped shape medievalism, a new field of study which focused on the previously-neglected middle ages. Museums recreated the past in period rooms, which worked to evoke the culture a work of art was created in through surrounding decorations. If the Cloisters had been built a decade earlier, those impulses would have been the main ones felt, and the Cloisters would most likely try to look fully. Medieval. However, the second part of this chapter explores the rising
tide against Revivalism: Modernist architecture, especially as defined the Museum of Modern Art’s *International Style* exhibit and book, demanded a new model of building design. Museums began centering more on the self-contained materiality of an object and against contextual or conjoined arrangements, trying to make exhibitions less intrusive so the viewer could focus on the object without distractions. Modernism, particularly the International Style, grew from an avant-garde trend to the most newly respected style of building on the pages of journals like *Architectural Record* and for progressive museum thinkers. These trends, while sometimes seemingly disconnected, are crucial to understand the design development and eventual form of the Cloisters.

*Looking to the Past*

**The Ideology of Gothic and Romanesque Revivalism and Medievalism**

Gothic and Romanesque Revivalism, which reached its height in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, was never a movement solely about architecture. The emulation of the medieval world was a moral and social stance expressed through the aesthetics of architecture. Gothic buildings in particular signaled the patrons’ and inhabitants’ dedication to Christianity, spirituality, and artisanal production that were contrasted with the fallen, post-Industrial Revolution world the buildings existed in.

The Anglo-American variant of the international European Gothic Revival, which primarily, although not exclusively, concerned itself with Northern French and English ecclesiastical buildings of the 13th and 14th century, began in earnest in England the nineteenth century, influenced by 18th century Romantic fascination with
the medieval. Englishmen A. Welby Pugin and John Ruskin, along with the Frenchman Eugene-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, were the most important thinkers of the Gothic Revival, and set the schema and standards to which architects and thinkers would aspire to through the early twentieth century through their canonical mid-century books which advocated for Gothic architecture, albeit from their different individual theoretical and critical perspectives.

Viollet-le-Duc encouraged reconstructing Gothic buildings into what he imagined their original forms to be, which resulted in many 19th century renovations of medieval buildings that are now seen to have created inaccurate fantasy worlds. Pugin advocated for the Gothic in explicitly nationalist, Catholic terms which denigrated the eclectic, multicultural architecture of the time. Pugin’s *The Revival of Christian Architecture* (1843) begins by condemning the “carnival of architecture,” where “the Turk and the Christian, the Egyptian and the Greek, the Swiss and the Hindoo, march side by side, and mingle together,” and “this motley group (oh! miserable degradation!)”, which, he alleged, ignored the “national and Catholic architecture.” Instead of borrowing from foreigners, Englishmen needed to return to the architecture and values of their national past:

> Whilst we profess the creed of Christians, whilst we glory in being Englishmen, let us have an architecture, the arrangement and details of which will alike remind us of our faith and our country… Such an architecture is to be found in the works of our great ancestors, whose noble conceptions and mighty works were originated and perfected under a faith and system, for the most part common with our own; for, strange as it may appear, the difference between us and our English forefathers, on examination, will prove slight indeed, compared with those nations, from whom we have been accustomed

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for the last century to borrow our types, as being best suited to our present habits.  

England, a colonial empire, was extracting architectural styles from its colonies, but Pugin saw that as “miserable degradation” that could only be replaced by honest return to the purer, more Christian past. Pugin saw architecture as a fundamental display of a culture’s faith and values: changing architecture indicated a lack of fidelity to the original faith. As a Roman Catholic, Pugin wanted England to return to the Gothic style of its Catholic period, whereas Ruskin and other advocates of the Gothic Revival in England were Protestants who saw the movement serving the Anglican Church.

John Ruskin, probably the most important thinker of the Gothic Revival, wrote in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) about the possibilities of the Gothic as a refutation of the materialism and enforced repetition of the Industrial Revolution. In Ruskin’s vision of the medieval, individual craftsmen had great freedom in creating Gothic buildings which fully expressed the spirit of Christianity. The organic growth and abundant, varied ornament of Gothic architecture “never suffered ideas of outside symmetries and consistencies to interfere with the real use and value of what they did.” Unlike in Classical architecture, the other major stylistic inspiration of the nineteenth century, Gothic architecture was not bound by “artificial regularity,” but could freely express spirituality and individuality. Although Ruskin and Pugin envisioned the Gothic as a fundamentally moral, revolutionary style which would interrupt the multicultural, industrial world, Gothic Revivalism in England lost much

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29 Pugin, 2.
of its theoretical power in the later part of the nineteenth century for many users. Although Anglican and other Christian Churches still used it to evoke religiosity, domestic and commercial uses watered down its strident demands and oppositional theories. For many non-religious buildings, Gothic Revival was mostly another aesthetic possibility in the Late Victorian era, though in America, it still expressed the Christian morals of those who chose it.\textsuperscript{31}

In America, Gothic Revivalism was most influential and long-lasting in American educational and ecclesiastical buildings, popular from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth. Gothic Revival theory was first embraced in America, and then, like in England, largely focused in Collegiate and church Gothic through the first decades of the twentieth century. These two forms of buildings, which existed in the historical Gothic period, could logically use Gothic architecture in service of both form and function. Collegiate Gothic kept its popularity through the 1930s, as Yale’s new Gothic Revival residential colleges and libraries showed, far past any other influential uses of the Gothic Revival except ecclesiastical.\textsuperscript{32} Gothic Revivalism created feelings of a rich, storied history, connection to Oxford and Cambridge, and dedication to the spiritual, communal nature of the imagined Middle Ages. Church gothic also continued in the twentieth century, as Charles Collens’ Riverside Church shows (1927-1930). Even more than a college, for different symbolic reasons, churches wanted to be associated with a spiritual form of architecture and a spiritual period, where the Church had great power and unity.

\textsuperscript{31} Susan B Matheson et al., \textit{Modern Gothic: The Revival of Medieval Art} (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 2000), 36.
\textsuperscript{32} Matheson et al., 57.
Romanesque Revivalism never reached the popularity of Gothic Revivalism, but it was quite influential in America, especially to the Cloisters, a Romanesque building. Romanesque Revivalism had one point of origin in Germany in 1828. *In what style should we build? (In welchem Stil sollen wir bauen?),* by Heinrich Hübsch, pondered a particularly 19th century question: with so many historical styles to choose from, which was the correct one? Hübsch, as chronicled by Kathleen Curran in *The Romanesque Revival* (2003), decided on the round-arch style (*Rundbogenstil*), originally due to its success in displaying the structure of the building through appropriate materials.  

Late in his career, from 1848 to 1863, Hübsch began to search for a “higher architecture” that went beyond useful material structure, and found it in religious buildings with the round-arch style, with murals that united painting and architecture. A number of other German and French architects also adopted the round-arched style of the Romanesque in its many variants for nineteenth-century churches, and Curran emphasizes that the style was fundamentally international.

Like Gothic Revivalism, Romanesque Revivalism was most popular in American educational buildings and, particularly, Protestant churches in the mid and late nineteenth century.  

The most important strain of the Romanesque Revival was Richardson Revivalism of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, exemplified by Henry Hobson Richardson’s Trinity Church, in Boston. Trinity Church (fig. 10), built from 1872-1877 for a prominent Episcopalian congregation and described by the architect

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34 Curran, *The Romanesque Revival*. 
as “a free rendering of the French Romanesque,” used sumptuous murals, round brick arches, and a boxy interior best suited to preaching. Richardson Revivalism emphasized round arches inspired by French and Spanish styles, strong massing in the picturesque style, and rustication of varied forms and materials, including, in some cases, brick, in addition to a prevailing preferences for a polychrome architecture of stone.

Richardson Revivalism created divergent strands in American architecture, particularly with two of Richardson’s most important students, Louis Sullivan and Ralph Adams Cram. Louis Sullivan, whose biographer called him “father of skyscrapers,” is seen as the father of American modernism with his famous aphorism, “form follows function.” Although Sullivan still embraced ornament in his buildings, he used it not to imitate the past, but to organically emphasize the new verticality of the skyscraper, and he greatly influenced Frank Lloyd Wright and other future modernists. Another one of Richard’s students, Ralph Adams Cram, was the “last great polemicist of the Gothic,” according to Michael Lewis in *The Gothic Revival* (2002), who adds that "with unshakeable Puginian conviction, he carried the architecture of the fourteenth century in a world of steel construction and tall buildings.” Cram had a deep spiritual connection to the Gothic and to the ideals of the Middle Ages, like honor, chivalry, and Christianity, and he found architectural solutions by looking towards the 14th century, rather than forward. In his greatest

35 Curran, 287.
work, St. John the Divine in New York (fig. 11), which he took over construction of in 1911, he used surprising and successful archeological solutions to fix architectural problems, but his architectural innovations were largely ignored by younger architects to whom only the most modern forms of the Gothic Revival held any interest.\textsuperscript{40} As Cram watched the world move past him, he found solace, solution, and meaning in the medieval world.

In the twentieth century, medieval revivalism fostered and was influenced by the crystallization of medieval studies as a formal academic field. In Boston (and Cambridge), the center of academic and architectural medievalism, three major figures, Cram, architect and scholar Henry Adams, and Arthur Kingsley Porter, an art historian and medievalist, all lived and worked. These medievalists, like Ruskin and Pugin, ascribed special spiritual powers to the Middle Ages, and looked at it as a better alternative to the twentieth. Henry Adams’ \textit{Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres} originally printed privately in 1904, and sponsored in general printing by the American Institute of Architect, at the urging of Cram, in 1912, approaches the Middle Ages as spiritual and inspirational, with a whole chapter dedicated to “The Mystics” of the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{41} As Charles Collens, architect of the Cloisters, based Riverside Church, his first building built for John D. Rockefeller, Jr., primarily on the cathedral at Chartres, it certainly seems like a relevant book for him, although there is no specific evidence for him reading it. Cram introduced the book with an “Editor’s Note,” where he focuses on the spirituality and feeling of the Medieval era, even more than the artistic experience: “we live in [the thirteenth century] and are part

\textsuperscript{40} Lewis, 179.
\textsuperscript{41} Henry Adams, \textit{Mont-St-Michel and Chartres}. (Cambridge, Mass: The Riverside Press, 1924).
of …its normal and healthy and all-embracing devotion,” which is “vastly heartening and exhilarating.” Cram cares for Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres because Adam’s understands that the art of the Middle Ages’ “essential element, the thing that differentiates it from every art that preceded and that which followed, is its spiritual impulse.” Arthur Kingsley Porter shifted the art historical assessment of the Medieval era, most importantly through his seminal Romanesque Sculptures on the Pilgrimage Roads (1923), a deliberately transnational view of the Romanesque period. These scholars continued to advance Pugin and Ruskin’s view of the medieval era as particularly spiritual and pure through both their scholarship and the modern architecture that it influenced.

Medievalism, particularly in American popular understanding, was sometimes used to support the racist idea of the inherent superiority of the Anglo-Saxon. The origins of democratic America were located in the German forests, with the freedom-loving, white Germanic tribes, and it was their culture which formed the bedrock of America and was threatened by an influx of immigrants. Medievalism was combined with pseudo-Darwinian notions of races and competition, and the roots of everything from capitalism to women’s social power to universities to religion were located in the Middle Ages, where those practices were unsullied by the multicultural world of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

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42 Adams, vii.
43 Adams, vi.
Kulturgeschichte and Museum Period Rooms

In 1870, as rich New Yorkers created the Metropolitan Museum of Art to establish the city as an important world cultural capital, museums in Germany were beginning to experiment with a new form that grow to be extremely influential in American museums in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Kathleen Curran terms them Kulturgeschichte museums in her thorough and important book, The Invention of the American Art Museum (2016). Before Kulturgeschichte museums, the two main forms were large princely galleries like the Louvre and the Uffizi and craft museums like the Victoria and Albert and the South Kensington Museum. Princely galleries had European paintings, mostly Renaissance and later, covering the walls, with occasional sculpture: craft museums showed objects in long cases sorted by material. German museums, especially ones focused on regional and national culture, began to sort art not be material, but by the period they were created in. These new rooms, broadly termed period rooms, mixed decorative arts like furniture, painting, and sculpture, within a single gallery which evoked the period displayed through wall coverings, floors, and ceilings, as well as architectural fragments.

Throughout the end of the nineteenth century, period rooms in Germany became more elaborate, although some voiced concerns about the possibility of nostalgia overpowering the museum’s mission for accuracy. The goal of a museum, according to Wilhelm Bode, whose Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum in Berlin and museum design philosophy were deeply influential to American museologists, was “the greatest possible isolation of each work and its exhibition in a room which, in all material aspects, such as lighting and architecture, should resemble, as near as may be, the
apartment for which it was originally intended.” It was no longer enough to have and display a masterpiece, or a comprehensive collection of fine old works: it must be shown in a way which combatted dreaded “museum fatigue” and enlightened a visitor to the culture that produced the art in question. This quest for resembling “the apartment for which it was originally intended” grew into what we now think of as period rooms, museum galleries with paneling, furniture, and art taken from an original source and installed within the museum.

In the twentieth century, two terms, period room and composite display, were settled upon to describe different components of German Kulturgeschichte museums and their American imitators, although until about 1920 their usage was not fully consistent. A period room, which originally referred to any museum gallery that evoked the past, came to mean solely a museum room which showed a specific historical interior (fig. 12). The authenticity and completeness required in period rooms varied: as late as 1924, in the Metropolitan’s flagship new American Wing, entirely made of period rooms, three of thirteen rooms were total reproductions. Composite display described the practice of mixing three- and two-dimensional objects from a similar period in a single gallery, surrounding paintings with furniture or sculpture (fig. 13).

As museums created smaller galleries more suited to period rooms, they also began to install architectural fragments like doors and windows and crafting period-appropriate replicas when originals weren’t available. Domestic rooms were best represented, but multiple museums constructed faux-Gothic chapels or other religious

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interiors. Museum exteriors usually had a neo-Classical, monumental feeling or a simpler brick façade, but in any case, they followed Beaux-Arts rules of symmetry and regularity. The varied windows of period rooms had to be incorporated into this scheme, which was done through the agglomeration principle. The Swiss National Museum (1898) rejected the “strictly closed, classically-formed monumental architecture,” according to Zurich’s mayor Heinrich Pestalozzi, in favor of “a grouping of building parts” which were drawn from local sources and reflected the temporal movement of the collections housed inside (fig. 13).47 Windows, surface treatments, and other façade variations were used to show the variety of the interior. The agglomeration principle was infrequently used, but was suited to interior courtyards which showed the progression of time in the surrounding galleries. The Detroit Institute of the Arts’ courtyard (fig. 14) shows a progression of window treatments from the medieval to the Renaissance.

**George Gray Barnard’s Gothic Fantasy**

The combination of the Gothic Revival, the growth of medievalism, and period rooms created a hunger for the “genuine” Gothic in America, and the first man to effectively combine all three was George Gray Barnard, who opened the first Cloisters in 1914 on Fort Washington Avenue in northern Manhattan. George Gray Barnard, a sculptor and collector, was more invested in creating a mythos of French medieval architecture, and himself, than in art historical or museum concerns. He

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47 Curran, 28.
liberally interpreted the atmospheric experience of *Kulturgeschichte* museums, focusing on atmosphere to the exclusion of accuracy or authenticity. Barnard first began collecting French medieval sculpture, particularly architectural fragments, as a way to make money while completing a major sculpture commission in France in the first decade of the twentieth century. He created a narrative, still presented by the 21st century Cloisters, of himself as a pioneering, rugged collector, rescuing precious “Gothic” art, a term which he used for the Gothic and Romanesque art he discovered, from fields, farms, barns, and ignorant peasants who were unaware of the true value of these objects. However, in reality, most of his collection came from a network of dealers already active in France. He was a successful collector, until he pushed his luck too far, aggressively attempting to consolidate the majority of the San-Michel-de-Cuxa Cloister, a stunning Romanesque collection of capitals, columns, and bases from outside Prades that would eventually become the centerpiece of the Metropolitan’s Cloisters. As Barnard worked in 1913 to remove a ten Cuxa arches and twelve Cuxa columns from a bathhouse near Prades, he gained the attention of Monsieur Sans, a French government architect dedicated to preserving French monuments. Sans fostered a public outcry against Barnard’s collecting in France, and on December 31st, 1913, the French senate passed a cultural patrimony law that ensured that cultural treasures stayed in France.48 Warned in advance, Barnard had 116 cases of his purchases and those of American collectors he was advising shipped out of France two days before the law took effect.49

As early as 1905, Barnard had suggested the idea of “a true setting for Gothic Statues, paintings, or other church treasures” at the Metropolitan Museum, but J. Pierpont Morgan, the president of the museum, had responded with reluctance, possibly due to Barnard’s notorious unreliability.\(^\text{50}\) In 1913, in the middle of his Cuxa negotiations, Barnard announced plans for a “cloister museum,” and it opened in December 1914, prematurely, in order to aid French soldiers and their families affected by the Great War, which had just begun. Barnard’s Cloisters (fig. 15) were atmospheric, enchanting, and jumbled: although it contained a fair amount of Romanesque art and architecture, the shell was dubbed “thesaurus of the Gothic art and culture.”\(^\text{51}\) Tour guides dressed as monks carried candles, and the museum was set up in such a hurry that some capitals were set upside down and remained that way until the Metropolitan reopened the museum under its own name.\(^\text{52}\) Barnard, who was an artist, not an art historian, did not focus on strict accuracy: he washed new brick walls while the mortar was wet in an attempt to make them dappled, and made a two-story interior cloister by stacking columns and capitals from two unrelated monasteries upon each other.\(^\text{53}\) As can be seen, architectural fragments and sculptures were arranged without a clear narrative, hanging from or embedded in the walls to make the building feel “old.” (fig. 8)

Barnard’s Cloister was a period museum that prized experiential satisfaction over accuracy, and architectural fragments were incorporated without any particular historical logic. However, these historical inaccuracies did not prevent respected

\(^{50}\) Schrader, “George Grey Barnard.”
\(^{51}\) Schrader, 34.
\(^{52}\) Schrader, 14.
\(^{53}\) Curran, The Invention of the American Art Museum, 125.
museum professionals from enjoying and even modelling their own museums after the Cloisters. Henry Watson Kent, assistant secretary at the Metropolitan and consultant to the not-yet-built Cleveland Museum of Art, encouraged the museum to base the three courtyard walls of the Cleveland Museum of Art which were supposed to show the architectural movement from Medieval to Renaissance, on the Cloisters.\textsuperscript{54} He told architect Benjamin Hubbel to go to New York to see Barnard’s “marvelous little musée.” The museum was enjoyed, but not taken seriously by the Metropolitan: it was a “little musée.”\textsuperscript{55}

In 1918, Barnard was inspired by Armistice Day to create a “National Peace Memorial,” a gigantic sculptural complex that would include a “War Memorial Arch” and seven gardens with symbolic meaning. Barnard needed funds for his dream, which was a massive undertaking that would consume the rest of his life and would never be completed, and therefore he began to scout buyers for the collection of the Cloisters, a long process. The Metropolitan, and John D. Rockefeller Jr., who had commissioned Barnard for a sculpture at his upstate estate Potanico Hills in 1915, were obvious choices for purchasers. Junior and Barnard were not well-matched, personally, and reserved, traditional, moralistic Junior found Barnard’s bragging and unreliability unbearable. Between 1918 and 1923, Barnard attempted to make the monumental sculpture fountain of Adam and Eve, which Junior contracted to have a cloud covering Adam’s penis, instead feature his genitals.\textsuperscript{56} Barnard gathered other possible buyers, including those from Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, or

\textsuperscript{54} Curran, 215.
\textsuperscript{55} Curran, 126.
and taunted the Met with the possibility of receiving more money by dispersing the collection. Junior had indicated that he would fund the entire purchase for the Metropolitan, but refused to deal directly with Barnard’s ever-shifting desires and agreements, leaving it to associates and the president of the Met, Robert de Forest.\footnote{Suzanne Loebl, \textit{America’s Medicis: The Rockefellers and Their Astonishing Cultural Legacy} (New York: Harper, 2010), 168.}

Eventually, in 1925, a final price of $650,000 was agreed upon, and de Forest publically praised Barnard’s “public spirit” in keeping the collection together in New York.\footnote{“METROPOLITAN BUYS BARNARD CLOISTERS: Sculptor’s Famous Gothic Art Acquired With $600,000 Gift of J.D. Rockefeller Jr. IT IS NOT TO BE CHANGED Barnard Spent Years Collecting the Treasures in France -- Glad That Place Passes to Public. METROPOLITAN BUYS BARNARD CLOISTERS,” \textit{New York Times}, 1925.}

\section*{The Metropolitan Museum of Decorative Arts}

In the early twentieth century, the Metropolitan was realigning both its collecting focus and its institutional purpose, which were connected. As Jeffrey Task describes in his 2012 book \textit{Things American: Museums and Civic Culture in the Progressive Era}, the museum had its own Progressive Era, where new leaders of the Metropolitan interwove industrial design, taste-making, and patriotism in programs, exhibitions, and new wings. The founders of the Metropolitan in 1870 ruled until 1905, when they were replaced, most importantly, by Robert de Forest, who would become the Metropolitan’s president, and Henry Watson Kent, an influential museum administrator. Those men, and the administrators they recruited, who Trask terms “progressive connoisseurs,” believed that better homes, filled with useful objects, produced better citizens, more suited for democracy; those citizens could learn how to

\addcontentsline{toc}{section}{The Metropolitan Museum of Decorative Arts}
make better homes from examples of refined design shown within the Metropolitan. This Progressive belief in the primacy of the design of homes and environments intermingled with concerns about the rise in immigration and dilution of “real,” Anglo-Saxon Americans. The solution for both problems was to display proper colonial American design and specifically target it towards industrial designers.

Before 1909, the Metropolitan focused almost entirely on French decorative arts, as then the only decorative arts considered worthy of inclusion into the canon of art history. Robert de Forest and his wife Emily helped elevate the status of American (specifically upper-class Colonial and Early Republic) decorative arts to being worthy of museum attention. The Hudson Fulton exhibit of 1909, celebrating the 300th anniversary of Henry Hudson’s trip up the Hudson and 100th anniversary of Robert Fulton’s first steamboat trip, was the first major exhibition of American decorative arts, with much of the art given directly, or sought out by, Robert and Emily de Forest.59 The exhibit was extremely popular, and set the stage for the 1925 American Wing, a permanent building which displayed the Colonial and Early Republican way of life to those who needed instruction in the tastes and myths of early American life.

Joseph Breck was integral to putting into practice the new purpose of the museum to encourage good taste and values in all classes of visitors. He became Curator of Decorative Arts in 1917, and the 1918 Morgan Wing of Decorative Arts, dedicated to art given by J.P. Morgan, president of the museum until 1913, was one of his first major projects. The wing included French period rooms and composite Regency rooms with woodwork, painting, furniture, and the suggestion of

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architectural features (figs. 16, 17). Objects were contextualized through their relationship to other objects, rather than being isolated. Even galleries that were not period rooms and had no explicit connection to specific rooms of the home, had a domestic character. The J.P. Morgan Wing is also an important precursor to the Cloisters because it documents the importance of individual extraordinarily wealthy patrons to expand the Metropolitan’s collections. Breck also helped curate the annual Industrial Design Exhibitions, held from 1917 to 1940, which showed visitors examples of good industrial design, from textiles to lighting to furniture. The 1929 Exhibit, the most popular since the inception of the exhibitions, showed American Art Deco design, including full rooms, “period” rooms of the contemporary period, from important Art Deco designers. These exhibitions displayed modern examples of American aesthetic, functional industrial production for the good of both industrial producers and consumers, as well as the nation as a whole.

The Hudson Fulton Exhibition began a craze for American decorative arts in many museums. The Met’s 1925 American Wing, under the eye of Joseph Breck, Curator of Decorative Arts, represented a culmination of both the American craze for period rooms and the Metropolitan’s social, aesthetic, and moral instruction of democratic citizens. Most Kulturgeschichtliche museums used period rooms to supplement galleries, but the American Wing discarded the traditional gallery, creating an entire building of period rooms. The American Wing was a wing of the Metropolitan with its own façade and entrance, both part of the museum and architecturally separate.

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The façade was the façade from Assay Building, a bank building built in Manhattan in 1824 and set to be demolished in 1915, until a donor bought it and gave it to the Metropolitan, who reconstructed it as the face of the American Wing (fig. 18).\textsuperscript{61} Grosvenor Atterbury, the architect of the American Wing, explained in his 1924 opening speech his desire for visitors to “run into John Alden kissing Priscilla on the top floor,” and other early American figures. Atterbury envisioned a personal connection that could only be fostered in a building which did not resemble a museum: “If you see these sights, it will, I think, prove that we have managed to eliminate, or at least conceal, any institutional quality in the American Wing; so that you will forget the Metropolitan Museum of Art as you enter the first low-ceilinged room and not remember it again until you are fairly out on the street and find you have forgotten the umbrella you had to leave in the checkroom on Fifth Avenue. For no sensible ghost wants to live in a museum; it's a wonder the pictures and things can stand it. Nor do they like to pass through such terrifying vastness to get to their own cozy rooms, which explains, of course, why we have made a separate entrance to the American Wing, opening directly on what I hope will some day have the semblance of a colonial garden.”\textsuperscript{62} For Atterbury, a period “room” was not enough; he wanted the visitor lose themselves in the narrative constructed in the American Wing, separate from the universal museum of the rest of the Metropolitan. The sense of “ghosts” in “their own cozy rooms” did not require original objects, as three of the

\textsuperscript{61} Max Page, \textit{The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940} (Chicago (Ill.): The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

thirteen historic rooms were total recreations, but instead a fully immersive, domestic atmosphere that taught visitors what the true root of America was (fig. 19).

At the wing’s opening, the simplicity of American craftsmanship and its moral value were made explicit. De Forest, who served as the museum’s president, had initiated and helped create the museum’s first exhibit of American craftsmanship in 1917, and funded most of the construction of the American Wing, said in his speech, “True, the foundation of our art is European -- so were our ancestors. But by applying European traditions to their own practical needs and the raw materials abundantly at hand, notably wood, they developed a style of their own -- simple, it is true, but beautiful in its simplicity -- a style which we may justly call American.”

The inherent, uniquely American simplicity on display would be “invaluable in the Americanization of many of our people, to whom much of our history has been hidden in a fog of unenlightenment,” as R.T. Halsey, collector and trustee in charge of the American Wing, said in his speech at the opening. The best way to break through the “fog of unenlightenment” was through direct domestic examples, through which the public could model themselves upon. This re-alignment of aesthetic and moral values to “traditional” American ones was the explicitly assimilationist and nationalist goal of the American Wing. Although more passive and positive, this goal aligned with more violent expressions of this sentiment in America, like the resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan and the racist, xenophobic Immigration Act of 1925, as Wendy Kaplan discusses (1982). There is only one positive, elite narrative.

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63 de Forest, Atterbury, and Root, 226.
65 Kaplan, “R. T. H. Halsey.”
presented in “American” history, one which new immigrants and other members of
the public are supposed to fold themselves into.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Bringing Reality, and Fantasy, to the Past

The assimilation-through-example of the American Wing is expressed,
without the trapping of an art museum, in John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s Colonial
Williamsburg, a “living history museum,” begun in 1926 and continuing to the present
day, which emphasizes the value and purity of the colonial Virginia. John D.
Rockefeller, Jr. was born in 1874 into almost unimaginable wealth, the heir of John
D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil fortune, and was influenced by his strict Baptist
upbringing and faith until his death in 1960. Rockefeller felt a duty to use his fortune
for the good of mankind, but that “good” was dictated by Junior’s personal, and
limited, vision. Junior donated huge numbers of work to museums and enriched, or
established, many institutions, but often in the service of “improving” the population
to move closer to his idealized view of the past through access to art or history. Junior
had particular tastes: he loved craftsmanship and detail, and disdained individuality or
any type of radicalism within art. His greatest passion was Chinese porcelain vases,
which he could stare at for hours finding new details. He was an avid collector and
philanthropist, and those interests often dovetailed. He enjoyed the craftsmanship
present in medieval art, although he did not seek it out.

Because Rockefeller’s philanthropic projects span continents, decades, and
many different fields, this thesis will only focus on three, all in the same fifteen years,
between 1925 and 1940: the Cloisters, Colonial Williamsburg, and Riverside Church,
a Gothic Revival church in New York City. These three projects are united in their goals to return society, at least in part, to times he perceived as purer and more virtuous through architecture.⁶⁶

Colonial Williamsburg, like many Rockefeller philanthropic projects, began with a different man’s dream, which found expression thanks to Rockefeller’s essentially limitless funds. Reverend William Archer Rutherfoord Goodwin, as rector of Williamsburg’s Bruton Parish Church, had dreamed of restoring Williamsburg to its colonial glory, and in 1924, he met Rockefeller and convinced him to sign on. Beginning in 1926, Rockefeller, through intermediaries, bought property and gave money for much of the central town to be forcefully brought back to its colonial days, a more complete project of “restoration” than the country had ever seen before that entailed the destruction of 720 buildings, mostly those built after 1790 but some damaged 18th century houses as well. Junior would eventually spend more than $66 million on Colonial Williamsburg, beginning restoration in 1926 and working throughout the 1930s. His wife, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, a keen collector, involved herself through helping Junior decorate and by collecting and displaying folk art, which she helped bring to the forefront of the art scene.

Colonial Williamsburg promised an utter immersion in colonial America, but took care to depict a purely positive narrative of early America, downplaying slavery by referring to slaves as “servants” and focusing almost entirely on the contributions to democracy and social order made by the wealthy white men of the town. As

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⁶⁶ Rockefeller Center, another major project of the 1930s, obviously has a different, more Modernist aesthetic, but is unfortunately outside of the scope of this thesis. One important thing to note is that Abby Aldrich Rockefeller was heavily involved in the modernist art and architecture, including Diego Riviera’s murals. See Kert, 1993.
Michael Wallace describes in “Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States” (1982), Rockefeller was interested in capturing only the white, elite past of Colonial Williamsburg, and there was “absolutely no reference to the fact that half of eighteenth-century Williamsburg’s population had been black slaves.” Although African-Americans were essential in excavating, building, and maintaining Colonial Williamsburg, with the exception of African-American men who served as coachmen for the carriage rides visitors took and actively preformed interpreted the “living history” to visitors, beginning in 1942, they were excluded from the narrative of history. Architectural Record’s December, 1935 article “The Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia” shows the entirely male Board of Advisory, but in the carefully staged photos by F.S. Lincoln, who Rockefeller hired to take the official images of Williamsburg, men are absent. Most of the photos are only of the architecture and interior design, but eleven photos include figures, all women. Two of the women are visibly black, and eight white, with one woman far enough in the distance to be unidentifiable. The photos of white women show them as the focal points of their vistas or interacting with each other; the photos of the black women treat them as part of the background, as these two photos on pages 406 and 407 show (figs. 20, 21). The white colonial woman, with her elaborate dresses, is turned into

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ornament demonstrating the purity of the recreated past; the black colonial woman, implied to be enslaved, blends into the background.

Colonial Williamsburg served as a peon to nostalgia and sentimentality for earlier, more simple American times that Junior thought it would behoove current Americans to return to. In doing so, it ignored much of the reality of both eighteenth and twentieth century America.

Reveling in Revivalism at Riverside Church

America’s past was not the only one the Rockefeller was interested in recreating: the Christian past of the Gothic also held appeal. Before designing the Cloisters, Charles Collens, the eventual architect, ably recreated another intricate vision of the past for Rockefeller in Riverside Church. Junior and the minister Harry Emerson Fosdick, of Rockefeller’s Park Avenue Baptist Church, conceived of Riverside Church in the 1920s as a non-denominational Protestant Cathedral that would inspire the same spiritual feelings as the great cathedrals of Europe.70 Rockefeller’s first architectural firm, McKIm, Mead, and White, a renowned Beaux-Arts firm who had built much of the Metropolitan and the Brooklyn Museum, built an apartment building above the church to cut down on costs; Rockefeller fired them after they refused to redesign, and commissioned Charles Collens, along with Henry C. Pelton in their place.71

Charles Collens, of the firm Allens and Collens, was a Boston-based architect. He had received his BA from Yale in 1896 and then spent a year at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, a common path for architects at the time.\textsuperscript{72} The Beaux-Arts style emphasized genteel classical buildings, which a high emphasis on symmetry and tradition; experimentation beyond historical styles was not encouraged. Allens and Collens were consulting architects for Vassar College, designing twelve primarily Gothic buildings for the campus, and in 1923, Collens wrote in \textit{The American Architect} a description of the architecture of Vassar which cautioned, “Self-expression and individuality…when applied to a group of buildings is decidedly vicious,” and that “after once striking the English Gothic note...the introduction of foreign styles even in isolated buildings is according to modern theories of group design in questionable taste.”\textsuperscript{73} Collens firmly believed in a consistent evocation of a single, usually Gothic style. Allens and Collens made buildings of different styles, but were most importantly neo-Gothic architects.

After Rockefeller commissioned Collens and Pelton, he sponsored them on a trip to Europe to see French and Spanish Gothic churches in Europe. Their final design, made after the trip, was based on the grand Chartres Cathedral and French Gothic churches. After experiencing the Romanesque churches of France, the architects also included a Romanesque Christ Chapel based on Romanesque.\textsuperscript{74} Collens and Pelton built Riverside Church (figs. 22, 23) as a steel-framed Gothic

\begin{footnotes}
\footref{72}{Who’s Who in New England (A.N. Marquis, 1915).}
\footref{74}{“Choosing the Architects and the Architecture · The Riverside Church · A Digital History of Morningside Heights.”}
\end{footnotes}
church with elaborate Gothic ornamentation, ornate exterior and interior carving, and stained glass windows showing figures from Jesus, to Bach, to Native Americans Drumming, to Martin Luther singing. In the West Portal, a stone carving of an enrobed Einstein sits, and grotesque gargoyles perch on the exterior. The building, finished in 1930, used the efficiency of modern construction to execute a completely medieval aesthetic.

This flagrant combination of modern technique and Gothic ornamentation infuriated some critics. In June of 1931, The American Architect published an article by Walter A. Taylor, a lecturer of architectural history at Columbia, entitled “A criticism of Riverside Church, New York,” which criticized the church as “steel gothic,” a fraudulent attempt at creating a sense of the Gothic that hid the structure of the church under layers of ornament. Cram, a leading Revivalist architect and medievalist, advocated for “integrity” in medievalist architecture, by using the same structural materials as the original medieval constructions; Collens and Pelton ignored this advice, and supported Riverside Church’s great tower with steel, which was encased in a layer of stone.

Charles Crane, from the office of Henry Pelton, wrote a stirring response the next month which defended the church from both those who advocated modernism and those who advocated for complete structural historicism. In 1931, modernism was still somewhat undefined, enough so that Crane wrote, “up to the present time no

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definite characteristics of this new style not subject to controversy amongst the ‘modernists’ themselves have developed.” He cautioned “Why should we throw overboard all precedent in architecture, at least until we have something worth-while to take its place?” 77 He cites Gothic architecture’s particular suitability for a church: “Gothic architecture is fundamentally Christian; it is a style developed by and for the followers of Christ. Unless totally biased, one cannot help but admit that the Gothic provides a beautiful and ecclesiastical atmosphere for the conduct of religious services.” 78

Although New York contained “modern” styles, chiefly the Art Deco style, with a liberal interpretation of semi-Gothic ornament mostly used for skyscrapers and interiors, Rockefeller did not consider it for his timeless, Christian church, which was supposed to last well into the future without feeling outdated. Art Deco, with its commercial interpretation of Gothic Ornamentation as used on the “Cathedral of Commerce,” the Woolworth Building, was a trendy style, but it was not seen as an option for the long-term future of architecture. It was not “worth-while” for a church, which was more interested in spiritual grandeur than up-to-date aesthetics. In Riverside Church, architects were able to completely reject the Modernist style, as it was not yet defined as a serious, lasting style; the Cloisters, which began design a few years later, after the Museum of Modern Art had defined a new, revolutionary Modernism in its 1932 exhibit International Style, would need to grapple with it.

77 Crane, “Why We Made It Gothic.”
Looking to the Future

The Modern Museum: Abby Aldrich Rockefeller & the MoMA

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Junior’s wife, began a journey in 1929 into modern art has influenced America’s modern art scene to this day. Abby, who was born into one of the most elite families in New York City, married Junior in 1901, and for two decades, they collected, travelled and patronized countless institutions together. In the 1920s and 30s, during the purchase and recreation of the Cloisters, Abby and Junior’s tastes were diverging fundamentally, and would never again comfortably align.79 Junior wanted to stay in the past, with anonymous, careful creators whose dedication he could enjoy; Abby wanted to experience and encourage the exciting new world of modern art, particularly American art. Although she was married to the premier patron on earth at the time, Abby’s budget for modern art was limited, because she used her own Aldrich inheritance, rather than spend Junior’s money on art he despised.80 She converted her children’s playrooms into a professional modern gallery, which Junior refused to enter and expressed confusion about and disdain for.

Abby, along with two friends, Lillie Bliss and Mary Quinn Sullivan, decided to organize a modern art museum which would later become the MoMA, partially in response to newspaper criticism of the Metropolitan’s refusal to invest in Post-Impressionists and living painters.81 They asked A. Conger Goodyear, an industrialist

80 Condas, “Mother’s Museum.”
81 Condas, 6.
who had been removed as president of Buffalo’s art museum for buying a Picasso, to
be chairman of the committee. Modernist art had, in iterations like the Whitney
Museum, been seen as feminine and therefore dismissed by the serious at world: these
three women chose Goodyear to be the public face of the project as a way to ensure
that their museum was taken seriously.\(^\text{82}\) By June 1929, Goodyear had created an
organizing committee of art historians and patrons, including Paul J. Sachs, professor
of Harvard’s innovative Museum Studies program, and a few months later the
museum opened. Although Abby was an instrumental force in creating the museum
and attracting donors, she was unable to contribute much herself, because Junior, who
disliked both modern art and Abby’s consuming interest in the museum, controlled
the family funds. Even though the museum began just as the stock market crashed,
the beginning of the Great Depression, it quickly became a major force in the New
York City art world.

In February of 1932, the museum put on an innovative exhibit on the
International Style, entitled *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition,* which
would create the primary definition of modern architecture for at least the next thirty
years. *International Style,* the MoMA’s first architecture exhibit, crystallized the
distant trends of European architects like Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Mies
Van Der Rohe (and the American Frank Lloyd Wright) into a single, easily
comprehensible revolution that, from the start, declared itself to be the future of
architecture. The exhibition mode, using models and photographs instead of
decorative architectural fragments, was a new way of displaying architecture, but the

\(^{82}\) Condas, 6.
greatest impact of the exhibit came from its catalogue and *International Style*, the book, released the same year. Alfred Barr, the first director of the MoMA, began the exhibition catalogue with a critique of the American dedication to Revivalism, before outlining the main principles of this revolution.\(^8^3\) The three main principles laid out in *International Style*, the book, were “emphasis upon volume—space enclosed by thin planes or surfaces as opposed to the suggestion of mass and solidity; regularity as opposed to symmetry or other kinds of obvious balance; and, lastly, dependence upon the intrinsic elegance of materials, technical perfection, and fine proportions, as opposed to applied ornament.”\(^8^4\) Many of the new museums and buildings built in the 1930s followed those principles more or less strictly, and they formed the core of modernism. Most crucial for the Cloisters was this rejection of applied ornament, because ornament, rather than structure, was the most common way to recreate the past. In a new world, ornament was “crime,” as Adolf Loos, an early modernist, declared in the early twentieth century in the face of the Art Deco, and the museum world took heed of that admonition in the 1930s.\(^8^5\)

Not only in architecture, but also in exhibition design, did the MoMA’s early years revolutionize America. Alfred Barr, the first director of the MoMA, altered how art was displayed so successfully that it is now hard to recognize his innovation, because it now seems eternal and natural. Barr’s innovation was in creating an exhibit that according to Mary Ann Staniszweki in *The Power of Display* (1998), “articulates

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a modernist, seemingly autonomous aestheticism.”\textsuperscript{86} From the very first exhibit in November of 1929 (fig. 24), Barr hung paintings on walls that were as neutral as possible, covered with pale grey monk’s cloth, and most importantly, he hung the paintings spacially, with plenty of blank wall on all sides, in a thematic or art-historical procession.\textsuperscript{87} Before Barr, both avant-garde and traditional exhibits hung paintings “skied,” grouping paintings together on a wall “salon-style” (figs. 25, 26): with paintings above, below, and next to each other either almost touching or within the visitor’s sight line.\textsuperscript{88} Paintings were often hung arranged due to their size and shape, not their subject matter or thematic qualities. Barr revolutionized display by hanging paintings, no matter their size, as independent aesthetic experiences separated by at least a foot of wall space, allowing a visitor to focus solely on one painting at a time, or step back and compare them with equal attention to each painting, not to the combination. This repudiation of composite display, which Barr learned from museums in Weimar Germany, is now standard practice in modern and universal museums.

This revolutionary museum was not universally beloved, and one of its critics was John D. Rockefeller, Jr. In the words of Alfred Barr, the first director of MoMA, Junior continued to act with “granite indifference” towards the entire field of modern art and Abby’s passion, but Abby had the emotional and financial support of their sons, Nelson and David.\textsuperscript{89} Nelson secretly donated $100,000 to the MoMA in 1934, when it desperately needed the money to receive a bequeathed gift of paintings and

\textsuperscript{86} Staniszewski, \textit{The Power of Display}, 61.
\textsuperscript{87} Staniszewski, 62.
\textsuperscript{88} Staniszewski, 63.
\textsuperscript{89} Condas, “Mother’s Musuem,” 9.
continue functioning. In 1939, only a year after the Cloisters opened, the MoMa moved into its first full building on 54th Street, the former site of the Rockefeller townhouse. Rockefeller sold the land to the museum for $250,00, which Abby repaid to him; at the last minute, he gifted them the land adjacent to the museum, within which Alfred Barr quickly created a sculpture garden.90 The MoMA’s new building (figs. 27, 28) was a revolutionary assemblage of steel, concrete, and glass, with perfectly blank, neutral gallery walls. It is the emblematic modern museum, and set the tone and style for much of the next century’s museums.

Nelson and David, Junior and Abby’s sons, who had been educated in modern art by Abby, as Jennifer Condas proves in “Mother’s Museum: The Emancipation of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller through Modern Art Matronage and Museum Building (2014), invested in and supported the museum through the 1930s. Junior became the only member of his immediate family who was clinging so strictly to the well-crafted, anonymous past of Asian and medieval art; everyone else was looking forward. However, Junior still retained primary control of the fortune, and was able to direct his personal projects to be focused on the past, as his choice of Charles Collens as architect for the Cloisters shows.

Moving Away from the Period Room

In the early 1920s, period rooms were still up-to-date museum practice, at least in America. However, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, modernism, with its emphasis on functionality and the rejection of ornament, arose as period rooms began

90 Loebl, America’s Medicis, 161.
to feel outdated. In Europe, the repudiation of Revivalism and period rooms happened more quickly, and attempting to recreate reality became unscientific and provincial.\(^9^1\)
The tide turned against elaborate backgrounds and recreations towards a simple setting for objects remarkably quickly. The Detroit Institute of the Arts, the Chicago Institute of Art, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, all major museums in the sphere of the Cloisters, created new installations between 1927 and 1936, and their rooms and their receptions illustrate the shifts in museum design, as detailed by Kathleen Curran in *The Invention of the American Art Museum*. The Detroit Institute of Arts, which began to be planned in 1919 and opened in 1927, only three years after the American Wing opened with three entirely-recreated rooms, was panned for its elaborate settings, backgrounds, and recreations to invoke a historical atmosphere. Wilhelm Valentiner, who became first director of the museum, wanted each of his rooms to have an atmospheric background of “panels, stone or hangings,” and told the architect, Paul Cret, "The whole museum should be more like a private collection in a large private house, otherwise it will always make a frosty general effect."\(^9^2\) But by the time the museum opened, these sumptuous rooms, where composite displays, of furniture, sculpture, painting, and other decorative arts were shown in front of an elaborate wall suited to the period, was considered too elaborate and confusing, not suitable for a museum. Museums now had a duty to be clear to visitors in what was authentic and what was modern, according to Fiske Kimball, a central voice in American museums, in his article for *Architectural Record*, “The Modern Museum of

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Art” (1929).\textsuperscript{93} He criticized that the Gothic Chapel (figs. 29, 30) used “period form but modern execution” by mixing electric light with medieval-style light fixtures, something rejected by The Cloisters, because “period forms may lead the visitor to confuse [modern objects] with antique exhibits.”\textsuperscript{94} Quickly, the elaborate reproductions museums had been producing to surround their art began to be seen as outdated in American museums, and they would be replaced with simpler displays, without specific architectural evocations of the past, as shown by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Chicago Institute of Arts, and the Cloisters.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston opened its new Decorative Arts wing in 1928, and the shift from only a few years earlier, and especially a decade ago, was obvious in its new galleries. The Netherland Gallery (fig. 31) had neutral walls as its background: the display of objects is nowhere near as spaced out as in the MoMa, and it still has a composite display that mixes two- and three-dimensional objects, but the room is much less atmospheric and more neutral than in Detroit.\textsuperscript{95} By 1936, when the Art Institute of Chicago opened their new Decorative Arts wing, their six galleries had neutral settings, with no striving for period atmosphere. Bessie Bennet, curator, explained that there was, “a complete architectural simplicity with no molding or ornament to distract attention from the objects on view.”\textsuperscript{96} “Molding or ornament,” which Valentiner had thought would save his museum from “a frosty general effect,” was now only a distraction from the serious work of a museum, showing an object.

Museums design and galleries changed radically from when Barnard’s Cloisters were

\textsuperscript{93} Curran, 139. \\
\textsuperscript{94} Curran, 139. \\
\textsuperscript{95} Curran, 206. \\
\textsuperscript{96} Curran, 208.
purchased in 1925 to the reopening in 1938, and modern evocations of period atmosphere through “ornament” was no longer appropriate: one instead strove for “complete architectural simplicity,” as the principles of the International Style demanded.

Searching for the Modern Museum

The architecture of museums followed the same path as exhibit design, with discontent in the late 20s being resolved by a demand for Modernist design after the International Style exhibit and book. Architectural journals, like Architectural Record and The Architectural Forum, show the rise of modernism in museums within only five years, and its total dominance by the end of the 1930s. In the December 1927 edition of The Architectural Forum, there were several articles about museum design, with titles like “Modern Museum Design,” “Museums of Art,” “A Trend in Museum Design,” and “Planning Art Museums.” These articles did not directly address period rooms, and had differing ideas on whether the walls should be “rich and restful…a background and setting worthy of properly displaying its art in a personal, satisfying, and friendly manner” or “subdued backgrounds” in rooms “where the attention may be focused on two or three masterpieces.”  

Modernity was restrained: Charles G. Loring described the Fogg Museum of Harvard (fig. 32), with its “Georgian façade” with “none of the neo-Classic, Greek, Roman, or Beaux Arts about it” as “quite a new mode” of museum architecture.  

Henry W. Kent, secretary of the Metropolitan, who was instrumental in creating the Met’s American Wing, expressed uncertainty about

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museum design and looked towards a yet-unknown future: “The sooner [the Louvre-Vatican style of building] and the dignified and stately disasters resulting from too great devotion to the sacred principle of the fenestration of the facade are given over, the sooner we shall arrive at an appropriate style of museum architecture, a style beautiful and practical.”\(^99\) Although Kent had recently created a wing full of period rooms, he did not advocate that, saying that “the whole question of collections and methods of showing them in these rooms is still in a debatable stage.”\(^100\)

By June of 1932, four months after the International Style exhibition opened at the MoMA, Kent had found the future of art museums, and it was strikingly modernist. Old museums were full of wings and rooms that were specific and difficult to remodel, constraining the natural growth of collections and departments. Kent emphasized the new possibilities offered by Modernism in making museums more adaptable and flexible:

> With unitization, with steel, movable partitions, new substitutes for old materials, new methods of light for day and night, glass walls, setbacks, etc., the museum of today could be built so as to allow growth and change economically, so as to allow classification its perfect work, and so as to give opportunity for effective exhibition. The floor spaces of such a building would not be hampered by party walls and fixed partitions, its divisions of space would be changeable at will, its lighting would be ample and controllable, and its decorations would be neutral.\(^101\)

Kent, who identifies himself in his byline as “Secretary, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,” condemns those who “build a house in an old style when a new one is clearly indicated” as having “missed the most obvious lesson of museum experience.”\(^102\) The

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\(^100\) Henry W. Kent, 583.


\(^102\) Henry W. Kent.
change in atmosphere was so rapid that Kent, who was searching for an answer in 1927, less than five years later described embracing Modernism as “the most obvious lesson of museum experience.”

This movement towards Modernism was not an inevitable next step after rejecting of recreation and revivalism, but a particular response to the importance of Modernism in the 1930s. Fiske Kimball, in his 1929 article “The Modern Museum of Art,” rejected the Detroit Museum’s jumble of original and recreation objects as confusing, saying that “anything having a period character should actually be antique, within the limits permitted by reasonable restoration. To employ some old rooms with others of modern workmanship ‘in the style of the time; is to leave the visitor in uncertainty and cast doubt even on what is real.”\(^{103}\) But Kimball also rejects “ascetic neutrality” in galleries as creating “bareness” and “monotony,” and advocates for “a decent richness in ceiling treatment, glow and color in wall coverings.”\(^{104}\)

Modernism, though, was swift in its takeover. By June of 1938, the month the Cloisters opened, **Architectural Record** was stating that “Today's modern is a reality. If the term ‘International Style’ is not broad enough to include it, this is the fault of the term; not of the reality” and criticizing even churches for not sufficiently embracing Modernism.\(^{105}\) It was the combination of the rejection of recreation and revivalism as authentic and the rise of the stringent neutrality of Modernism that made the interior of the Cloisters stark and object focused within a revivalist framework.

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\(^{104}\) Kimball, 572.

\(^{105}\) “Where Is Modern Now?,” **Architectural Forum** , June 1938, 466–70.
A New Generation of Museum Professionals

The rapid changes in American museum architecture and design were enshrined in museums for the next several decades by the graduates of a single Harvard course. In 1921, Paul Sachs, after joining, then leaving, the family business of banking, began a new course on Museum Studies at Harvard, his alma mater. Legendarily outlined on the back of an envelope by Henry Watson Kent, secretary of the Metropolitan, during a train journey with Sachs, the Museum Course quickly became a place where influential museum directors were formed.\textsuperscript{106} By the time James J. Rorimer, future director of the Cloisters and source of many of its modernist impulses, was a student in 1927-1928, its reputation as the place where future directors learned to curate, evaluate, and run museums was cemented. The course represented a new point of view about the museum, and each year, students debated central question such as whether museums should collect modern art and what was the place of a period room. Half the class argued that “period room” exhibits catered to the interests of the majority of visitors, while half argued for object-based exhibitions which allowed educated visitors to have a pure aesthetic experience.\textsuperscript{107} Rorimer would have been aware that his museum professional peers saw period rooms as, at best, a way to cater to the masses, and, at worst, a distraction from the object that “cheapened the museum,” as the 1934 class described.\textsuperscript{108} In the 1930s, a


\textsuperscript{107} Duncan, 97.

\textsuperscript{108} Duncan, 98.
focus on the object was presumed to elevate the cultural tone of museum and represent the most modern movement in exhibition design. The “apostles of the object” championed neutral museum galleries that emphasized the aesthetic experience of the art object to the exclusion of all cultural or historical context. Alfred H. Barr, the first director and curator of the MoMA, made that type of display into the standard one to which most museums would conform for much of the 20th century.

Although 19th century museums also showed objects without context, the 20th century professionals emphasized isolating objects and redefined white (or sometimes light grey) as the only neutral color for exhibition design. The Cloisters was never going to become a white box, due to the sensibilities of its architect, patron, and first director. But Rorimer’s experience with object-centered curation in Sachs’ Museum Course led him to, after taking charge of the Cloisters in 1933, temper much of the Cloisters’ period-room sensibilities.
From Rocky Hill to Medieval Monastery to Modern Museum

Rockefeller’s Vision of the Cloisters: An Ornament for Fort Tryon Park

The astonishing view that Fort Tryon Park and the Cloisters is centered upon was preserved by industrialists before the Cloisters was ever conceived. J. Pierpont Morgan, in 1901, provided the Interstate Parks Commission, a joint commission of New York and New Jersey dedicated to protecting the cliffs the money to purchase the cliffs of the Palisades, which were threatened by quarrying. Morgan saw the destruction of the Palisades, the cliffs lining the New Jersey side of the Hudson River, from his yacht as he sailed to his country home.109 John D. Rockefeller, Jr, quietly aided the Commission by buying up the land on the top of the cliffs to prevent further development, and the still-preserved views are thanks to their purchases, which were eventually donated to the public in the form of a park.

The genesis of Fort Tryon Park, the home of the Cloisters, came in 1915, when Rockefeller toured a section of land in northwest Manhattan with the Park Commissioner in 1915 and discussing the “desirability of the site for a park,” according to the New York Times.110 Until the 1920s, the northern tip of Manhattan was mostly estates, and the 67 acres that would become Fort Tryon Park were mainly made of three grand properties. Rockefeller began buying those estates in 1917. All the land was acquired by 1926, but the city was initially reluctant to give up on tax revenues from the property, which amounted to over $450,000, and did not agree until Rockefeller promised to pay for the Olmsted Brothers to landscape the park as

110 Husband, 20.
well. From the beginning, Rockefeller thought that a rocky, Romantic building would enhance the site with the most commanding outlook of the cliffs and river. In a letter to the Metropolitan’s President in 1930 proposing moving the Cloisters to Fort Tryon Park, Rockefeller wrote that the site he had chosen was suitable for museum because of “the commanding outlook it affords over the Hudson River Valley and the entire northern part of the city.” Interestingly, the city is mostly hidden from the final Cloisters: Fort Tryon Park, and the river, are displayed.

Rockefeller particularly emphasized the exterior aspect of the museum, above its function as a museum: the museum needed to succeed aesthetically as an addition to the park. Rockefeller’s conception of beauty was deeply tied in with his previous restoration projects and his valuation of the historical. In the same letter to the director as above, Rockefeller placed the “external beauty and charm” as the first priority of the museum, and wrote, “Should any questions arise in the planning the interior of the building that involved the sacrifice of its exterior appearance, I should be strongly inclined to favor the latter rather than the former.”

The new Cloisters was always supposed to be a jewel-box. In the 1920s, dozens of museums had been built across the country, and cities establishing themselves as important built grand, usually neo-classical buildings which spanned thousands of years of cultural history and at least all of Europe and America, if not other continents as well. These museums expanded rapidly to fill out their collections,

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and used Kulturgeschichte organization to lead visitors through a grand tour of the varieties and progress of humanity. From its inception, the Cloisters was a different, narrower form of a museum: the first museum dedicated to the Middle Ages in America. When Junior envisioned the new Cloisters, he emphasized that its limitations were central and should be enhanced, and told the then-Museum director in late 1930 that it “should always be thought of as a small Museum interesting because of the high quality of the exhibits rather than their quantity…As the available space for the exhibition purposes is used up it might be the policy of the Museum thereafter when better material was available to replace the less good exhibits thus improving the collection rather than enlarging it.”

The program of the Cloisters was to be a suitable home for Barnard’s collection, particularly the four cloisters, with a moderate amount of exhibition space and proper use of the “commanding outlook” of the site. It was never meant to be an expansive or growing museum, or one suitable for major events, but rather a self-contained building of treasures perched on top of a park, removed from the metropolis surrounding it.

In May of 1930, the Olmsted Brothers designed the “Preliminary General Plan” of the proposed park, which the City had not officially approved (fig. 33). The preliminary plan shows the first plan of the Cloisters, by John Russell Pope, who Rockefeller commissioned in 1930 before rejecting him in 1931 in favor of Charles Collens. The building’s position in the north of the park was established and did not change, because it was Rockefeller’s own decision. In November, the city approved the plan to build Fort Tryon Park, with four acres set aside for the Cloisters. The main

113 Husband, 30.
feature of the park was winding paths with timeless views of the Palisades, but the most striking feature of those views was the George Washington Bridge (fig. 1), begun in 1927 and opened in 1931. The George Washington Bridge’s iconic steel towers were supposed to be covered in concrete and stone, with Beaux-Art ornament, but the onset of the Depression prevented that.\textsuperscript{114} The stark functionalism of the bridge won admirers: Le Corbusier was grateful that the building was “saved” from unnecessary ornamentation, because the bridge “is the most beautiful bridge in the world…The structure is so pure, so resolute, so regular that here, finally, steel architecture seems to laugh.”\textsuperscript{115} Like the Cloisters itself, the site and views combined ancient and Modernist evocations.

The First Designs, 1930-Summer 1931

Rockefeller’s first choice of architect was the firm of John Russell Pope, who had previously worked with the Olmsted Brothers. John Russell Pope was a noted Beaux-Art architect, who created noted picturesque and, particularly, monumental classical buildings, skillfully interpreting the past for new public institutions.\textsuperscript{116} Otto Eggers, the main draftsman and eventual partner of Pope, in 1930, designed a Romantic Gothic abbey-castle (fig. 34) which pulled from Kenilworth castle, which

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Rockefeller had seen as a young man in England. Eggers and Pope created their vision of the Middle Ages, a castle, with towers and crenellations, reminiscent of Central Park’s Belvedere Castle, and did not take into account the ecclesiastical nature of the objects. Joseph Breck, the curator of Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan and the man originally in charge of the Cloisters strongly condemned Eggers’ plan, describing it to Rockefeller as “a theatrical effect, sham Gothic” because the plan “varies widely from medieval precedent,” and because the three cloisters have “no logical relationship to the church or to the other parts of the building.” Breck marshaled several reasons to instead base the building on a “medieval monastery”: because they “often were built in several architectural styles”; because “such features as the chapter house, the refectory, the dormitory, etc. provide a great variety of galleries….contributing to the effective installation of the exhibits”; and because the monastic church “is simple in character so that the cost and prominence of any modern carved stonework necessary would be reduced to a minimum.” This early response illuminated Breck’s three major concerns for the rest of his tenure as curator and eventual director of the Cloisters: fidelity to medieval models, domestic period room exhibition spaces, and simple design to decrease the prominence of modern stone.

After Breck’s disappointment in the first design, Rockefeller fired Pope, and in his place engaged Collens, who had just finished Riverside Church. It is clear from this choice that Rockefeller was not particularly concerned with architectural

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118 Breck.
criticism of his projects; Riverside Church had been panned by the New Yorker’s architecture critic, Lewis Mumford, as well as in Architectural Record, for its slavish devotion to recreating the exterior of the Gothic with a modern steel interior.

Rockefeller, however, enjoyed working with Collens, and Collens agreed to produce schemes for the Cloisters. Rockefeller suggested the idea of a fortified monastery, which satisfied Breck’s quest for accuracy while still fitting the rugged look Rockefeller wanted for Fort Tryon Park. Fort Tryon Park was based, in part, in the memory of the fort that George Washington had established there as a last defense against the British in Manhattan during the Revolutionary War. The “rocky, wooded hill” that the building will be on, Rockefeller said to Collens in his letter outlining his desires before Collens began to design the Cloisters, “suggests something picturesque and romantic in outline rather than a highly sophisticated type of building.”

Between February and March of 1931, Charles Collens and Breck worked furiously to produce several different schemes for the museum. Charles Collen’s first scheme (figs. 35, 36) showed his comfort and natural inclination to the Gothic: the spire of the church stretched spikily into the sky, and the major feature was a buttressed chapel poking out, with another chapel peeking out past it. Collens revised that first tower on his second version of the scheme, replacing the spiny tower with a sturdier Romanesque one. The second version (fig. 37) was based on the church at Monsempron, a still-intact Romanesque church and monastic complex in Southwest France, which Collens found “after looking through books in the Boston Athenium” and decided would be a suitable model for the cloister, as it was both picturesque and

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119 Husband, “Creating the Cloisters,” 32.
The interior stayed broadly the same in both versions, with four museum galleries (labelled “Museum”) surrounding an interior central cloister, with an additional exterior cloister, the Trie cloister, being added in the second version. The third scheme (fig. 37) was more of a medieval monastery, and less of a museum: the galleries were replaced with the various rooms a working medieval monastery would have, like a “dormer” and “frater,” a sleeping space and dining room for monks, spaces that would lend themselves to be period-room style exhibits of medieval monastic domesticity.

Joseph Breck felt torn between the functionality of a museum-style plan and the atmosphere and liveliness of a period-room scheme. When responding to the second and third schemes on March 23rd, he acknowledged the practical advantages of the second: “a neutral museum plan; this takes care of our three cloisters, provides good exhibition galleries, and several small chapels which could be developed in various Romanesque and Gothic styles. As you will note, a good circuit is provided.” But even with those positives, he felt that “it does seem to me to lack something of the vitality of the other scheme. There is bound to be a ‘museumy’ character to it that we escape in the other plan.” Like the planners of the American wing, Breck saw the “‘museumy’ character,” its logical, “neutral” galleries, as a fundamental disadvantage in creating a sense of life within a museum. In a “neutral” gallery, the objects become “museumy,” solely aesthetic experiences; in a domestic

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120 Husband, 32.
122 Breck.
period room gallery, the objects retains a sense of their original use and history, therefore giving them vitality and interconnectedness.

He was drawn to the third scheme due to its domesticity: “I think the prior’s residences (with a small chapel adjoining), is a desirable feature since it would afford opportunities for the display of smaller objects, particularly exhibits of domestic character,” which were not the original core of the Cloisters’ collection but could be acquired. “Smaller” and “domestic” objects, like the simple, domestic objects of the American Wing, could only be shown properly within a room that did not feel to “museumy” and retained their vitality. The ecclesiastical nature of the Cloisters’ design fit its ecclesiastical objects, particularly within its chapels, but objects of “domestic character” needed a domestic interior, one that would make sense within the recreation and simulated reality of the Cloisters. In his notes on the third scheme, Breck enlarges and adds detail to Collens’ domestic segments, adding a two-story “prior’s residence,” a kitchen, and a chapter house (fig. 38). In Breck’s revised plans, he drew arrows to sketch the movement of a museum visitor through the gallery, which requires looping around some rooms, like the top chapel, and through and around the cloisters.

Collens and Breck agreed upon the importance of vitality through historical recreation, but they disagreed on whether historical accuracy or atmosphere was more important. This conflict, particularly between architects and museum directors, was a constant issue that centered on a problem of authenticity: was it more important for rooms to feel authentic or be authentic? For Breck, an art historian and museum professional, rooms needed to be authentic, meaning that they were modelled after
particular medieval sources suited to the objects in their rooms. For Collens, who had written articles for architectural journals about Gothic architecture but was not an art historian and had spent his career designing Gothic Revival buildings, the feeling of authenticity was more important: revivalist architecture could create a charm, and atmosphere, which mirrored the feeling caused by the original. His response to Breck’s comments on Scheme 2 and 3 illustrate what he is striving to create in the Cloisters: “I visited yesterday the arrangements which the Detroit Art Museum has in connection with their Mediaeval exhibits. They have made an attempt at doing something in a Mediaeval way which entirely lacks conviction.”

The Detroit Art Museum, had a neoclassical overall design, with a small chapel embedded into plaster walls (fig. 29). The Gothic chapel had been condemned by Fiske Kimball for being too liberal in recreation, potentially confusing visitors as to what was medieval and what was modern, but Collens attacks it from the other direction, for failing to create enough of a medieval atmosphere. Collens added in the same letter, still writing about the Detroit Art Museum, “I noticed that nobody went up or down, and that their whole interest was confined to one floor. I think that you would make a great mistake if you failed to keep your entire exhibit to one floor, even if the Dorter and the Frater may have been two-story buildings originally.”

Collens cautioned Breck against a slavish devotion to accuracy to the detriment of museum design, a suggestion which Breck, in general, would not heed.

In June, Collens produced the first more formal sketch for the Cloisters. It was a revised version of the second scheme, based on the church at Monsempron, with a

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124 Collens.
mix of neutral galleries and period rooms. There were three chapels a Romanesque, Early Gothic, and late Gothic, embedded into the chronological flow of the galleries around the Cuxa Cloister, which had moved to the center of the museum. There were two or three domestic rooms, including a second floor “Abbot’s Room,” and the four Cloisters, Saint-Guilhem, Cuxa, Trie, and the cloisters lining the bottom garden, were all in the places where they would eventually be built. The more delicate cloisters that could not be opened to the air would be “lighted from clerestories with the old timber truss roofs, rather than attempt any artificial sky or modern skylight,” Collens instructed in a report about this preliminary scheme to Rockefeller and Breck in 1931. In the same report, he wrote: “It was felt that in designing a museum to house medieval exhibits, there should be no conflicting modern ornament or detail, but that the background should be as neutral as possible, in order that the authentic material should have a setting free from the distraction of modern detail. The church at Monsempron complies with this condition.” The museum, while fictitiously modelled on a Romanesque church, should be “as neutral as possible.” Collens, in this report, uses modern solely as a descriptor of the temporal quality of material, not a stylistic or ideological marker as others more invested in modernism would: “modern ornament” would be an oxymoron in the International Style. With this plan in the hand of the Building Committee, Building Committee (Rockefeller, his son Nelson, and DeForest, the president of the museum, among others), Collens sailed to France on a research trip paid for by Rockefeller.

126 Collens, 1.
Collens’ Tour of France and the Importance of Charm

In July of 1931, Charles Collens went on a trip to France to see the small monasteries of Southern France, both Gothic and Romanesque, that could be inspirations and models for the new Cloisters, often called the Medieval Museum in the early staged of its development. It is unfortunately unclear how the sites were selected, but they reflected a combination of intact and ruined sites that would inspire Collens. Collens saw the remnants of Cuxa, where the largest cloister in the Cloister’s collection was from, and sites in a wide range of conditions, from totally restored, to fully intact and preserved, to mostly ruined. Collens went to major churches and sites, like Chartres Cathedral and the monastery of Cluny; less-well-known sites like the church of Monsempron, on which he had based the exterior of the Cloisters—which was “not mentioned in the guide book” and therefore difficult to find; and modern restorations and evocations of the Middle Ages.127 His report to Rockefeller after he returned a sketchbook now unfortunately lost, shows that if Collens had been the sole determinant of the Cloisters, the museum would have been a total recreation of a French monastery, concerned with creating a “charming” atmosphere for visitors. Collens used the words charm and charming ten times in his ten-page report, and that charm is most strongly associated with the least “museumy” parts of a building, like plantings, wide open views, and mixed stones and periods. Collens did not focus on internal changes to the gallery, but recommended several changes to the atmospheric

127 Charles Collens, “Report on the Trip to France for the Medieval Museum,” August 1931, Box 32, Cloisters Archive, https://photos.google.com/u/1/album/AF1QipMsWA-gX1drRqTscTgYho2ErXQzw0uU0Zt_-/photo/AF1QipN3XLrC1rP_xgHyjPDJd1pywrWSMYmwsy_0EtZu.
effects of the building, like using a mix of medieval stones and opening cloisters to the natural world.

Although Collens had left the commission with a “neutral” museum which included several non-period galleries and was purposefully not full of modern recreations of medieval detail, his experiences in France pushed him farther towards recreating the total atmosphere of a medieval cloister in any way he could. Collens ended his report with a section entitled “CLOISTERS”, where he praised to interaction of the Cloisters with the natural world: “After visiting the various cloisters, particularly the smaller cloisters, and seeing the great charm which these cloisters have, opened to the air, I would like to recommend that the two smaller cloisters, or at least the cloister to the south (The Trie Cloister), be so arranged to have 3’0” overhangs, which are common, on the roofs…I think that the charm of these small cloisters is greatly enhanced by planting in the courts and by the open sky as seen through the cloister arches.”\textsuperscript{128} He was not the first to ascribe charm to medieval cloisters: Henry Adams, in Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, wrote, of the Mont-Saint-Michele (also called Merveille), “of all the parts of the Merveille, in summer, the most charming must have always been the cloisters.”\textsuperscript{129} Collens’ “great charm” does not refer to the artistic value of the carvings or stonework of the cloisters, but of the affective experience of being in the court or walk of the cloisters. The organic, natural world is invited into the museum to enhance the feeling of charm, leisure, and pleasure, and the aesthetics of the architectural fragments are just one part of the overall. Collens was interested in the “effect” of cloisters’ placement,

\textsuperscript{128} Collens.
\textsuperscript{129} Adams, Mont-St-Michel and Chartres, 43.
views, and plantings, an effect that cannot be quantified but can be felt, and he hoped, be recreated in the Medieval Museum.

The views of the Cloisters were particularly important because the major feature of the site and the reason Rockefeller selected it, was its commanding view of the Hudson River and, the Palisades. Collens wrote, after seeing a cloister at St. Bertrand where “the entire wall was opened up with piers supporting the roof so that one walked through the cloister and looked out upon a beautiful panorama,” “that gave me the idea that we were making a mistake in the Saint-Guilhem cloister in closing up the river side with small embrasures. I think that the whole side ought to be opened up as it is at St. Bertrand so that the magnificent view of the Hudson can be seen to its fullest extent.”130 The Saint-Guilhem cloister, also referred to as the St. Williams cloister, faced the river on one side of the June 1931 plan, and Collens wanted to maximize that view, a major difference from his memorandum where the cloister was to be closed up from above and to the side, “with proper atmosphere for the exhibits” given “by careful study of wall treatments, proper lighting effects, floors, fenestration, etc.”131

Collens also found charm in the mix of different building materials that occurred in heterogeneous monasteries, which developed organically in different styles. Collen’s initial report gave no indication of a mixed use of stone: the only reference to the building materials is that “the character of the present Hill on which this Museum would be built is such that a monastery would grow naturally out of the rocky out-crops and the local New York stone would lend itself to this type of

131 Collens, “Explanation of the Preliminary Sketches,” 2.
building and would harmonize with the general setting,” and later that the chapels “would be designed in the very simplest manner possible.” After going to France, Collens wrote at the end of his report, under “STONEWORK,” “in all of these groups the great charm of the group developed from the use of different stones, different pointing, some coursed stones, some rubble ashlar, and a great variety of texture.”

A neutral museum would be uniform in its new, well-formed materials, but Collens instead desired “stone which had holes in it to give the effect of age which appears in all of the walls of these different groups,” and asserted, “In fact, all these variations in architecture and arrangement are what give charm to the early work.” None of Collens’ plans, of incorporating gardens or mixing materials, were unheard of for a museum, but what was new was the extent to which Collens wanted a “great variety of texture” through the entire museum and fully open cloisters.

The search for charm ignores the negative effects to the countries from which objects are extracted. Collens did not see any value in keeping architecture where it is found, and believed that atmosphere can be wholesale recreated without loss in a new site. By describing the affective experience of entering these sacred spaces as “charming” only, Collens removed them from their history and connections to their original site. Many of the sites Collens visited had been taken apart by political upheaval during the Reformation or Revolution or collectors like Barnard in the late 19th century and early 20th century; Collens comments on the destruction, but not on what caused it. When Collens went to a church that was still intact he wrote, “The

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132 Collens, “Explanation of the Preliminary Sketches.”
134 Collens, 6, 9.
inside is absolutely untouched and has all the charm of its original architecture.”

An untouched church has “all the charm of its original architecture,” but charm can be replicated; it is its completeness, not the fact that it still exists in its original site, with attendant social, artistic, and historical connections, makes it important and pleasing for Collens.

This lack of concern for French cultural heritage and the ethical implications of removal is evident in Collens’ “STONEWORK” section: “I am inclined to think that it would not cost any more to purchase in France a few old buildings and have the stone shipped by water to the site on the Hudson. It would thereby be possible to build up walls which would have all the charm of the original work, as Mr. Blumenthal has done…There are certainly enough abandoned buildings near the seashore to make it possible to buy up a lot of this material and send it by sea direct to the site.” Instead of using local New York stone like originally intended, it would be equally cost-effective to re-create a French building “with all the charm of the original work” transplanted into America. The tiles Collens wants for the Cloisters “could be had for the taking” in France, probably due to the worldwide depression. Economic concerns and “charm”, not regard for French cultural heritage, are the only issues worth considering.

This interest in “charm” to the exclusion of ethics is particularly salient when considering that the core of the Cloisters’ collection was created by removing medieval sculpture and architecture for the benefit of Barnard and Americans. Barnard emphasized, and the Cloisters still repeats, stories of the sculptures and

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135 Collens, 2.
136 Collens, 9.
architecture being improperly used for practical purposes by ignorant farmers. But Barnard amassed such a collection of French medieval sculpture, and attempted to remove an entire cloister, the Cuxa Cloister, with such brazen opportunism that the French government responded, passing a law that protected their cultural heritage from being exported. Barnard exported his collection the day before the law went into effect. Collens wrote, about his visit to the Cuxa Cloister, "Unfortunately there is very little left of Cuxa," not commenting on the fact that if there was much left of Cuxa, there would not be a center of the Medieval Museum. In Annabel Jane Wharton’s book *Architectural Agents*, she shows the fundamental violence involved in taking architecture from its original place, in a chapter titled “Murder.” Barnard attempted to gather the entire Cuxa Cloister, but was prevented by Emmanuel Sans, the departmental architect of the Commission of Historical Monuments, and only received half of it to take across the ocean. The rest of the Cuxa Cloister was not in its original setting when Collens visited, but the collection of columns, capitals, and bases stayed in the area, and in 1949 the fragments were restored to their original home, which now shows the violence of Barnard’s extraction. The ethical problem with permanently removing a cultural patrimony to recreate its “charm” elsewhere is not considered by Collens, Breck, Rorimer, or Rockefeller, Jr.

Because Collens was interested in atmosphere and completeness, not authenticity or site-specific meaning, he found charm in both original and recreated buildings, and he highlighted two sites with particularly effective recreations of

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137 Collens, 5.
139 Wharton, 24.
medieval atmospheres. He described a monastery at “Font Froide,” which a “French woman of wealth…has completely restored, put very good stained glass into the church, and completed the entire group in a way to make it a very distinctive work of art…the whole effect was stunning.” Fascinatingly, Fonfroide was only in 1908 bought by that “French woman of wealth,” Madeleine Fayet, née Madeleine d’Andoque, from a rich local family, and her artist husband Gustave Fayet, to save it from purchase and appropriation by Barnard. Without their intervention, it would likely be in the collection of the Cloisters today, and its original site would have been dismembered, instead of the remarkably complete church, cloister, 12th century chapter house, and lay clergy building, a continuous site of monastic architecture for nearly a millennia.

Collens does not describe how accurate the modern stained glass, which was made between 1912 and 1925, is, just comments on its quality and the effect on viewers (“stunning”).

Collens believed that a “medieval” building does not need an original site, or a medieval provenance, to be effective, as shown in his description of George Blumenthal’s “Salle de Musique.” The Salle de Musique (figs. 42, 43), a freestanding building using medieval fragments to construct a fictitious whole, displayed Blumenthal’s personal collection of medieval art and architecture: in 1934, he offered the entire collection to the Cloisters, who took a fair amount. The interior reveals a jumble of furniture, candlesticks, and smaller items, with wall objects separated from

141 Graham Keevill, Mick Aston, and Teresa Hall, Monastic Archaeology (Oxbow Books, 2017), 46.
143 “FRANCE, AUDE, FONTFROIDE, ABBEY STE MARIE.”
the viewer by multiple pieces of furniture. In this building, Collens saw a coexistence of old and new without conflict: “It is an education in what can be done in the reproduction of medieaval work. Mr. Blumenthal built this, however, out of old material, getting stonework, windows, etc., from old buildings. But this does not detract from the fact that the entire building has been built within the last twenty years, and has every evidence of having been there for five hundred years.”¹⁴⁴ This seamless creation of a building that is both new and old is particularly due to “the variation in stonework…and the general effect of the building,” which Collens asks Rockefeller to study. By embracing the mixed sources, Blumenthal created a building which has “every evidence” of age without any actual age: to Collens, this was a success.

Most tellingly, Collens spoke favorable about the abbey of Saint-Martin-du-Canigou, which had been heavily restored beginning in 1902 and finished in 1932. To contemporary art historians, the restoration was a failure which destroyed the original architecture in search of a complete building. In The Art Bulletin of March 1936, Walter Muir Whitehall, then the director of the Peabody Museum in Salem who had just finished his dissertation on medieval Spain, lamented: “As in the case of Ripoll, the object of the restoration was the achievement of a complete and unified building, rather than the preservation and consolidation of the ruins of the original church, and the student of Romanesque architecture today will find the lithographs of Saint-Martin-du-Canigou in Baron Taylor's Voyages pittoresques more useful than the

restored building itself.” Collens, on the other hand, wrote that “It gave me an idea of what could be accomplished in modern work to reproduce the atmosphere of an ancient abbey,” and that “one of the views is also similar to the one which we have suggested at the south of the museum. The effect was exceedingly charming.”

Collens’ report suggested moving the architecture of the museum towards a period room recreation of the medieval and away from a neutral museum. He went to the Grande Chartreuse near Gremble to find examples of the “small domestic building” Breck had suggested several times, and suggested introducing a small monk’s house, “furnished as it was furnished in the Grande Chartreuse.” The Romanesque Chapel, a consistently medieval feature of each scheme introduced, Collens wrote, “should be treated with an apse, and not hide in the round and in a square gable, as done in the present plan.” Giving the chapel an apse would give it a stronger atmosphere of a church, which Collens thinks would give a stronger effect, and the Romanesque Chapel of the final design indeed has an apse. In the final section of the report, “DETAILS,” Collens suggested that “in one or two sections of the exterior a small amount of detail might be inserted to give a little more play to the composition” such as “a few corbels” or “possible gargoyles.” Though Collens had left promising “a setting free from the distraction of modern detail,” the liberal atmosphere French restoration and revivalism convinced him that a few ornaments couldn’t hurt. If Collens had been the only driving force, one can imagine a final

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museum that more closely resembles Riverside Church, with ornamentation both
interior and exterior. However, Collens’ convictions were about to be challenged by a
man far more involved and respected in the American art scene.

Wilhelm Valentiner and the Modern Museum

Collens returned to America in August, more convinced than ever that the
way to successfully create the Medieval Museum was to replicate the atmosphere of
French medieval monastery: to make the building full of flowers, views, and charm,
without concern for material authenticity. However, he was quickly forced to defend
his purely revivalist sensibilities against modernism. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. had sent
the preliminary, June 1931 drawings of the Cloisters to advisors, including Wilhelm
Valentiner. Valentiner, in addition to working on the Decorative Arts Wing at the
Metropolitan with Joseph Breck and designing the badly-received Detroit Institute of
Arts, a late Kultugeschichte museum, was an art advisor for the Rockefellers. In 1919,
after serving for Germany in the First World War, he began his involvement with
modern art and became close with artist who would become leading figures of the
German Expressionist movement, and was from then interested in the possibilities of
modern art. Valentiner, as one of the Rockefeller’s trusted art advisors, recommended
and discouraged purchases and led art trips through Europe for the family: Abby
sought him out for his interest in modern art, but his traditional expertise in
seventeenth-century Dutch art reassured Junior.147 He was instrumental in introducing
Abby to the world of German modern art during an art trip to Europe in the summer

of 1924.\textsuperscript{148} Valentiner wrote to Junior in August of 1931, warning him against having a hopelessly outdated, revivalist museum.

Valentiner suggested that “it also seems only logical to give to the marvelous original cloister courts…a setting in a building which is suggestive of the period whose works it contains, a building which, through its picturesque exterior, fits in the wild and rocky surroundings and through its marked silhouette” but cautioned against it being “too much like a composite copy of a medieval monastery” because it “is contrary to the opinions of most museum authorities” of the day.\textsuperscript{149} Although most museum professionals suggest a “shell without a specific style,” Valentiner suggests to make “the building itself an original piece of present day architecture” “through the medium of the ideas of [the architect’s] own time,” with “suggestion…given of the general effect in regard to the masses and outlines of these [medieval] buildings,” along with the original cloisters. Valentiner references Eliel Saarinen’s work in Detroit’s Cranbrook School (figs. 43, 44), which Saarinen had begun in 1924, and which was ongoing. The Cranbook School, the school for boys made between 1924 and 1927, followed the Ruskinian Arts and Craft tradition, which valued the independence of the craftsmen: craftsmen, while constructing the Cranbook School, were allowed to make their own choices within the program of the building, as shown by the sometimes asymmetrical mix of brick levelling and patterns, and the creative stone ornaments that echo medieval variability.\textsuperscript{150} But the Kingwood School for Girls (fig. 45), on the same campus as the Cranbrook School but built between 1929 and

\textsuperscript{148} Kert, 218.
\textsuperscript{150} “Architectural Design as Research Programs: The Schools at Cranbrook,” n.d., 63.
1931, the ornament was mechanized in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright and Art Deco, and the uniformity of the building, not Ruskinian variation, is emphasized.  

In this building, as in so many other places, the vestiges of the Gothic Revival are quickly shed in favor of Modernism. Valentiner praises them because they are “reminiscent of medieval architecture, yet are in style entirely original without being in any way what people call exaggeratedly modern.” The Cranbrook School buildings have only a faint connection to medieval structure and ornament, which grew less with each new building.

Valentiner rejected the charming period rooms that Breck and Collens were envisioning: “This building should however have no imitated Gothic and Romanesque chapels, no Romanesque portals or Gothic windows and buttresses, no tower imitating one.” Unlike Collens, who firmly believed that recreation can create equal “charm” and evoke the same atmosphere as original medieval architecture, Valentiner stated, “it has been proved over and over again that it is impossible to bring back to life the style of another epoch or to copy old buildings in such an manner that they are not a disappointment to everyone who has seen the originals.” The medieval era is the most impossible because “every imitation will prove to every sensitive person that the essentials, the spiritual part of it, which alone has value, are entirely lacking,” and the genuine architectural fragments of the Cloisters will make the failures of modern reproductions even more obvious.

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154 Valentiner.
155 Valentiner.
Valentiner seems intent on preventing others from making the mistakes he made in the Detroit Institute of the Arts, trying and failing to evoke interest and emotion by mixing freely original objects with modern work that pretends to be old. Valentiner rejected the basic tenet of revivalism, that using past styles can evoke the same feelings as the original structure: he now saw authenticity as completely tied to original materiality, and facsimiles or recreations as doomed to fail. The building could be “suggestive” of a past style, like the Romanesque or Gothic, but trying to force a medieval atmosphere through re-creation moves past suggestion into lies, and the building becomes outdated, false, failed architecture.

After Rockefeller received Valentiner’s extensive account of all the ways in which his new museum was incorrect, he sent the report to Collens, and asked for explanation. Collens came back blustering, insistent upon the value of recreation and of Gothic Revivalism in evoking emotion and spiritual experiences. He referenced his own pleasure in sitting in Trinity Church and the success of Riverside Church, and said that a shell of a building would not suit the art and architecture exhibited.\footnote{156} did not reckon with Valentiner’s most threatening point, that “there should be found, therefore, an architect capable of creating an original piece of architecture, while keeping the general outlines as given in the plan,” one who can suggest the medieval while creating something new.\footnote{157} Although Collens rejected Valentiner’s advice, and Rockefeller, who had patronized multiple projects that were based on the possibility of creating a spiritual or affective experience by recreating architecture, kept him as

\footnote{157} Valentiner, “W. R. Valentiner on Proposed Plan for the Cloisters Museum.”
architect, Valentiner’s letter shows how rapidly the world had turned against
historicism and recreation. James R. Rorimer, when he took over the project in 1933
after Joseph Breck’s death, shared most of Valentiner’s vision, attempting to create a
modernist building with medieval “masses and outlines” and frankly modern details
and work. Ultimately, Valentiner’s advice was, to a large degree, heeded, because it
represented the future of the museum experience.

Joseph Breck and Charles Collens: Historicism in Two Forms

In the fall of 1931 and spring of 1932, Breck and Collens exchanged many
letters about plans for the Cloisters. Their negotiations explored what it meant to be
authentic and successful museum, and their divergent priorities: Breck’s drive
towards historical accuracy, and Collens’ interest in atmosphere. Although generally
embracing revivalism, the two also sought simplicity and rejected the elaborate
Gothic ornamentation of Riverside Church, signaling the influence of Modernism on
their designs.

By October 1931, Collens had six men working on plans for the Cloisters, and
he and Breck were discussing ceilings, floors, doorways, and the general shape of
rooms, with rough plans of the three main levels (first floor, ground floor, and second
floor) produced by late October. On October 14th, Collens wrestled with the issue of
aesthetics versus fidelity within the Cloisters, when discussing the stone work that
surrounded the tomb of Armengol VII at Las Avallenas (fig. 47), built around 1300in
a Spanish monastic church, which would be placed in the Gothic Chapel. “The
original stonework,” Collens confessed frankly, “to my mind is atrocious. I think the
whole scale and design of the canopy is such as to materially detract from the beauty of the tomb itself. My feeling would be that the tomb should be set in a simple stone niche, which would be introduced in the masonry to accommodate the tomb. If we reproduce the original niche, we are going to have a fake piece of archeology, from which we are both trying to keep away.”158 In this letter, Collens aligns several different arguments to make his case: that the stonework is “atrocious,” that it will “detract” from the art object, and that recreation would create “a fake piece of archeology.” He often marshalled several arguments to make his position stronger, but the concerns begin with the aesthetic, meaning the museum’s atmosphere. As this photo from the built Cloisters in 1938 shows (fig. 48), Collens succeeded in convincing Breck, and the niche is even simpler than the vaulted ceilings and the windows.

From the beginning of the process, Collens and Breck were positioned themselves against other, more outlandish examples of Gothic Revivalism and aligning themselves with what they described as simple, neutral designs. Breck signaled his desire to avoid inferior medieval imitations, of the kind that Wilhelm Valentiner cautioned John D. Rockefeller against, in his October 26, 1931 letter to Collens: “I spent the last week end at New Haven. Have you seen the new Law-School and the Library? If so, I think you will agree with me that we ought to cross our hearts and swear by all the gods that wherever we have to introduce modern stonework such as columns and arches, that they will be kept to simple forms alone.

without any carved ornament!!” Sterling Memorial Library and Sterling Law Building, both designed by James Gamble Rogers and completed in 1931, centerpieces of the Collegiate Gothic campus, both feature elaborately carved pointed-arch windows and use Gothic-style sculpture to portray contemporary subjects (figs. 48, 49). On Sterling Law Building, there is a bulldog, Yale’s mascot, in the guise of a lawyer, and a gothic-style door carving of a policeman arresting a suspect (fig. 48). Breck’s disgust at these imaginative Gothic Revival ornaments and carvings displays both his deep fidelity to medieval sources and the growing discomfort with the fake-medieval architecture that Revivalism encouraged.

Breck’s chief concern, even more pronounced than his aversion to modern imitation ornamentation, was accuracy to medieval models. Five times between October of 1931 and Breck’s death in August of 1933, Breck wrote to Collens to insist on basing parts of the Cloister’s design on medieval examples. On October 27th, 1931, Breck cautioned Collens, “Regarding the Romanesque Chapel, were your sketches based on any definite model? I should be glad if you would let me know if you have any particular existing chapel in mind. If we could find on that came near meeting our requirements, would it not be better to follow this than to invent?” The Romanesque Chapel is one of the most explicitly period-room sites in the Cloisters, evoking an ecclesiastical atmosphere without including medieval stone. For Breck, such a reconstruction needed a “definite model.”

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In March of 1932, as Mary Leuchak recounts in “The Old World for the New,” one of the most significant problems of the Cloisters was decided. None of the four cloisters in the collection are complete, meaning that the four-sided walkway they form is significantly smaller than the original, noticeably changing the atmosphere of the cloisters. The Cuxa cloister is the largest, at half its original size, spacious enough to give some of the original effect. There are, in comparison, many fewer capitals in the Trie and Saint-Guilhem cloisters, forming cloisters with a central void just a few feet wide. In March, Collens suggested combining the Trie and Saint-Guilhem cloister, which would create a more atmospheric, spacious cloister. To convince Breck, he compared it to the organic layering of temporally distant styles he saw and appreciated in monasteries during his tour of France in 1931. Breck refused, concerned about inaccuracy to medieval sources and confusion to viewers. The cloisters stayed separate, and the Saint-Guilhem cloister never regained its lost medieval atmosphere.

The first blueprints, which were supposed to be the final plans but would in fact continue to be revised for over two years, were dated May 28th, 1932. The basic form was similar to the June 1931 plan: the Cuxa Cloister was in the center of the first floor, surrounded by galleries interrupted with a Romanesque and a Gothic Chapel on opposite sides of the building, and a tower resembling the tower at Cuxa filled with administrative, photo-developing, and other offices. Its domestic quarters, which Collens, in his report to Rockefeller after his trip to France, suggested by a

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two-story house, shrunk to a single second-floor room by May of 1932, to be used for domestic objects.

The varied characters of the rooms can be discerned from the materials used in them, which are outlined in the blueprints, which unfortunately could not be photographed due to security concerns. The more neutral rooms, like the St. Guilhem Cloister and the exhibition room have plaster walls and ceilings; the more period-esque rooms, like the Romanesque Chapel and the Entrance Hall, have stone walls and ceilings, and ones striking a balance may have, like the Late Gothic Hall and the Tapestry Room, plaster walls with wood ceilings.

For the next year after the first scale drawings were completed in May 1932, Breck continued to fiddle with the designs, to the great consternation of Collens and his architectural firm, which warned at one point that the paper would rip if they were forced to erase and redraw the scale drawings any more. They continued exchanging letters through the fall of 1932, battling along now-familiar lines. In November, Breck urged that, “In principle, I think we should follow the perfected styles rather than provincial variants or experiments. I wish we could find a good example of a chapel with the scheme 1 vaulting, and follow that in plan, proportions, etc., as far as possible. When we start to invent, there are so many pitfalls ahead of us.” The chapels, which imitated medieval styles without a definite model, were consistently an issue for both men.

By the spring of 1933, Collens was so frustrated by Breck’s constant adjustments that he left the project in the hand of Harold Willis, his assistant, who would become a partner in the firm after the Cloisters was completed. One of the
biggest questions left was of the Saint-Guilhem Cloister. The cloister was too fragile to be exposed to any weather, but as a cloister, it needed plenty of light and an airy atmosphere. From February through April of 1933, both the interior and the exterior of the Saint-Guilhem cloister were sketched, considered, and debated. On February 10th, Willis reported that they were producing two sets of drawing for the cloister:

“(1) With plaster walls above cloister; ceiling sash will have translucent glass with skylight above concealed by parapet. (2) Alternate design for square glazed openings with masonry piers above cloisters. Flat simple wooden ceiling to be whitewashed, per my sketch.”

In the first design, the ceiling would be translucent, but in the second, it would be a wooden ceiling, and the cloister would be artificially lit.

Breck’s 1932 sketch gives an idea of the cloister under the second scheme (fig. 50). Breck’s sketch is medieval in its atmosphere, with a faceless monk considering the fountain, and the high windows and plain vaulted ceiling are reminiscent of the Metropolitan’s Morgan Wing galleries. On April 3rd, after the first scheme had been chosen, Harold Willis sent two options of skylight styles (fig. 51). In both, the Cloister has an extended roof like the Cuxa Cloister around the walk, and the ceiling is a skylight, and with an unobtrusive ceiling light below. In this scheme, the cloister is supposed to look as much as possible like its original presentation, with a sloped roof over the covered walkway. However, by the final model (fig. 52), probably built in 1935, the roof had disappeared and above the medieval arches were just stark white walls, and the atmosphere had shifted from medieval evocation to modernist formalism.

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On May 23\textsuperscript{rd}, 1933, the members of the Cloisters Committee made a resolution that the plans including the suggestions of that day’s meeting represented “final solution of the building problem and that no further changes will be made.” This seemed to have healed the rift between Collens and Breck, and this promise was made with the best of intentions from each of the members. Joseph Breck went to Europe for the summer, and everyone involved was ready to finally begin building. On August 2, the 48-year-old Breck, taking a walk in a village in Switzerland, had a heart attack and died—a shock to his family and colleagues, and a seismic shift for the design of the cloisters.

**Rorimer, a Modern Museum Man, Takes Over**

Joseph Breck’s death necessitated an immediate reshaping of the Metropolitan and resulted in a new shift in focus for the nascent Cloisters. Until his death, Breck had been the curator of the massive Department of Decorative Arts, which included all American and European art besides painting from the medieval era to the most modern parts of the Metropolitan’s collection. The same department was in charge of a 13\textsuperscript{th} century sculpture of St. John, an 18\textsuperscript{th} century American child’s desk, and a 17\textsuperscript{th} century pendant reliquary, along with many thousands of other objects. For years, the department had been too bloated to be useful. After Breck’s death, the department was split into the Department of Medieval Art, the Department of Renaissance and Modern Art, and the Department of American Art, each with its own curator. James R. Rorimer, Breck’s assistant, who had graduated from Paul Sach’s Museum Course
only five years earlier, was the new curator of Mediaeval Art, which included the still-in-process Cloisters.

Although Breck’s death was a shocking, saddening event, Collens and Rorimer immediately returned to the business of the Cloisters. Although the plans of May 23rd, 1933 were supposed to be absolutely final, Rorimer worked diligently to simplify where he could, replace imitations with originals whenever possible, and frame the Cloisters as a modern museum, not as a medieval imitation. From the distance of decades, Rorimer identified his way of conceiving the cloisters as specifically aligned with the functionalist, modernist architecture that was sweeping the city. In a speech in 1962 to the Parson School of Design, to students at the apex of Modernism, he said: “[The Cloisters] was to be an architectural ensemble reminiscent of the pseudo-medieval architecture of the American college campus. For a moment I thought that I would prefer an assemblage of fragments reminiscent of Piranesi’s views of ancient Rome. And then some of my younger architect friends, contemporaries at the time, urged that we have a modern building with all the freshness and functionalism of the Bauhaus school of thought.” Although no documentary evidence was found to support these specific claims, it shows that, at least in retrospect, Rorimer perceived himself as fighting against the old guard towards “freshness and functionalism,” instead of assembling fragments.

On November 27th, 1934, George Blumenthal, William Sloane Coffin, the current president of the Metropolitan, Nelson Rockefeller, Junior’s son, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Collens, Herbert Winlock, the director, and Rorimer met for a major meeting in which Rorimer’s vision of simplifying the museum and avoiding imitation
was approved by the committee. Among the resolutions, the most vital ones were that
the entire second floor, which was supposed to include offices, vaults, closets, and
“the gothic room on the second floor, which as planned has no antique elements, be
omitted.”\textsuperscript{163} The second-floor gothic room was the last remnant of the domestic part
of the Cloisters, a “Prior’s Room” suited for small, more domestic objects. Other
telling resolutions on Rorimer’s priority of creating a successful, modern museum
included “That the imitation Swiss Renaissance paneling planned for the coat room
and sales lobby be supplanted by unornamented stone” and “That windows be used in
the blind Saint-Gaudens arcade to provide for a view of the garden, and that if
possible one or two antique windows be so used, and if such antique windows are not
procured simple lancet windows be used as in the architect’s plan.”\textsuperscript{164} Rorimer is
working not just to simplify the Cloisters, but specifically to cleanse it of the more
imitational, less genuine features, like “a period room with “no antique elements” and
“imitation Swiss Renaissance paneling.”

Rorimer could not change the medieval character of the Cloisters, so he
instead attempted to, in as many ways as possible, replace medieval imitations with
genuine artifacts. This process was possible due to his exceptional talent for
acquisition and close relationship with John D. Rockefeller, Jr., carefully forged
through meticulous record-keeping and making sure Rockefeller was as involved in
the process as possible. After that first major meeting, he continued on his campaign.
In February of 1935, “it was agreed to substitute a simple Gothic doorway for the

\textsuperscript{163} G. L Greenway, “Notes on the Meeting of the Committee of the Cloisters on November 27, 1933,”
November 27, 1933, Collection 32, Box 33, Cloisters Comittee Meetings, Cloisters Archive.
\textsuperscript{164} Greenway.
present modern Romanesque doorway (East elevation),” and in March, in a collection of “Major Building Changes which Mr. Rockefeller has Approved since the Committee Meeting on November 27, 1933” included “The redesigning of the Romanesque chapel to include the Romanesque stonework from Langon” and “Changes in the Romanesque hall including the installation of the frescoes and the simplification of the windows, capitals, etc.” The Romanesque Chapel was an atmospheric room which truly felt like a church, as this sketch from 1937 shows (fig. 53). By including real stonework from Langon, Rorimer made it closer to authentic, with less imitation: however, he was above all interested in the success of the museum, so he did not strive to make it obvious in the chapel which parts were medieval and which parts modern. He respected the atmospheric nature of the room, which was central to its success.165

Rorimer was aware of which spaces in the museum, like the Romanesque chapter, needed to feel atmospheric, meaning that the modern parts should be able to blend in with the original architecture. The Cuxa Cloister, the heart of the museum, required a semblance of the medieval even in its modern architecture. In its center was placed a modern reproduction of the fountain of the original cloister (the original was in the Philadelphia Art Museum), and Rorimer told Collens in May of 1935, “I am very anxious, if possible, to have the finished fountain look considerably less mechanical than the drawing, and I hope that the stonecutters will be able to get something of the spirit of the original.”166 Although Rorimer was generally against

165 James J. Rorimer, “Major Building Changes Which Mr. Rockefeller Has Approved since the Committee Meeting on November 27, 1933,” 13 1935, Collection 32, Cloisters Archive.
imitation, in the Cuxa Cloister, he sought the “spirit of the original,” a Ruskian conception of craftsmanship and the possibilities of the Gothic. The Metropolitan museum had the quarry where the Cuxa stone was originally extracted from reopened to make sure there would be an exact match between modern and antique elements.

In a fascinating contrast, next to the Cuxa Cloister, Rorimer reassembled a medieval room with deliberate clarity about which parts were modern and which original. Breck’s dream of a “chapter house,” which was a meeting-place for monks in monasteries, present when he sketched abbey living quarters integrated into the museum, was realized by March 13, 1934, but not in the fashion he imagined. Rorimer bought a chapter house from Pontaut, to be disassembled and reconstructed on site. In the final Cloisters, the Pontaut Room (fig. 54) contains no exhibitions of smaller objects or attempts at atmosphere beyond the original materiality of the chapter house. Obviously-modern bricks fill gaps in the stone, between the stone arches there is plaster, and on the floor a new tile floor. The modern sections were not hidden with stone, which could blend into the original room, like in the Cuxa Cloister, but obviously displayed in brick and plaster. The original architectural material and its aesthetic quality is the only thing to pay attention to in this space.

The final revision of the blueprints was completed on May 1st, 1935. Throughout the spring of 1934, possible changes were being shown in plaster models before they were decided upon. Unfortunately, the model (fig. 55) in the Metropolitan’s photo archives is not dated, but the inclusion of the Late Gothic Chapel, which was approved by March 13, 1934 “if it can be acquired” and was abandoned in 1937 when the acquisition fell through, gives a timeframe. In the model,
the exterior is pared-down revivalism. The tower has simple decoration, and the Bonnefont Cloister, the enclosed cloister on the lower right corner, has buttresses supporting it. But the windows are quite simple, and even the Gothic Chapel, on the lower left, does not have exterior ornamentation besides buttresses. The models of the individual rooms show the variety of styles contained within the relatively uniform exterior. The Saint-Guilhem Cloister in the model (fig. 56) is a series of voids, with the only decoration coming from the columns, capitals, and bases of the cloister and the antique corbels on the walls. In the Gothic Chapel model (fig. 57), columns, pointed arches, the stone baldacchino around the doorway, and the antique window all create a more atmospheric, fuller sense of a room. Even in this room, the clearly modern simplicity of the niche around the tomb is evidence of the drive away from total reproduction or imitation of medieval context. Collens wrote to Rorimer about that niche in October 1933, “I am glad to know that you will either put in the original niche over the tomb, or a much simpler motif. I hate to reproduce that motif in modern stone.”

Marc Eidlitz and Sons., the contractors, had begun work on the ramparts, the fortress-like walls surrounding the Cloisters and transitioning to the park, in December 1933, and by March of 1935 work began on the Cloisters itself. The major change from the model to the final plans (fig. 6) was that in 1937, the Late Gothic Chapel from Chauvirey-le-Châtel was given up on due to acquisition problems which were could delay the completion of the building, and replaced with the Boppard Room, a small corner with beautiful stained glass and tapestries but no other

distinguishing architectural features. In these plans, the flow of visitors is centered upon the Cuxa Cloister, but it with possible detours and spaces to linger out of the chronological flow of time. The cloisters do not follow the chronological flow from the Romanesque to the Late Gothic (to fifteenth century on the lower floor): they are embedded as independent experiences with different arrangements and atmospheres. Almost every gallery (though not the chapels or the Spanish Room) opens out into at least one cloister, which integrates them into the spaces. This means that any path through the gallery can include multiple stops in the cloisters. The south and east sides of the building use exterior buttresses, but the other two do not, meaning that the “medieval” atmosphere is different in different views of the building.

Markers of a Museum in Lightings, Pedestals, and Labels

After the building was fully decided upon, Rorimer began to dedicate himself to the details of signage, installation, and lighting. Rorimer’s signs were starkly modern, with no medieval flourishes and very small serifs (fig. 58). One of the final battles between modern and medieval design in the Cloisters was waged in January of 1938 about a plaque to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in the entrance lobby. Rockefeller had been the source of almost all the objects in the Cloisters, making the credit line on the objects’ labels somewhat redundant. Instead of thanking Rockefeller on each label, Rorimer decided to write one plaque thanking Rockefeller for all he had done for the Cloisters. Charles Collens offered to design the inscription based on “Romanesque” lettering, attaching as an example the Romanesque page from the classic *Handbook of*
Ornament by Franz Sales Meyer (fig. 59). Rorimer rejected the offer, saying in explanation that he, the director, and the president “favor a modern, legible type of lettering based on good, old roman lettering… I hope you will not think too harshly of us for deciding not to use the Medieval style of lettering which you suggested.” Collens accepted his loss, saying that “while I should like to see a little more local character in the lettering for the inscription, I am apparently out-voted.” In the final Cloisters, the plaque has simple, legible lettering without flourishes (fig. 60).

Neither Copy nor Composite: Rorimer’s Description of the Cloisters

Rorimer’s dedication to making the Cloisters a modern museum is particularly clear in his language about the Cloisters as it opened and as he began to write about it. In a review of the Cloisters, printed a few days after it opened, a reporter writing in the New York Times, Edward Alden Jewell, notes, "Here we have a building, as Mr. Rorimer points out, that is neither a copy nor, in the strict architectural sense, a composite." Jewell quoted two paragraphs from Rorimer, and in the second, Rorimer had written, “Although decorative effects have often been obtained by arranging antique objects without relation to their original use, this procedure was considered inconsistent with the purpose of a museum and was avoided at The Cloisters. **...** Prominence has been given the exhibits by making the

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architectural setting unobtrusive. Though the backgrounds are medieval in style, the simplest precedents have been followed for the modern work.\textsuperscript{172} The modern work is not just simple, it is “the simplest” that precedent can find, suggesting both historical models valued for their crafted simplicity and unornamented modern creations evoking medieval style. Rorimer repudiated the practice of earlier museums and other buildings to make antique objects into “decorative effects,” not regarding their function.

In 1941, Rorimer, when writing an introduction to \textit{Mediaeval Monuments at the Cloisters: As They Were and As They Are}, was even more strident in the non-historicism, non-revivalism of his museum: in short, the museum’s validity in an age of modernism. He emphasized that the various medieval architectural elements “have been incorporated functionally in the structure of the building,” not as ornament. He actively distanced the Cloisters from a Revivalist fantasy: “The building . . . is not copied from any mediaeval building, nor is it a composite of various buildings. . . it was our purpose to provide an appropriate, unified ensemble for the diverse architectural elements. The simplicity of the building grew out of a desire to show these examples of Romanesque and Gothic architecture and architectural details, together with tapestries, sculpture, furniture, and metalwork, in uncluttered and unconfused surroundings. By purposely not placing objects here and there for the sake of obtaining dubious decorative effects, it has been possible to avoid the kinds of settings that have made many private houses, and even museums, the anathema of some of our contemporaries.”\textsuperscript{173} Implicitly, he is distancing the museum from period

\textsuperscript{172} Jewell.
room curatorial practices, aligning the museum with the future, not the past. Rorimer does not mention the direct historical antecedents of the Cloisters, like the model of Monsempron and the tower, modelled on the tower of the Cuxa cloister. Instead, he emphasizes that the Cloisters are “uncluttered and unconfused surroundings” for the art objects, aligning the museum with the new home of the MoMA, where well-spaced objects hang on neutral walls, each a complete aesthetic experiences, and with the “absolute architectural simplicity” of the Art Institute of Chicago’s new rooms. This formulation of the Cloisters as “uncluttered” separates it from atmospheric, immersive period rooms, which used “clutter,” a mix of objects, to engage visitors, and Barnard’s original Cloisters and Isabella Stewart Gardner’s museum, which used architectural settings for “dubious decorative affects.” Rorimer is aware that “some of our contemporaries,” advocate for modernism and reject outdated, ornamental facsimiles: Rorimer embraced, rather than pushed against, that view.

*Mediaeval Monuments at the Cloisters* also contains important insight into how Rorimer saw the act of collection. Rorimer describes the purpose of the book as to “tell unemotionally and unequivocally in pictures the story of the various monuments: their virtual abandonment, the collecting of them, and their reinstallation at the Cloisters.”¹⁷⁴ In contrast to the emotional tenor of past medievalist work, which focused on the spiritual vitality of the Middle Ages and the glory of the Christian art, Rorimer promised to tell the story “unemotionally.” Rorimer also began the monument’s story with their “virtual abandonment,” recasting Barnard and the Metropolitan’s collecting as a rescue mission. In the same sentence, Rorimer is

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promising a new, less emotional type of medieval scholarship and casting himself as a knight in shining armor for the abandoned monuments. In the accompanying pictures, Rorimer shows the medieval artifacts in their ruined states, pre-rescue, and then restored to glory in the Cloisters, like the moss-covered, dirty interior of the Chapter House at Pontaut, set against the perfectly clean, perfectly restored Chapter House at The Cloisters, asking the reader where the architecture seems best suited (fig. 61).

But, as Annabel Jane Wharton notes in _Architectural Agents_, he also shows the dismemberment that accompanies such rescues, in oddly affecting photos that document a deeper loss than the text attests to.\(^{175}\) In plates XI and XII (fig. 62), Rorimer shows the wall left behind when the Trie Cloister was removed: broken stone and brick and a sense of emptiness. Set against that poignancy, the utter tranquility and wholeness of the Trie Cloister seems shallow and uncaring.

Overall, the Cloisters, particularly under the leadership of James R. Rorimer, self-consciously sought modernism through simplicity and by downplaying historicized tendency, even as it left some rooms as atmospheric and historical. The modern sections of the Cloisters are not supposed to hide their modernity under a historic glaze, but to provide an unobtrusive, uncluttered background for the works of art on view. This tendency grew throughout the project, as the International Style gained importance in New York City and period rooms become more outdated, particularly once Rorimer became director in August 1933. Although the Cloisters is visibly constructed of wood and stone, not the glass, steel, and concrete hailed by the International Style as the materials of the future, the way those materials are treated

\(^{175}\) Wharton, _Architectural Agents_, 24.
shows the force of modernism, even in a project that began as a historicized revivalist concept.
Modern, Medieval, Or Not A Museum At All: Reviews and Experiences of the Cloisters

Although correspondence and monographs about the Cloisters can reveal a greater depth of the intentions and concepts behind the museum, it is most importantly a museum, and it is best defined by the experience of visitors. I will begin with contemporary reviews at the time of its opening, showing the extraordinarily varied ways critics saw the museum. By including a wide range of contemporary reviews, from architectural journal as well as large and small museums and magazines, analysis can probe whether the Cloisters created a unified experience, or a fractured one. Next, the reader will be walked through certain spaces of the Cloisters which are emblematic of the different approaches the museum takes. By visiting a more charming space, a more modernist space, one which combines medieval atmosphere with modernism, and one which shifted from modernist to atmospheric, the reader will be able to consider how the issues outlined in the previous two chapters influence the contemporary museum experience and the experience of 1938.

Opposing Experiences at the Same Museum: Reviews of the Cloisters

Reviews of the Cloisters when it opened were generally positive, but they were not consistent with each other. Reviewers seemed to be experiencing different museums when discussing the architecture: a completely medieval museum, a surprisingly modern one, or one that did not feel like a museum at all.
Malcolm Vaughan, an art critic for the *New York Times*, saw it as a portal to the medieval, with a completely medieval atmosphere and design. Malcolm Vaughan was no absolute traditionalist, and wrote a response which, at least in part, defended modern art after an article in the *Times* dismissed it in 1944, but in the case of the Cloisters, he could only see the medieval. In his review, published in the *Times* magazine the weekend before the Cloisters opened, on May 8th, he began with a remembrance of Charles Elliot Norton’s desire “to quicken…in the youth of a land barren of memorials of former times, a sense of connection with the past and of gratitude for the efforts and labors of other races and former generations.” That “sense of connection,” he tells us, is found in the Cloisters: “the new Cloisters is almost literally a medieval monument, many of its stones, columns, doorways, windows and ceilings and all of its treasure being original pieces, dating from the period. With its Romanesque and Gothic chapels,” and its many other medieval parts, “it arouses so vividly what Norton wished for us—‘a sense of connection with the past’—that one might say you may now walk into the Middle Ages by riding half an hour on the subway.” Vaughan spends the majority of the rest of the article, seven sections, describing his views of the virtues of the Middle Ages, mentioning, off-hand, the Cloisters only three times until his final paragraph. Vaughan explains the religious and social systems of the Middle Ages, how unions, “women’s high place in society,” and capitalism began in the Middle Ages, and that “the most appealing the most original, and loftiest aspects of the Middle Ages derived from cloistered meditations.” Vaughan tells us that this history will allow us to better understand the

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story of the art of the Middle Ages, which is told at the Cloisters. Vaughan’s review shows the popular understanding of the Middle Ages, influenced by early forms of medievalism, as a pure, Anglo-Saxon source of all that is good about the 20th century, and all that we have lost.

Edward Alden Jewell, who, like Vaughan, embraced modernism in art (although not abstract art), also prioritized the medieval in the Cloisters. Writing a more traditional review entitled “The Cloisters Treasure,” and sub headed, “An Epitome of the Middle Ages, Unique Branch of Metropolitan is Opened” for the New York Times, printed the day after the Cloisters opened to the public, he acknowledges the modernity of the Cloisters more than Vaughan, but he still focuses on the “charm and spacious stillness of the extraordinarily authentic ‘atmosphere’ of the place.” The “charm” of the “atmosphere” of the Cloisters was a main preoccupation of Charles Collens in the earlier years of the project, particularly after his 1931 trip to France, that is less emphasized by Rorimer. Jewell praises that a visitor is “never fact-consciously disturbed by a break in the harmonious relationship of one element to another.” Jewell sees a successful illusion of harmony between unrelated elements, and thinks it is better for the visitor (and, assumedly, for him). Cynthia Armstrong, in the journal Scholastic, in October of 1938, published an article entitled “Middle Ages on-the-Hudson,” which, although it recognized the modernity of the architecture of the Cloisters, chiefly praised its medieval atmosphere. It begins, “The gentle note of a monastery bell sounds hourly from the tower of The Cloisters…its sweet, calm voice seems to say, ‘No hurry. Here there is time for everything. This is the abode of

177 Jewell, “THE CLOISTERS TREASURE.”
centuries, not hours.”

This evocation of the monastery bell is part of “an illusion charmingly created by The Cloisters” because “a suggestion of antiquity clings about the red-tiled roof and the gray stones of the new building.” Illusions are embraced as a charming, evocative experience: the “contrast between” garden and Cuxa Cloister, the most historically recreated part of the Cloisters, “is delightful.” Lamont comments on the view of “the mighty arch of the George Washington Bridge—another sharp reminder of the twentieth century,” but instead of feeling the twentieth century within the design of the Cloisters, she places it in the Middle Ages: “The Cloisters, however, is modeled after that of a late thirteenth century abbey.” For both reviewers, the modernist undertones are lost.

Gertrude Lamont, writing for the Washington Post on July 31st, 1938, praised Collens and Breck for creating “peace in the sheltered walks of the garden, so serene that the roar of the city fades from memory” while still “avoid[ing] the easier way of reproducing a medieval building or group of buildings. Instead of that, they built a plan around various architectural elements and integrated them so successfully that there is no feeling of incongruity” in the different periods of medieval architecture included. Like Jewell and other writers, Lamont praises the peaceful atmosphere and harmony, the lack of “incongruity,” but she praises it because the harder, yet more effective, modern path was chosen instead of a medieval copy.

\[179\] Armstrong.
\[180\] Armstrong.
Critics who approach the Cloisters from an architectural, rather than an artistic or more general perspective, tended to prize the modernism of the Cloisters more strongly, showing how essential modernism had become in the architectural world. Lewis Mumford, the architecture critic for *New Yorker* and an important cultural commentator, goes even farther in identifying the Cloisters’ embrace of modern details as its key to success. Mumford, the most famous critic to write a review of the Cloisters, was a supporter of modernism, although it was not unqualified by his specific utopian ideals.

Mumford was on the board that advised the MoMA’s *International Style* exhibit, and he wrote a strident essay in *The New Republic* in 1928 advocating for modernism as the only possible style suited to the modern era.

Although he was not uncritical of the International Style, he was much more of a modernist than a revivalist. Merrill Schleier identified his dislike of ornament (and therefore the Gothic), and his adoration of stark functionalism as “gendered and classed” in “Lewis Mumford's Gendered and Classed Modernism” (1998). Schleier discusses how Mumford equated ornamented buildings with too-feminine women, of both high and low classes, and rejected them in favor of working-class, masculine, strong simplicity. This opposition dovetails with the way that the Gothic and Romanesque were seen as gendered in relation to each other. The Gothic was delicate, ornamented, and feminine, while the Romanesque was strong, sturdy,

185 Schleier.
simple, and masculine. Henry Adams, in *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, writes, “the difference in sex is not imaginary…What the Roman could not express flowered into the Gothic; what the masculine mind could not idealize in the warrior, it idealized in the woman”: while Mumford sees an inferior and superior, Adams sees them as complementary, “a union nearer to the ideal than is often allowed in marriage.”\(^{186}\)

When Mumford thought the Cloisters would be a Gothic Revival building, based on its architect, he expected to hate it like he hated Collen’s Riverside Church: “Mr. Rockefeller, it will be recalled, wishes generously to replace the Barnard Cloisters, the most perfect museum in the city, with a ‘genuine’ Gothic building – something like the Riverside Church, one has every reason to fear.”\(^{187}\)

But when the Cloisters combined two unornamented, masculine styles, the Romanesque and modern, Mumford found himself shocked at how much he liked the Cloisters.

Other articles praise the approach to the building and the medieval atmosphere it creates, but Mumford begins the review with “an original dislike” of the building because “to an original dislike for the new Cloisters as a figure in the landscape. This south European building, with its tawny, tiled roofs, caps the northerly one of the twin hills in Fort Tryon Park, and confronts the George Washington Bridge as the Virgin of Chartres, in Henry Adams’ parable, might have confronted the Dynamo. But in this case the Virgin loses out.” The Cloisters becomes feminized as the Virgin, losing to the modern, masculine form of the George Washington Bridge. The Cloisters leads to “one’s feeling of being bewitched,” worse than “fake Gothic like

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\(^{186}\) Adams, *Mont-St-Michel and Chartres*, 34; Adams, 33.
that of Riverside Church,” which “is plainly fake at any distance.\textsuperscript{188} While other commentators might use the word enchanted, Mumford uses the negative, gendered “betwitched” to describe his suspicion of the medieval atmosphere.

Mumford’s suspicion is appeased by his discovery that the Cloisters is \textit{not} trying to be harmonious, and that it embraces modern details: “The time-battered Gothic windows at the east side are frankly set in the masonry wall without any attempt to make the whole unnaturally homogenous. This candor is repeated within. The handrail of the stairs is simple and severe; the side lights and the modern lights are honest and modern, harmonious with the object on view because they make no effort to bridge the gap between the flickering candle and the implacably steady electric light…The functional elements of the design are either authentic or unobtrusive.”\textsuperscript{189} In contrast to many of the other commentators, who praised the harmony of the art and its surroundings as being impeccably connected, Mumford sees that it is “harmonious…because they make no effort to bridge the gap” between the modern and medieval, and because “the whole” is not “unnaturally homogenous.” Like Mumford, the review for \textit{Time} praised the museum at the expense of the neo-Gothic in other buildings of the period. The reviewer says that the Cloisters, “designed with notable-sanity” by Charles Collens, “escapes the clutter of ornate neoGothic.”\textsuperscript{190} Only a few years earlier, Collens had designed, and defended, the neoGothic, but this reviewer is grateful that he escaped it.

\textsuperscript{189} Mumford.
\textsuperscript{190} “Magnificent Monastery,” \textit{Time} 31, no. 21 (May 23, 1938): 60.
Mumford explicitly connects the simplicity to both modern and Romanesque design: “The studied absence of the superfluous characterizes both the setting and the display; it is this that emphasizes the underlying kinship between modern and Romanesque art…This rigor of selection is responsible for the clean, spacious sense that the building has even on a day of crowds. It is the least cluttered of museums.”

Modernism, as encapsulated by the International Style, emphasized “the studied absence of the superfluous,” the rejection of “cluttered” design, a “clean, spacious” experience of buildings that emphasized voids and space. Mumford felt all this within the Cloisters, and saw it as an echo of the Romanesque design displayed within. His comments also, again, reflected the ways that modern and Romanesque architecture were both defined as masculine, against the “cluttered,” feminine Gothic.

Architectural Record, in “The Cloisters: A New Technique in Exhibition Design,” also praises the unornamented, modern feeling of the Cloisters. Instead of the typical review photo of the Cuxa Cloister and garden, and the building surrounded by nature, Architectural Record uses stark, dramatically lit photos: one of two statues, each against its own wall, one of the Pontaut Chapter House in construction and with its final plaster-and-brickfill of the ancient structure, and two of the modernist Saint-Guilhem Cloisters, with columns bare against unornamented white walls. (SHOW PHOTO fig.) Architectural Record begins with an account of the “preservation of historic architecture” in Ford’s Dearborn Village, Rockefeller’s Williamsburg, The Metropolitan museum’s American Wing, and then sets out what is different about the Cloisters: “The Cloisters was to be neither a composite nor a copy of old

191 Mumford, “The Sky Line.”
Instead, the Cloisters “supplemented” original stonework “with modern work based on unornamented prototypes which in no way detract from the medieval effect,” and because of that, also “provides a setting for exhibits of a less architectural nature, which is at once unobtrusive and appropriate.” Because of the “unornamented” background, the Cloisters can be an effective setting for all of its objects, not a distracting reconstruction like other examples mentioned.

One of the harshest descriptions of the Cloisters, printed in the *Hartford Courant* on November 27th, 1938, was subtitled: “N.Y.’s Medieval Museum, Rockefeller Gift, Lures Throngs Apparently Because It Is As Little Like a Museum As Possible.” The article began, “The extraordinary popular success of The Cloisters proves, apparently, that one good way to make the public like a museum is to make the latter as little like a museum as possible.” This anonymous writer saw museums in a narrowly defined way, presumably as the common neoclassical, white-walled, grand museums like the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, that excluded the “medieval” Cloisters: “it would almost be possible to walk through this medieval building without realizing it was a museum at all.” This writer does not emphasize that the building is a modern, not fully medieval, one, but he does not praise or enjoys its atmosphere as other commentators do. To him, it is an old building, not a museum, which requires, possibly, “long cases full of small objects” or “vast collections of armour,” two things he noted the Cloisters lacked: treasures.
like the Unicorn Tapestries are “just hanging on a wall.”\textsuperscript{196} The simplicity of display and design, and the medieval atmosphere, remove it from consideration as a museum.

**Reaching the Cloisters**

The site of the Cloisters has been a defining feature of it since Barnard’s original museum, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr’s gift of Fort Tryon Park in 1930 was contingent of reserving four acres for a future museum. The Cloisters is dramatically perched at the height of Fort Tryon Park, meant to be silhouetted against the sky from below on approach. It is a significant distance from the Metropolitan, both across and several miles to the north, one of the first remote “branch” museums in New York City. During its process of building, the neighborhood on the hill below the park was being developed and apartment building were being built, but those residents were not assumed to be the main patrons of the Cloisters. Access was considered from downtown, particularly from the Upper West Side, where the Eighth Avenue subway existed, and the Upper East Side, where bus service reached the Cloisters. Access via car was also considered, including a special bathroom in the gatehouse for chauffeurs. There was a consistent discussion of the problem of parking within the correspondence, which was solved in the 1930s via entrance up a “medieval ramp,” which deposited visitors into the lobby.\textsuperscript{197} Today, parking is provided outside the building, in lines across the street.

Commentators remarked on how isolated it was, with one writer in the *Hartford Courant* saying, “The park is in the far northwest corner of Manhattan, so

\textsuperscript{196} “Extraordinary Success Crowns ‘The Cloisters.’”
\textsuperscript{197} “Extraordinary Success Crowns ‘The Cloisters.’”
located that casual ‘dropping in’ is not possible.”\textsuperscript{198} The bus, then and today, drops patrons off directly in front of the museum, but access via subway requires walking through Fort Tryon Park. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was unhappy during the process of building with the lack of a non-roadway path to the Cloisters, and on my latest visit, coming from the subway for the first time, I found myself briefly lost, and walked along a road a portion of my path.

The approach is striking, and from the distance, the building does look quite medieval. The tower is silhouetted against the sky: Rockefeller sought a fortified look, which was pared down but not eliminated, even as it was not truly in the monastic character of the building. A publicity shot (fig. 63) from the Metropolitan of the building from the south, with the tower rising above the trees, from the Metropolitan, with was common in the articles, and gives off an air of rugged naturalness. Articles described its exterior as “[resembling] strikingly a chapel in Avila, Spain, built in the twelfth century,”\textsuperscript{199} “this unique embodiment of the Middle Ages” which “caps a smiling terraced summit,” and other phrases which praise its medieval feeling on the landscape. Lewis Mumford, architecture critic for the New Yorker, confessed “to an original dislike” because “at a distance, the Cloisters looks not like the excellent museum that it is but like a transplanted building, picked up by the jinn and whisked through the sky—not so much an honest relic as a wish.” To all commentators, the approach is distinctly medieval, but to Mumford it is a dishonest “wish.” The historicized architecture is more complete from the exterior than in the interior.

\textsuperscript{198} “Extraordinary Success Crowns ‘The Cloisters,’”
\textsuperscript{199} Jewell, “THE CLOISTERS TREASURE.” (middle ages on the Hudson)
Pilgrimage to the Museum

There is an assumed separation between the Cloisters and the neighborhood that surrounds it: The Cloisters was moved from its original home on Fort Washington Avenue when apartment buildings began to be built around Barnard’s building. That neighborhood, a mix of German and Eastern European Jews and Irish immigrants, was a part of the expansion of Manhattan and the increased immigration of the time. Neither Jews nor Irish immigrants would much of their European heritage within the Cloisters: at the time of opening, it was almost exclusively French and Spanish art, with some Christian German sculpture. These immigrants were not the intended main audience; travelers from downtown, and those with their own automobiles or even automobiles with chauffeurs were more catered to. The anticipated audience was not directly articulated, but seemed to be from the mostly-downtown art museum audience, rather than from the surrounding neighborhoods. Particularly during the Depression, catering to visitors with cars, and providing a gatehouse for their chauffeurs, indicates that the museum expects at least some of its visitors to be upper class.

Because the Cloisters is so geographically separated from the rest of the New York City art world, the experience of visitors can be seen as a sort of “pilgrimage.” In “The Universal Survey Museum” (1980), Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach discuss how visitors to a universal survey museum “enact a ritual” because “the museum itself—the installations, the layout of rooms, the sequence of collections – creates and experience that resembles traditional religious experiences” and demands the ritual of
walking through the museum.\textsuperscript{200} For Duncan and Wallach, that ritual “equates state authority with the idea of civilization,” and it enlists art to be part of a narrative of progress which depends on state power.\textsuperscript{201} Although the Cloisters is not a directly state-sponsored museum, as Duncan and Wallach focus on, it is part of the major, universal Metropolitan, which Duncan and Wallach identify as one of the ritualized survey museums.

Although I do not take the same approach as Duncan and Wallach in analyzing the museum, their understandings of how the motions of visiting a museum can mimic a religious experience are important for understanding the Cloisters, a nominally secular space which, in its architecture and collection, evokes a medieval monastery. Although the Cloisters was moved from Fort Washington in part due to the building of apartment buildings which would overpower Barnard’s Cloisters, most of its audience was assumed to be coming not from the neighborhood of Washington Heights, but from farther south in Manhattan, either via car, the A train, or from the new bus line. Like the medieval monasteries it is based upon, the Cloisters is isolated, with only water and nature (along with the George Washington Bridge) visible from it. It is designed to be approached from the south, with the tower on its northeast side; the north side (fig. 64) is significantly more streamlined and less medieval. The museum goer becomes both tourist and pilgrim. The final walk through the Fort Tryon Park, ascending to the top of the hill from the subway, presents tantalizing glimpses and vistas of nature. The visitor knows they are truly


\textsuperscript{201} Duncan and Wallach, 47.
near when the rough Manhattan schist of the ramparts, leftovers from the path of the Eight Avenue Subway construction, transitions to the more refined granite of the building.\textsuperscript{202} The long travel required to get to the Cloisters can be seen as a part of a pilgrimage where visitors go to experience a semi-secularized object of beauty and a sense of spiritual peace in place of a relic.

The Cloisters was and still is consistently presented as a spiritual refuge from the rest of Manhattan, worth a pilgrimage. Rockefeller, in his remarks upon the opening of the Cloisters, remarked that “the wholesome and profitable use of leisure, now so startlingly prevalent, is one of the great problems of the day.”\textsuperscript{203} In May of 1938, unemployment reached 19.74\% in America, so it seems unlikely that most people felt as though one of “the great problems of the day” was how to use their leisure.\textsuperscript{204} The solution could be found, in part, in “The Cloisters in their new environment, surrounded by nature at her best” which may “become another stimulating center for the profitable use of leisure” where “those who come under the influence of this place go out to face life with new courage and restored faith because of the peace, the calm, the loveliness they have found here.”\textsuperscript{205} For the unemployed or those with what Rockefeller saw as too much leisure time, their faith can be “restored” once influenced by the peace and beauty of the Cloisters. Mumford, who was suspicious of a faked medieval atmosphere, still felt that the Cloisters’ setting and views were “as much a refreshment for the spirit as are its finest memorials from

\textsuperscript{202} Husband, “Creating the Cloisters,” 46.
\textsuperscript{203} “Opening Exercises, The Cloisters.”
\textsuperscript{204} National Bureau of Economic Research, “Unemployment Rate for United States,” FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, August 17, 2012, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/M0892AUSM156SNBR.
\textsuperscript{205} “Opening Exercises, The Cloisters.”
the past.” Mumford find spiritual solace in the Cloisters because “the extreme opposite, in position, in sense of life, in feeling, of all that exists architecturally in the insolent towers at the other end of the island.” Even Mumford is not immune to imagining the past activities of monks within a monastery, or remarking that “a little of that ancient peace still broods over this museum; you can walk around one of these quiet gardens and even discover whether or not you have a soul.”

Today’s reviews of the Cloisters on Yelp also emphasize that the Cloisters provides an escape from the fast-paced movement of New York City. They include often include the journey to the Cloisters as an important part of the experience: “The crowds of Midtown getting you down? Walk over to Madison Avenue and take the M4 bus on a scenic ride up to the northern reaches of Manhattan. Last stop: The Cloisters”; “As a New Yorker, sometimes you just need a break from all the ambulance sirens and slow walkers crowding up the streets... and The Cloisters are the perfect escape. Still located in NYC (although a far trek for those of us in Brooklyn), they’re a getaway from the city within the city”; “The whole environment is quite tranquil. It's a nice place to get away from the noise/chaos of life and just explore a new area”; “Really nice break from the city!! Great place to go over the summer to find some peace!!!!” For those looking to escape the city, the medieval atmosphere brings tranquility, beauty, and peace.

The walk through the plan of the Cloisters is similar to the ritual described by Duncan and Wallach, in that one goes from the past towards the present, but it is

206 Mumford, “The Sky Line.”
interrupted by cloisters, which pause the educational, aesthetic ritual. Particularly in the Cuxa Cloister, the regular rules of a museum which govern visitors’ behavior are relaxed— they are encouraged to sit by the art and can even lean on the columns, smell flowers, touch statues, fountains, and water, and almost lounge. Within the cloister, particularly on a nice day, the pressure to keep moving, or to study objects aesthetically, is abated, and visitors can pause and act in a freer manner. Charlotte Klonk, in *Spaces of Experience* (2009), writes that in the early nineteenth century, at the National Gallery in London, curators “complained that mothers came there solely to teach their children to walk,” behavior that was eliminated from most museums in the later nineteenth and twentieth century as the social codes for museum visits became stricter.208 In the Cuxa Cloister, though, toddlers happily run through the paths that form the symbolic cross on the garden: it is a space where the normal codes of museum behavior do not apply. Even though it is not covered by the same ritual actions, like Duncan’s ritual, it functions to give the visitor spiritual renewal and a sense of removal from the outside world.

**Entering the Cloisters**

When the visitor enters the museum, there is an immediate atmospheric affect from the limestone interior. In summer, the first step into the museum is surprisingly, refreshingly cool, which signals to the visitor that the heat and crowds of the city have been left behind. Within the entrance, there is a guard and an immediate set of stairs, and “the handrail of the stairs is simple and severe,” Mumford writes. Today, there is

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208 Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 1.
a line of black-and-white large format photos hanging on the right side of the stairwell as you go up, showing Barnard’s cloister and the process of creation this building. The photos, when considered, give context to the creation of the Cloisters how it was created, but the black and white photos blend into the moderately lit grey wall. The entrance is not accessible, and the Cloister’s landmark status forestalls accessibility renovations. There are sixty stairs to reach the first floor. A van can meet visitors who need mobility access at the entrance for those using public transportation, and there is a separate parking area for visitors who need mobility access who arrive via car, although the cobblestones are difficult to navigate in a wheelchair. Visitors who need accessibility services are urged to call or email the Cloisters in advance, according to the website, but do not need to. The Langdon Chapel and the Early Gothic Hall are the only two galleries which are completely inaccessible due to the presence of stairs, but visitors will need to go through back passages and staff-only areas, accompanied by staff, to reach other exhibits. The lack of a public elevator is a major flaw, making visitors who need accessibility options greatly dependent on the staff. Unlike at the Met 5th Avenue, there are not hearing or sign accessibility options.

After depositing coats and bags at a strictly-enforced coat check and walking up a narrower, winding set of stairs, visitors reach the lobby. Originally, visitors via car arrived immediately into the lobby, which the reviewer from the Hartford

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210 “Love Everything about the Cloisters - This Review Is for Those Who Are Disabled or Need Wheelchair Access - Review of The Met Cloisters, New York City, NY - TripAdvisor.”
Courant described as “a vaulted chamber like an anteroom of an old castle.” After the cramped experience of the winding stairs, the high ceilings are striking. The octagonal room contains a modern desk, and to the right is the store, exposed to view only in the doorway. A year after the Cloisters opened, in September of 1939, Collens visited and discovered a desk selling things within the entrance. He wrote in a furious letter to Rorimer, “I think the atmosphere of an “Old World Cloister” is absolutely destroyed by the impression created on seeing this sales table in the entrance.” On the letter, in Rorimer’s hand, is a note saying that they “had discontinued this sales desk,” but that it “wasn’t any of his business.” The Cloisters has a shop and café, requisites for a contemporary museum, but both lack the gloss and expanse of the Met 5th Avenue or other, newer museums.

Markers of a Museum in Lightings, Pedestals, and Labels

Before visiting the galleries, it is worthwhile to consider the often-overlooked presence of lighting, pedestals, and labels. These three elements define a professional, 20th century museum against a true medieval or historical site. Lighting, pedestals, and labels are essential for exhibiting and teaching visitors about artwork, but they can also be distracting and ruin the “atmosphere.” Collens had strong views about lighting and pedestals from the beginning of the process, and wrote in a letter to Rockefeller defending period rooms: “while to the art expert the setting and lighting [of a neutral museum] may be such as to enable him to examine all parts of the

exhibit with the greatest amount of ease, you cannot feel that those exhibits are in their natural setting. I am afraid that I am one of the very large body of laymen who would much prefer to see a Fourteenth Century Madonna set in a niche with a sanctuary lamp as its lighting than to have that same Madonna placed on a wooden standard, suitably labeled, and so lighted that every detail is brought out in strong relief.” However, Collens’ views were somewhat overpowered by Breck and, particularly, Rorimer, who valued a museum experience of a well-lit, labelled object over the explicitly spiritual, atmospheric experience Collens preferred. Rorimer strove for subtle, not overpoweringly modern displays, but without the historical fiction Collens advocated for.

The Washington Post’s Gertrude Lamont wrote, “Meticulous attention to detail, including indirect lighting on the magnificent fourteenth century Virgin and Child and the simplest, unadorned wooden pedestals for the statuary, helps to convey the impression of harmony which is an outstanding characteristic of the Cloisters.” Lamont’s “indirect lighting” and “wooden pedestals” (fig. 65) were the same things that Collens scorns as too modern, but for Lamont, their simplicity created “harmony.” Lewis Mumford, who along with Lamont was the critic least invested in the historicized nature of the Cloisters, also praises the display choices: “The side lights and the overhead lights are honest and modern, harmonious with the objects on view because they make no effort to bridge the gap between flickering candle and the implacably steady electric light. The refusal to build up fake medieval pedestals for the statuary, or fake canopies for the sculptures that rested under canopies…shows

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good judgement. The fragments of medieval art are plainly indicated on charts in each room.” For Lamont and Mumford, the profession museum display makes the museum “modern” but also “harmonious,” not reaching for a lost past but presenting the past comfortably within the unobtrusive present. Other commentators more invested in the historicized nature of the Cloisters do not mention these elements of display, either because it did not fit into their view of the cloisters or because they were so uncluttered as to not be noticed. Today, the pedestals are not bare wood, but the effect is similar in the spare, unobtrusive nature (fig. 66).

Display labels have always been sparse at the museum, explaining the name, date, and provenance of the object but without further details. This practice encourages visitors to engage with the art, not read labels, and keeps the walls uncluttered, but it also privileges visitors who already have an understanding of medieval art and can follow its progression from the Romanesque to the late Gothic and very early Renaissance, allowing them to get more out of Cloisters visit. In this way, the museum presumes a limited, educated, privileged audience and prioritizes their experience, not the experience of the broad public one. The modern solution to this problem is the Met’s free audio guides, which are offered to every visitor and seem quite popular.²¹⁴ Visitors can listen to a curator or art historian explain select objects, gaining context while still looking at the art. Some works of art are even accompanied by modern recordings of music, generally Catholic hymns, which are from the time and place of the object. However, this does lead to a more solitary museum experience, even when going through the museum with someone else,

²¹⁴ Majeed, “Excuse Me, Is This a Church?”
because visitors rely on the audio guide to explain the work of art rather than discussing it with the ones they are visiting the museum with.

Cultivating Contradictions

Once a visitor has entered the Cloisters, it gently directs them to begin the chronological tour the medieval France and Spain. In the final part of my thesis, the visitor’s experience in the Cloisters will be outlined through some of the most striking, contradictory spaces. Unlike many museums, the Cloisters has not received renovations which fundamentally change its nature, and therefore, the design decisions of the 1930s still affect the visitor experience today. Architectural fragments as large as the apse of the chapel of Fuentidueña have been added, and smaller objects have finally found a home in the downstairs treasury, but the much of the experience is comparable. Fundamentally, the Cloisters is a site of easily-overlooked contradiction, and this brief walkthrough is intended to highlight some of the most fundamental contradictions. The Hall of the Unicorn Tapestry and the Romanesque Hall contradict themselves, temporally and ideologically, respectively; the Cuxa Cloister and Saint-Guilhem Cloister contradict each other. These contradictions are fault lines on which the battle for the Cloisters was waged, and they are crucial for understanding what narratives can be layered upon the stones of the Cloisters.
The Romanesque World

The first gallery in the suggested chronological tour of the Cloisters is the Romanesque Hall, and from the entrance hall, one sees a captivating array of round arches (fig. 67). The Romanesque Hall (fig. 68) makes the visitor feel both the solidity of the Romanesque design, but also the void within it. The walls are stark stone, and the objects have ample room around them. The doors show the progress from the early Romanesque to the late Gothic, in a simple evocation of the agglomeration principle. Cynthia Armstrong, writing for the journal Scholastic, explained to her readers the etymology and description of the Romanesque:

“‘Romanesque’ means ‘like Roman’ and that describes this type of art roughly. It is not Roman, but descended from Roman art. It was the attempt of barbarian people…their copies of Roman art were not actually copies. They were a super and new form of art, fresh and original.”215 Mumford, writing for the New Yorker, wrote, “This studied absence of the superfluous characterizes both the setting and the display; if is this that emphasizes the underlying kinship between modern and Romanesque art.”216

In the Romanesque Hall, both interpretations are possible: one can marvel at how it evokes the Romanesque, showing through experience what the Romanesque’s “grounded” feeling means, or one can see “the underlying kinship between modern and Romanesque art,” aided by the lack of modern decorations and, for Mumford, the working-class masculine solidity and simplicity of both. This underlying kinship of modern and Romanesque art is enhanced by the display of the

215 Armstrong, “Middle Ages On-the-Hudson.”
216 Mumford, “The Sky Line.”
Romanesque art, which is hung simply in independent bays, separating the sculptures from one another, as the MoMA pioneered.

The Langon Chapel (fig. 69) adjoining the Romanesque Hall, formerly called the Romanesque Chapel before Rorimer acquired stones from Langon, has the same feeling of space and void as the Romanesque Hall, but in the unmistakable form of a church. With a cross hanging above the altar and a long nave to walk down, the visitor is transported into a stark, yet still spiritually powerful, church (fig. 70).

The Charming, Affective Cuxa Cloister

The bubbling sound of water coming from the door you entered from for the Romanesque Hall pulls you left, towards the center of the Cloisters, the Cuxa Cloister (fig. 73). This Romanesque cloister from Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa is so grant a treasure that its appropriation inspired France’s first cultural patrimony law to save the rest of it. It is the spatial, experiential, and spiritual center of the Cloisters. It is the one of the most purely historicized spaces in the museum, looking most for atmospheric charm and least for “authenticity,” meaning a careful lack of recreation of the past with modern materials. Even Rorimer, who generally tended toward modernism, was eager to preserve the atmosphere of the Cuxa Cloister, wanting modern stonecutters making a replica fountain to “get something of the spirit of the original.”

Embedded into the wall are architectural fragments that, although from Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, feel as though they are solely included for atmosphere, like the architectural fragments embedded within the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum or Barnard’s Cloister.

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sculptures of lions are low to the ground, able to be touched, especially by younger visitors. The cloister itself is presented as a unified, whole experience, even though it is area of the cloister is half the size of the original. The replacement columns and bases, simpler copies of the antiques, are made from the reopened quarry of the original, because the mix of pink and white marble was vital to the illusion of wholeness. Although there is a sign telling visitors which parts are original and which are modern, it is not prominent, and it’s very difficult to tell just by looking at the cloister.

To most visitors, this does not matter, because the Cuxa Cloister is a place to experience an atmosphere, rather than discerningly study artistic products. As Collens sought after his research trip to France, it incorporates nature in an extremely charming fashion, open to the sky in warmer months and full greenery and colorful blossoms. Visitors sit in the bays, which they would not be allowed to do if they were not made of modern stones, chatting, taking photos, or reading. Children smell flowers and are picked up to feel the water from the fountain, a replica of the Cuxa fountain, which is now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. 218 The garden is based off a plan from a monastery, with four small plots separated by a cross-shaped plot with a fountain in the center. There is an apple tree in each quadrant, and varied medieval plants, although towards the later summer, when there are few medieval plants left flowering, the garden is filled out with modern or non-medieval plants. Joseph Breck invested in many lists of medieval plants, from medieval sources and from works of art like the famous Unicorn tapestries. Multiple articles were written solely about the

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218 Majeed, “Excuse Me, Is This a Church?,” 261.
garden, with titles like, “Gardens at Peak at the Cloisters: Herbs Include Favorites of Charlemagne--Medieval Precedents Followed,” “Ancient Herbs Flourish Hero: Medieval Plants in Garden at Cloisters Doing Well,” and “Cloisters Gardens Illustrate Attractive Use of Small Area: MONASTERY GARDEN IN NEW YORK.” This is not the only garden at the Cloisters, but it is the most atmospheric one. Cuxa Cloister invites lingering, especially on warm days, shifting between the cool cloister and the warm, sunny garden. Along with the exterior view, it is the most popular subject for newspaper photos, and today, impromptu photo shoots are a frequent sight. In winter, when the cloister is walled off with glass to protect from the elements, it feels stark and lonely.

**Light, Space, and Saint-Guilhem**

On the other side of the Romanesque Hall is Saint-Guilhem cloister, the most modernist space in the museum. You enter through the Reugny Doorway, a late Romanesque or early Gothic door with a slightly pointed arch and five cusps within it, each with a small head above, and the columns of the cloister are intricate and detailed. But this room (fig. 71) refuses to harmonize with the organic Gothic ornament, and instead feels strikingly modernist. Unlike the rest of the Cloisters, which has only small amounts of natural light, it is fully lit with sunlight, because the whole ceiling is skylight. Collens suggested combining it with another small cloister, the Trie Cloister, to make a larger, more spacious cloister, but Breck refused to allow that mixing. As a result, the room is a small square, with a glass ceiling and stark greyish white walls.
The “cloister,” the covered walkway, has blank plaster walls only interrupted by medieval corbels and a few objects on grey, completely rectangular pedestals; there is no sense of charm (fig. 72). Within the interior of the cloister, there are mechanically regular walls supporting and surrounding the columns, with thin rectangular slits lining what would be the second story above a simple, unadorned molding. The modern embedded columns between bays and in corners are also completely rectangular, with only the slightest capital. The fountain is made of an 11th-century capital. Today, in summer, there is only a single plant in a grey pot, and in winter, more potted plants (fig. 73): at the opening, there was nothing within the Saint-Guilhem Cloister except a single central fountain (fig. 71). “Middle Ages on-the-Hudson” describes the room by saying, “in the new cloisters, these stone carvings are protected from weather in a glass-roofed courtyard and the missing columns have been replaced by simple modern ones.” This room is remarkably modernist in its lack of ornamentation and emphasis on the “void” of the center of the Cloister. The Cloister encourages contemplation of the columns as aesthetic experiences, and they reward careful study. Each of the original capitals, bases, and columns have intricate, beautiful, sometimes funny surprises: the classically-inspired acanthus leaf capital has dimensionality and spontaneity, feeling as though it might start growing towards the sunlight of the skylight; one set of columns has merged into a single, stocky column, in a manner that ruins the perfect ratio but adds a great deal of dynamism (fig. 74).

To some viewers, the starkness and void is disruptive and disappointing, unsuited to the lively beauty of the columns. In an article for France Revisited, an online magazine about travelling in Paris and France, Elizabeth Esris documents her
disappointment with the Cloister’s Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert after experiencing what is left of the original abbey in France. Esris and her husband “were charmed” by the artistic, local doors and windows of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, found that “the abbey has an atmosphere that suggests mystery and evokes contemplation,” and emphasizes the continuity and history of the place itself and its inhabitants. She then visited the Met Cloisters, where she found the Cuxa Cloister “breathtaking; stone pathways, flowers, trees, and dense foliage frame pink marble columns, a central fountain and low tiled roofs. It is a realization of how we imagine a medieval cloister to have looked and felt.” But the Saint-Guilhem Cloister failed her: “I wanted to love this cloister, but I could not. I felt the artifice of museum lighting despite the open ceiling, and I begrudged the closed space that made it more of an exhibit than a setting where imagination might take you back in time…I wanted to see them not as individual elements of interest but as an essential part of an idea, a purpose, a commitment to the necessity of contemplation and prayer.” For Esris, the modernist, stark framing of the Cloisters just highlighted what was lacking in a decontextualized museum setting. The objects were made to fit into an ecclesiastical, spiritual context, with a greater purpose than just the aesthetic interest the gallery reduced them to. It left her questioning the ethics of removal and display, and landing on the side of the people of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, who have signs up in town decrying the extraction of their cloister to Barnard and the Metropolitan.

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Too Much Space, Too Much Light: The Evolution of the Hall of the Unicorn Tapestry

The “Unicorn Tapestries” are the most iconic works of the Cloisters, and the evolution of their display shows the conflict between Revivalism and Modernism, between modern director and traditional patron. Junior originally bought the tapestries for himself, and they were a prized possession in the Rockefeller townhouse, where they were displayed domestically (fig. 75). Rorimer decided to display the tapestries in a large, modern, unadorned gallery, with plaster walls and space between each tapestry to contemplate them individually (fig. 76). The tapestries were hung alongside each other on one wall, with two simple tables and a small fireplace populating the room that was lit from the South with eight windows lining the wall. Beginning in 1944, Rockefeller began to discuss with the Metropolitan and Charles Collens whether there were changes in the Hall of the Unicorn Tapestry that would give it the same power it had within the Rockefeller’s home, when it was in a small private room.220 Rorimer was in Europe in service of the U.S. Army and would, in 1945, join the “Monuments Men,” a task force assigned to recover works of art stolen, looted, and hidden by the Nazis.

Margaret Freeman, Rorimer’s assistant and acting curator, and Charles Collens agreed with Rockefeller’s suggestion and worked to make the gallery more atmospheric. They did so by, at the suggestion of Freeman, chopping the long gallery into two rooms for two different sets of tapestries, therefore having the tapestries hung on all four sides of a smaller room, which would “more nearly approximate the

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room in Mr. Rockefeller’s house.”

Freeman interrupted the tapestries with a grand fireplace, as shown in this plan (fig. 78), reduced the amount of daylight on them, and added stained-glass windows looking to the interior of the Cuxa Cloister. When Rockefeller saw the new room in 1949, he praised it, saying “The great fireplace is magnificent, while the windows looking out into the cloister gives a sense of intimacy and variety that adds charm. The proportions of the rooms and everything about the arrangement of the tapestries teemed to me to be beyond criticism” (fig. 79). The stark modernism of the original room had left Rockefeller unsatisfied: “To me the tapestries have never been as satisfactorily displayed and lighted at The Cloisters as they were in our 54th Street home although crowded into a single room. In their present setting they have all the values of their intimate background in our home with the artificial lighting and many added advantages.”

By being well-lit with natural light and spaciously laid out against one wall, so one could contemplate them in their entirety like a row of modern paintings, the tapestries lost their atmospheric power, and it had to be recaptured by making the room smaller, darker, and more crowded.

Margaret Freeman, in a 1949 edition of the Met Bulletin, explained the purpose of the remodeling as “to provide for these aristocrats among tapestries a setting such as they might have had when they were designed and woven in the late Middle Ages for a Queen of France” in a “room of more gracious proportions, like a room in a French château.” “Now,” she wrote, “on stepping into the room, one is

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223 Rockefeller, Jr.
encompassed by movement and brilliance and color. It is as if one were no longer admiring a garden from outside the garden gate, but actually walking among the flowers. The people of the Middle Ages would undoubtedly have preferred the tapestries this way.”

Freeman showed, in addition to French models, a photo of the tapestries in the Rockefellers’ own home (fig. 75), in what she described as a “medieval” setting where tapestries rounded walls and overlapped with each other. After trying a modern installation of the tapestries, the medieval atmosphere was returned to, and today, the gallery retains the atmospheric feeling, and its great popularity is a testament to the success of the “medieval” display. Even in postwar era, the medievalist atmosphere was preferred and modernist ideas set aside at the request of the patron.

These five rooms represent only a small selection of the illustrative contradictions of the Cloisters. They allow us to jump into the question of narrative: what narrative do visitors receive, and what narrative do they create? Should a narrative be unified in a building?

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What the Cloisters Says to Visitors, and What Visitors Say to the Cloisters

The confusion of reception of the original reviews, whether the cloisters is a good medieval experience, a good modern museum, or even a museum at all, continues to the present day. In Risham Majeed’s 2017 article “Excuse Me, Is This a Church? Display as Content at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” in *Journal of Museum Education*, she chronicles that as a lecturer at the Cloisters, she is often asked “by the general public, ‘excuse me, is this a church?’” She writes, “I never quite know how to respond accurately, because the answer is somewhere between yes and no.” Many visitors, today and in the past, cannot tell the difference between original and modern stonework, or assume that all the stonework is original. Rorimer attempted to create simple, unconfused architecture which complimented medieval architectural fragments without mimicking their original settings: he may have succeeded to the expert, who can detect the difference between machine-cut and hand-cut details, but not to the layman visitor, to whom everything looks “old.” Even the New Yorker in 2016 called it a “beautiful building, assembled from fragments of Romanesque and Gothic architecture that were shipped over from Europe in the mid-twentieth century,” with no mention to its modern components.

The Cloisters is deliberately ambiguous, sort-of historical, sort-of modern, both religious and secular, striving for both a charming atmosphere and a modern, simple display of objects. Different spaces, like the Cuxa Cloister and the Saint- Guilhem Cloister, have different conceptions and make different and almost opposing

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225 Majeed, “Excuse Me, Is This a Church?,” 258.
226 Majeed, 258.
statements. Because it evolved from a historical basis into a more modernist execution, the Cloisters has no single grand thematic statement. Visitors and critics can read what they desire onto the Cloisters, and they will be able to find evidence for their suppositions.

This malleability has advantages for visitors and for the museum. The museum does not require the complete renovation of many period rooms, including the Met’s American Wing, currently under renovation, to become palatable to modern demands for authenticity and museum practice. As time passes and notions of museums change, the Cloisters is more flexible than either true modernist and true period rooms museums. But the Cloisters’ combination of opposing styles and worldviews depends on the visitor having prior knowledge of both medievalism and modernism. It is easy to experience the museum as a totally medieval building, and the more obvious medieval fragments as a seamless part of the unobtrusive modern stone. To visitors without a background in medieval architecture, a background that seems to be taken for granted by the creators of the Cloisters, the Met’s Cloisters is not any less fanciful than Barnard’s original Cloisters. Architecture, although laden with connections and references, also must be legible to a casual viewer who is approaching the building on their own terms. The Cloisters does not provide a clear impression to that viewer, because its Revivalism is tempered and its Modernism hidden. Because of its conflicted, changing creation, there is not one voice speaking clearly to a visitor: a visitor must make sense of its disparate parts by themselves, dependent on their a priori knowledge.
A central question of the Cloisters, and of my thesis, is whether an affective experience can exist in a site separated from its origin by both space and time. Although obviously Charles Collens’ blithe belief in the transferability of charm undervalues historical and situational ties, Richard Brilliant and Nadja Askamija’s total dismissal of the possibilities of transplanted architecture also underestimates the power of affective ties. A New Yorker who comes on an underground subway to find peace and serenity in the Cuxa Cloister has a different relationship to a carved capital from a monk, or a tourist to the original site, but that relationship is not inherently less meaningful. The visitor is not returning to the Middle Ages, but they are sincerely connecting with a space, a garden, and a collection of stones they feel to be medieval. A pilgrim had reasons besides the religious for travelling to and patronizing the monastic sites many objects originate from; conversely, a visitor has reasons other than the aesthetic to choose to make pilgrimage to the Cloisters. The Cloisters’ mythos as a collection of medieval fragments, with the modern parts forgotten, can be seen as the failure of James R. Rorimer’s campaign for modernity, or as a testament to the power of the unauthorized affective experience of the collective.
Appendix A: The Accidentally Postmodern Getty Villa

In this thesis, I charted how the original intentions of the patron, architect, and curator were shifted by the rise of Modernism as an undeniable force in 1930s architecture. J. Paul Getty’s Getty Villa (originally known as the Getty Museum), designed in the late 1960s and built from 1970-1974, provides another example of how a building can respond to the architectural styles of its day, even when its patron and architect have other intentions. The Getty Villa was supposed to be a purely historicist recreation of the Villa dei Papyri, a Roman villa buried in A.D. 87 in the same eruption of Mt. Vesuvius that buried Pompeii. Getty was inspired by generations of extraordinarily rich men (and some women) who recreated earlier examples of wealth and culture for their own purposes. Like Rockefeller, Getty rejected the modernist styles of his day, which were significantly more entrenched in the 1960s and in the 1930s. When he decided to make a formal museum on the Malibu property where he had been housing some of his vast collection, available to the public by appoint 2 days a week, he decided to match the building to the many Classical statues and objects he had acquired.

In the beginning of the design process, Getty insisted, “I refuse to pay for one of those concrete-bunker type structures that are the fad among museum architects, nor for some tinted-glass and stainless-steel monstrosity.” Getty turned to the Villa dei Papyri, which had featured in a novel he had written about Roman times as a young man, and which was known solely through an 18th century plan formed from a

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partial excavation. Like the creators of the Cloisters, Getty described the setting as naturally suited to the art. He hired a Roman archeologist and art historian, Norman Neuerberg, to oversee the design, construction, and decoration of the museum. Both Getty and Neuerburg, though deliberatively dismissive of the modernist art world and East Coast tastemakers, were completely serious about recreating a Roman world where visitors could be guests experiencing the generosity of a Roman senator or emperor. Getty framed himself as a modern Roman emperor: his book was about the Emperor Hadrian, and he dedicated an out-of-place cult niche in the Villa for a statue of Herakles found near Hadrian’s villa.229

But the past cannot be completely restored: both the Roman past, and the Revivalist architectural past, had disappeared, and the Villa could not recapture them in the minds of visitors. Instead, the museum is an unintentional example of postmodernism, as identified by Charles Jencks, in his movement-defining 1977 book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*.230 Jencks, with characteristic irony, captions a photo of the inner peristyle with the remark, “False windows, replica statues and wall painting imitating first century imitations of marble -- a very amusing and colourful recreation whose wit is perhaps not intended.”231

Fundamentally, what the Villa lacks is a sense of “oldness.” All Revivalist architecture, even the most excessive high Victorian Gothic Revival, is based on a historical understanding of how the older style “should” look: buttresses, ornaments, stone for the Gothic; clean white marble for the Neo-Classical. The Villa uses modern

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231 Jencks, 95.
understandings of actual Roman architecture (though some believed it took too many liberties). It creates a Roman atmosphere of bright color and gaudy illusions, a far cry from the dignified, towering columns and rotundas of Classical architecture that has been used since the Renaissance to evoke stateliness and power. The use of color, although more accurate (it would have been even brighter and closer to the Roman original, but the painter had to redo it to tone the colors down), interrupts the visitors reading of the architecture as revivalist, and leads to a sense of unexpected irreverence which pushes the Villa into postmodernism. Joan Didion, sardonically commenting on both the building and those who strenuously object to it in her review of the new museum, commented that it forces a visitor to experience the past as it was, as gaudy as the present, rather than the stately past that is imagined.

The Getty Villa, since its creation, has caused discomfort and uncertainty for those involved with it. As soon as J. Paul Getty died and left the majority of his massive fortune to the Getty (and the lawsuits were settled), most of the collection was moved to a prototypically modernist building, Richard Meier’s Getty Center (1997) in Brentwood, an expensive residential neighborhood of Los Angeles. The Getty Center is a planar, curvilinear structure encased in 1.2 million square feet travertine that serve no structural function, with stunning views and a collection of buildings for the Getty Center’s many programs: museum, research institute, conservation institute, foundation, trust. This building, although criticized by some architectural critics, fits perfectly into the style of its time and is easy to experience as a modern museum should be experienced: as a neutral holding center for art, with
striking yet unobtrusive architecture. It can be speculated that J. Paul Getty would have strongly disliked the building, but it is certainly popular with the art world.

The Getty Villa, left with only Greek and Roman art, underwent a major renovation after the Center opened. Machado + Silvetti beginning their design in 1993, and it opened in 2006, attempting to make the Villa more palatable to serious architecture and contemporary museum programs like an expanded shop and restaurant without compromising its fundamental character. Machado + Silvetti found their solution in treating the Getty Villa like an archeological site, not a piece of architecture. Visitors first glimpse the Villa from above with a carefully constructed walkway, then walk down strata of stone to reach the entrance. Instead of being visitors, invited into the home, guests become archeologists investigating a Roman villa.

The Villa’s combination of genuine Roman recreation and accidental postmodern irreverence can create surprising and effective museum experiences where visitors more fully engage with objects in a Roman fashion than would be possible in either traditional Classical Revival or modernist museums. In the summer of 2016, the Getty Villa put on Roman Holidays, a series of programs designed to give visitors educational experiences mimicking Roman religious festivals, where visitors could have fortune-telling “liver readings” with prop livers, make Roman perfume, and, most interestingly, write prayers to a statue of Venus in the style of Roman prayers. This program was astonishingly popular, with about 2,000 prayers
written a week for a statue tucked into an out-of-the-way corner of the Villa.\textsuperscript{232} The statue itself is the Villa’s “touch” statue, a replica of a 19\textsuperscript{th} century Venus without any claim to authenticity or special aesthetic power. Through this program, however, it was elevated to an agentic representative of a powerful goddess, as a Roman statue of Venus once was. Visitors wrote to Venus asking for happiness, love, fertility, wealth, power, and geopolitical peace, and in return, many promised gratitude, specific gifts, and some even left offerings like (plastic) gems, beads, flowers, fruit, and feathers.\textsuperscript{233} In this recreation of a Roman villa, to a replica of a recreation of a Roman statue that was probably based on a Greek original, visitors leapt at the chance to engage in much the same way supplicants did 2,000 years ago. Each person’s prayer to Venus left both a physical trace and an affective stickiness that, taken together, transformed the Venus from a museum object to an idol; when visitors touched Venus, read the hanging prayers, wrote their own, or left offerings, they were building a new web of meanings that existed independently from the material facts and provenance of the specific statue. The site was postmodern, lacking in aura and authenticity, yet in some ways it was the truest and most powerful thing I’ve ever experienced in a museum.

\textsuperscript{233} Anderson.
Appendix B: Illustrations

Fig. 1. The Cloisters, Bonnefont Cloister, View facing southwest of the garden, the Hudson River, and the George Washington Bridge. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 2. Distant view facing north showing The Cloisters along the Hudson River. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photographed by William Keighly.
Fig. 3. Upper Manhattan, with the Cloisters are within the circle in Fort Tryon Park. Courtesy of NYCGo.com.
Fig. 4. The Bonnefont Cloisters and garden, June 1942.
Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 5. The Cuxa Cloister, June 1942.
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 6. 1938 Plans of the Cloisters as built.
Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 7. Current floor plan, Metropolitan Museum of Art.Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 8. Barnard’s two-story combined cloister. Interior of George Gray Barnard’s Cloisters, photographed 1925-1926 after purchase by the Metropolitan.
Fig. 9. Photo of the Langdon Chapel, from The Cloisters: photographs 1938, an album of photos taken at the opening. Courtesy of the Cloisters Archive Collection.
Fig. 10. Trinity Church, Boston, Massachusetts, polychrome brick and Romanesque-style round arches. 
Courtesy of University of California, San Diego.
Fig. 11. Central Portal, St. John the Divine, Heins and LaFarge; then Cram and Ferguson. 1826-1926.
Photo by Alec and/or Marlene Hartill. Courtesy of Hartill Art Associates Inc.
Fig. 12. Period room from a house built in 1592 in the Swiss National Museum, ca. 1906.


Fig. 15. The Barnard Cloisters, Interior. 1927. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
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Fig. 18. The Branch Grovesner Atterbury, American Wing, Metropolitan 1924. Bank Facade; The space surrounding the Bank Facade would later become known as the Charles Engelhard Court.
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 19. Paneled wall, low ceilinged room in the American Wing, opened 1924. View of third floor interior, gallery M25, showing room from Metcalf Bowler House, Portsmouth, R. I. before 1763. Detail view of the paneled wall.
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 23. Charles Collens and Henry C. Pelton, Riverside Church, 1930. Photo: Samuel H. Gottscho (February 21, 1931). Riverside Church. Entrance detail. Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.

Museum of Modern Art archives.
Fig. 25. The “Armory Show,” *The International Exhibition of Modern Art*. Sixty-ninth Regiment Armory, New York, 17 February to 15 March 1913. The first major avant-garde show in New York City: notice how the paintings are hung stacked together.

Courtesy of Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*, 63.
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Courtesy of Columbia University in the City of New York.
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Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.
Fig. 29. Fiske Kimball, “The Modern Art Museum,” Architectural Record, December 1929, issue 66. 571.

Fig. 30. Fiske Kimball, “The Modern Art Museum,” Architectural Record, December 1929, issue 66. 571.
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Fig. 32. Coolidge, Shepley, Bulfinch, and Abbott of Boston. Fogg Museum, Harvard, 1927.

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Fig. 59. Franz Sales Meyer, *A Handbook of Ornament*, Romanesque Letters.
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Fig. 61. Facing pages about the Pontaut Chapter house in James R. Rorimer’s *Mediaeval Monuments at the Cloisters.* PLATES III AND IV
62. In plates XI and XII of *Mediaeval Monuments at the Cloisters*, Rorimer shows the violence left behind alongside the beauty of the Trie Cloister.
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Exterior view of the Cloisters, 1938.
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Fig. 84.
Courtesy of Machado Silvetti.
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