

Allen Memorial Art Museum Teacher Resource Packet – AMAM 1917 Building



Cass Gilbert
(American, 1859 – 1934)
*Allen Memorial Art Museum
Building, 1917*
Sandstone façade, terracotta roof

Cass Gilbert was an American architect, born in 1859. He was well known for his involvement with the City Beautiful Movement, and its Beaux-Arts style, and a historicizing style of architecture – his buildings borrow from a large number of examples, including Renaissance architecture. Gilbert worked in Oberlin for a number of years, designing a complete master plan for the campus of which four buildings were finished: Fairchild Chapel, the Cox Administration Building, Finney Chapel, and the Allen Memorial Art Museum.

Biography



Cass Gilbert was born in 1859 to a land surveyor in Zanesville, Ohio. He began his career in 1876, working as a draughtsman for a firm out of St. Paul, Minnesota before moving on to enroll at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1878. His mentor while at school, William Robert Ware, had modeled the curriculum of the design school on the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. This experience shaped Gilbert's later architectural career, and he became known as an American interpreter of the [Beaux-Arts](#) tradition. Along with sketching tours through England, France, and Italy, these early influences formed the basis for the dominance of ornamentation, monumentality, and historical pastiche in Gilbert's architecture.

Cass Gilbert, circa 1926. © Cass Gilbert Society

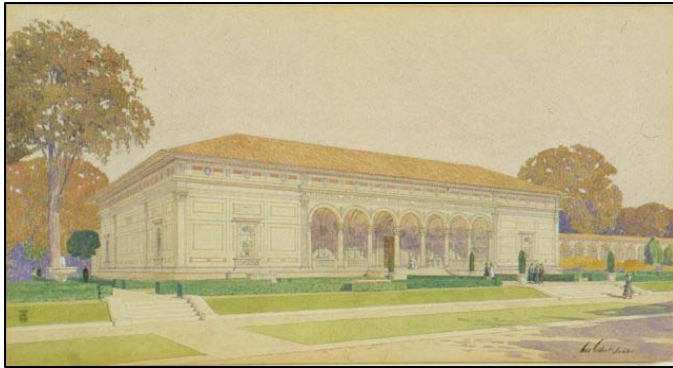
By the turn of the century, Gilbert began to win prestige as an architect in his own right. His 1895 design for the Minnesota State Capitol won him national recognition and foreshadowed his dependence on historical borrowing, pulling from influences as broad ranging as St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and the American Neoclassical design for the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. One of his most important commissions, the

Woolworth Building in New York, was completed in 1913, paralleling the time he was working at Oberlin. The skyscraper is known for its soaring Neo-Gothic style, emphasized by the ivory glazed terracotta and darker spandrels.

His plans for Oberlin College, developed and implemented from 1908 to 1931 included a plan for the Allen Memorial Art Museum. The museum, completed in 1917, was one of Gilbert's later works to be realized on Oberlin's campus. Like his earlier buildings, it reflects his interest in historical eclecticism, borrowing heavily from Quattrocento Italian villa design. Gilbert's work at Oberlin College also included Finney Chapel (1908), Cox Administration building (1915), and Bosworth Hall (1931). He also designed a comprehensive plan for the campus itself, which was never fully realized.

Cass Gilbert died in England in 1934, after completing his final and perhaps most prestigious project, the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C.

Function, Form/Style:



The Allen Memorial Art Museum shares a number of elements in common with Gilbert's other buildings around the Oberlin campus. The use of locally quarried sandstone and [terracotta](#) roof creates a visual link between the four structures built for the college. Unlike Gilbert's synthesis in other Oberlin buildings of the

"Romanesque, Beaux-Arts, and a Midwestern vernacular," the AMAM follows the basic design of a [Brunelleschi](#) villa. Famous for his historicist approach to architecture, the museum is, perhaps, a surprisingly straightforward interpretation of the original from which it borrows. The façade of the AMAM features Gilbert's distinctive approach to ornamentation, relying on classical elements such as [tondos](#), [lunettes](#), and [Corinthian](#) capital design. The symmetry and elegance of the design create a building which functions as "high art with a capital A," echoing its function through its façade.

As part of Gilbert's comprehensive plan for Oberlin's campus, the art museum serves a vital role in his search for a total unity between the town and the college. Central to the building's front is the phrase, "The Cause of Art is the Cause of the People," mirroring Gilbert's own ideals in creating a democratic art institution, while playing a larger role in the ideology of the art museum as a whole. Intended as an art museum since the inception of the project, Gilbert's building successfully presents itself as a 'glorified temple' for the art works housed within, imbuing the museum with an august presence on the Oberlin campus.

Cultural and Historical Importance:



The Allen Memorial Art Museum project was begun in 1915 on the northeast corner of Lorain and Main Streets on the Oberlin College campus, as part of an overall plan designed by Gilbert. The building was always intended to house the college's art collection. Completed in 1917, the museum opened as an educational facility intended as a learning tool

by students on campus. The museum has always been free and open to the public, both College and community, as part of its program. The building was the second to last to be constructed on campus according to Gilbert's plan, and was the only building realized on the east side of Tappan Square. As part of Gilbert's *oeuvre*, the building represents a thoughtful combination of historical borrowing, self evident in the museum's Italian villa design, and 'Midwestern' vernacular, seen in its horizontality and use of local built materials. Within Gilbert's overall career, the building reinforces the architect's dedication to historical pastiche, ornamentation, and monumentality. As a cultural institution, the museum has served the Oberlin College campus and community for almost a century.

The museum, as part of the early 20th century built record, reflects the architectural trends in America at the time. The influence in Gilbert of the Beaux-Arts tradition reflected the overall movement towards an optimistic sense in America, harkening back to a Renaissance humanism. Likewise, the building's historicizing tendency reflects the works of other architects at the time in borrowing historical ornamentation to create eclectically ambiguous architecture. The construction of the Allen Memorial Art Museum in 1917 mirrors the overall drive towards creating a museum culture in the United States, with important museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art (New York) being established from the end of the 19th century into the mid 20th century. Likewise, the AMAM plays a role in Oberlin's history and its own tendency towards an ever changing built environment and strong and lasting traditions of investment in cultural institutions.

Visual Analysis

The Allen Memorial Art Museum features a strikingly symmetrical façade, echoing Italian Renaissance design. The symmetry and harmony of the exterior visually situates the building in a tradition of rational form. The front door of the Allen is perfectly centered in the façade, framed by classically arrayed columns, which hearken to the

entrance of the Greek temple. This visual allusion echoes the rituality of the temple or monumental building, and casts the museum as a sacred space.

The lunette above the [Neoclassical](#) door frame features a Madonna and Child, flanked by two angels bearing vases and emphasized by a richly blue backdrop. The blue of the lunette is taken up by the blue and gold mosaic of the quadripartite vaults in the arcade of the entranceway. The mosaic shows symbols, such as the peacock, traditionally associated with Christian symbolism on the Italian villas and buildings from which the Allen takes many of its cues. The mosaic also features the names of famous artists from the past, some of which are not included in the collection inside.

The verbal insistence on the building as the receptacle of high art is echoed on the exterior epitaph on the façade of the building, proclaiming, “The Cause of Art is the Cause of the People,” a quote from the 19th-century writer William Morris. This democratizing statement continues on either side of the exterior in a linguistic statement of purpose, with, “The Fine Arts: A Heritage from the Past” and “The Fine Arts: A Gift to the Future.” The niches under each statement, originally intended to house traditional sculpture, further reinforce the program adhered to by the original Italian villas that Gilbert sought to imitate.

The building features a low hipped roof covered in red terracotta. The roof is linked to the geometric forms beneath it by color. The [entablature](#) above the columns features geometric tondos with stylized family crests, reminiscent of the tondos on the *Opedale degli Innocenti* by Brunelleschi in Florence, Italy, flanked by rectangular red inserts. The geometry of the rectangular is echoed throughout the building, both by the horizontality and symmetry of the building, but also by the flanking rectangular outlines on either side of the [loggia](#) (or porch). This porch is fronted by six Corinthian columns, furthering the symmetry of the building. The sides of the building continue the same motifs found on the façade, converting columns to [pilasters](#) and featuring finely and intricately designed ironwork on the windows.



Walking through the front door, one is struck by the immediate openness and

light of the space, designated as a sculpture court. The museum’s interior allows the viewer to circumambulate through the entire museum and its collection. As it was originally designed, the visitor could then progress through the art history library to the classroom and studio spaces reserved for students and educators, following the front-back dichotomy of Gilbert’s architecture and the visual division of space by function.

Classroom Ideas

Language Arts: Write a family story to accompany a family crest on the **tondos**. What visual clues would in the crests indicate a family's profession, place in society, etc.?

Social Studies: Based on Gilbert's plan for a model town, design the "ideal" city plan. What functions would it need to fulfill? How many people would live there, and how could the layout of the town and design of the buildings influence the way residents live? Look at the work of other architects who have designed the "ideal" city, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's plans for Broadacre City.

Mathematics: Measure all aspects of the 1917 building, in terms of height, width, and spacing between columns, etc. Work out any ratios or instances of numerical symmetry. Research the ratios and rules used by ancient Greek and Roman architects, and compare to the work done by Gilbert.

For more information, visit:

<http://www.cassgilbertsociety.org/index.html>

Vocabulary

Beaux-Arts: A style of architecture, popularly associated with the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, that prevailed in France in the late 19th century and that was adopted in the U.S. and elsewhere c. 1900, characterized by the free and eclectic use and adaptation of French architectural features of the 16th through 18th centuries combined so as to give a massive, elaborate, and often ostentatious effect, and also by the use of symmetrical plans preferably allowing vast amounts of interior space.

Brunelleschi (Filippo): Italian architect and sculptor. He is traditionally regarded as the father of Renaissance architecture.

Corinthian: One of the five classical orders invented in ancient Greece and similar in most respects to the Ionic but usually of slenderer proportions, and characterized by a deep capital with a round bell decorated with acanthus leaves and a square abacus with concave sides.

Entablature: The entire construction of a classical temple or the like between the columns and the eaves usually composed of an architrave, a frieze, and a cornice.

Loggia: An external roofed gallery with open arches on one or both sides.

Lunette: A semicircular area framed by an arch or vault.

Neoclassical: A revival of classic styles or something that is held to resemble classic styles, as in art, literature, music, or architecture.

oeuvre: the total output of an artist over their career.

Pilaster: Shallow pier or rectangular column projecting from a wall, used for decoration.

Quattrocento: The 15th century, used in reference to the Italian art and literature of that time.

Terracotta: commonly used term for a type of natural plastic clay that hardens when dried.

Tondo: A round painting or relief

Ohio Academic Content Standards – Benchmarks

Language Arts

Acquisition of Vocabulary; Informational, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Writing Applications; Research Standard; Communications: Oral and Visual Standard

Mathematics

Measurement; Geometry and Spatial Sense; Patterns, Functions, and Algebra

Science

Physical Sciences; Science and Technology

Social Studies

History; People in Societies; Geography; Economics; Skills and Methods

Visual Art

Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Creative Expression and Communication; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships and Applications