

“The Most Famous Stairway in New York City”

It has been called “The Masterpiece of the Master”

Through the Ages,

Published by the National Association of Marble Dealers
Vol. 5, No. 8, December 1927, pp. 18-22

The article begins:

“To say that the house at 23 Park Avenue, New York City, is the supreme example of genius of the most notable architect of his time in that metropolitan area, would be to lay one’s self open to criticism, and yet certainly such an assertion would find many sponsors among the members of Stanford White’s own profession...The site is a corner one – Park Avenue and East Thirty-fifth Street – and the main entrance is on the Park Avenue side in the center of the façade....”

“The original owner was J. Hampden Robb, who built the house for his private residence many years ago...In 1923, when the property became the possession of the Advertising Club of New York, it was remodeled by McKim, Mead and White to serve as a club house....”

This article, which begins on the next page,
is presented on the Stone Quarries and Beyond web site.

<http://quarriesandbeyond.org/>

Peggy B. Perazzo
Email: pbperazzo@comcast.net
May 2016



THE MOST FAMOUS STAIRWAY IN NEW YORK CITY

It has been called "The Masterpiece of the Master"

TO say that the house at 23 Park Avenue, New York City, is the supreme example of the genius of the most notable architect of his time in that metropolitan area, would be to lay one's self open to criticism, and yet certainly such an assertion would find many sponsors among the members of Stanford White's own profession. It is true that White has

designed many larger and better known edifices, but this building has a vigorous composition that is definitely enhanced by a proper relation of scale between its decorative elements and the moderate proportions of the structure, which is five stories in height. The site is a corner one—Park Avenue and East Thirty-fifth Street—and the main entrance is on the Park Avenue

side in the center of the façade. Above the entrance, partly shielding the marble steps themselves, extends a two-story canopy or portico, formed by pairs of marble columns supporting balconies above their architraves, the style of the columns changing from Doric on the ground floor to Ionic above. The door of Italian mahogany is heavily carved, and the small vestibule is finely paneled. A clear conception of the general treatment of the main façades and the dignity they possess is made possible by a glance at the illustration shown at the head of this article.

The original owner was J. Hampden Robb, who built the house for his private residence many years ago. Upon his death in 1912, the contents were distributed, but fortu-

nately those units which were essential to the architectural integrity of the interior were preserved. In 1923, when the property became the possession of the Advertising Club of New York, it was remodeled by McKim, Mead and White to serve as a club house, but as far as it was possible the original interior decorative units were preserved and incorporated into the new design, and they establish in large part the beauty and distinction of the building.

Chief among them is the remarkable marble stairway that easily dominates the front portion of the interior. It is claimed by many who should know that Mr. Robb found this stairway in an old French chateau and shipped it to America with instructions to Mr. White to build a house



Entrance hall of the Advertising Club of New York, a building designed by Stanford White as a home for J. Hampden Robb.

(photo caption) "Entrance hall of the Advertising Club of New York, a building designed by Stanford White as a home for J. Hampden Robb."



Detail of the graceful marble stairway in the home of the Advertising Club of New York City.

around it. On the contrary, Mr. George French, who made an intensive study of the history of this building, writes in his brochure on the subject that: "The fact is that Mr. Robb or Mr. White found the stairway somewhere in France and was allowed to have its design copied; and as it exists it was reproduced from that design by Mr. White." On the other hand, some of the mantels, of which there are thirteen all told, were actual importations; the ones made in this country

were designed and executed as fit companions for those secured from abroad, and though they lack the historic significance of their European prototypes, they add equal distinction to the rooms in which they are placed. Most of these mantels are marble, and each has a large and thoroughly practical fireplace, capable of holding logs of a goodly size, and ready to enhance this homelike aspect of the room with the glow of cheerful fire light.

The first view of the famous stairway is caught as one is ushered by the doorman into the white marble lobby or foyer, which is itself worthy of more than a glance. The splendid mouldings of the ceilings and doorways, for instance, and the brilliantly colored veining in the Breche Violette marble wainscoting that is

visible around the room, are pointed out to the visitor by the club members with a justifiable pride.

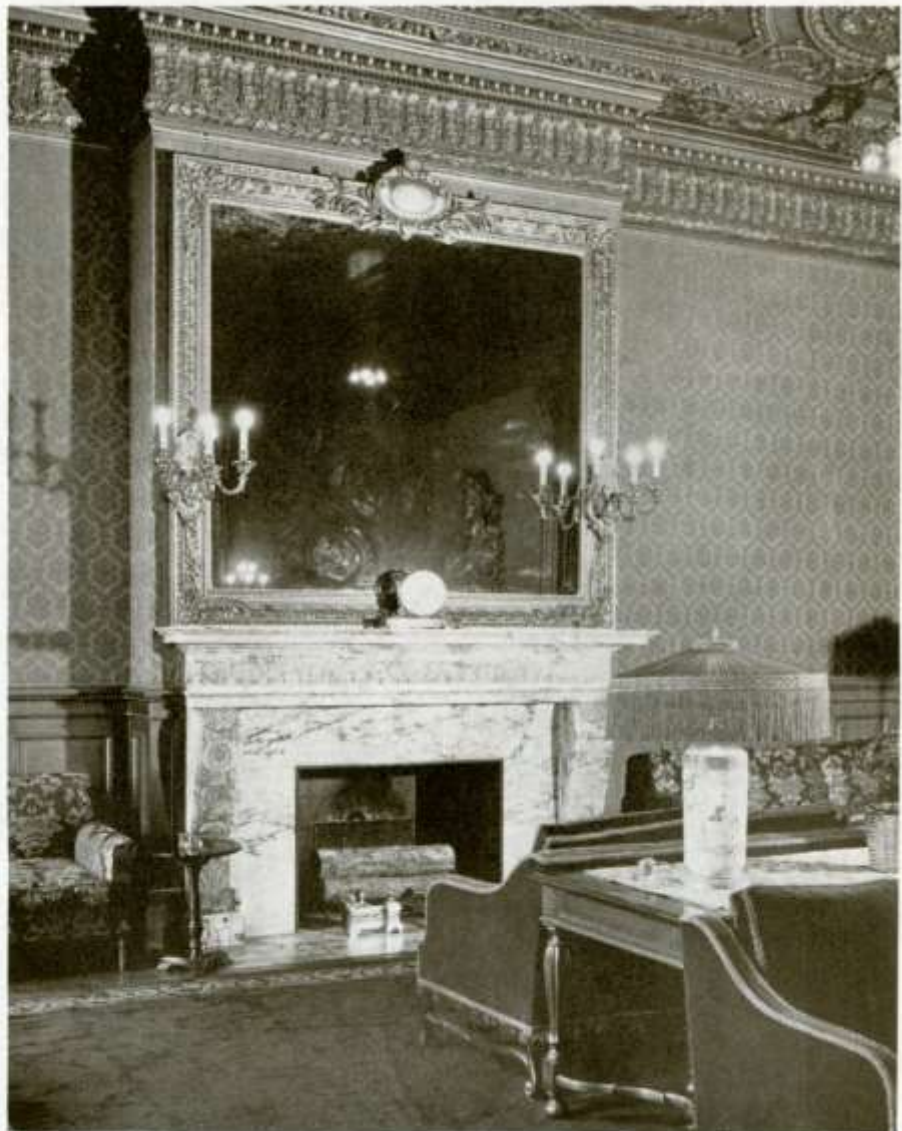
But the stairway itself invites, and before inspecting any other part of the clubhouse, one is enticed to ascend the broad treads that today are partly covered in deep plush. "This staircase," wrote Mr. French, in the brochure mentioned above, "gives a certain character to the whole house, and when one essays the fourth floor without its aid it

(photo caption) "Detail of the graceful marble stairway in the home of the Advertising Club of the New York City."

seems that one is passing out of the clubhouse proper into some less distinguished realm, and less desirable as well. It meanders from the lobby on the street floor to the dining-rooms, so that the habitu  is able to make his ordinary transits from floor to floor without losing sight of it, with its intriguing spirals, its admirably hand-wrought iron balustrade, its vistas into the rooms, its windows, and its general urbanity and charm; not to ignore its fine marble steps but partially covered.

“The first flight of the staircase lands one on the lounge floor, in what was the Robb upper hall, but which we reckon as the third lounge. One of the brilliant distinctive features is here, the ceiling with its central crystal light. It is a particularly fine ceiling, and holds the eye while it seeks the major mantel in the house, the massive and artistic feature found by Mr. Robb in Paris, which is perhaps the crowning glory of the house as it is now constituted, rivaled perhaps by the staircase at its most attractive points, though almost nothing is definitely known about it save what it shows to every beholder. It is sixteenth-century French, but beyond that no one now available knows. It was found by Mr. Robb in Paris, but whence it

came, and from what residence of noble or royalty, we have only to surmise.” It might be added that the staircase is made entirely of Blanco P marble, from Italy, and that the material is, as the name implies, of a clear blue-white color, very faintly clouded. The pictures in the ceiling of what was the main hall of the house when it was the Robb home are the work of a young Parisian artist, Collet, and this lounge room is now called by his name.



Mantel of Pavanazzo marble in the north lounge of the Advertising Club of New York building.

(photo caption) “Mantel of Pavanazzo marble in the north lounge of the Advertising Club of New York building.”

The various mantels throughout the building are dissimilar in size, shape and design, but they have mostly one feature in common: marble of one kind or another has been freely used in their construction. The first fireplace to catch the eye is that in the ladies' reception room, to the right of the entrance lobby. The style of the room is called Louis Quatorze, but the mantel is French Gothic of the fifteenth century, with twisted spiral columns supporting a heavy canopy elaborately carved. The buff-colored marble came from France, and is known as Hauteville.

In the library on the second floor is a fireplace with a mantel that is quite unique. The lower half is yellow Numidian marble; the upper half is a portion of an old church altar of Pollard oak, interestingly carved. This Numidian marble is also known as Giallo Antico, and comes from Africa; it is a

warm yellow tinged with pink and having streaks of brown. Quarries in Tunis and Algeria each contain similar material; however, it is said that the Tunis quarry, which had been worked by the Romans, was lost for many centuries, and although it was re-discovered during the construction of the railroad between Tunis and Algiers, is not now in active operation.

Facing Park Avenue on this same second floor are two large lounge rooms, originally the drawing and music rooms of the Robb mansions. The one on the north retains much of its original character, especially the elaborate metal ceiling with gold coloring. The fireplace here is more modern in type than some of the others in the house. It is of Pavanazzo marble, a type produced in various quarries near Carrara and Seravezza, Italy, and distinguished by its abundant veining of purplish tones. The south lounge



Mantel of Hauteville marble in the women's reception room in the clubhouse of the Advertising Club of New York.

(photo caption) "Mantel of Hauteville marble in the women's reception room in the clubhouse of the Advertising Club of New York."



The library in the Advertising Club of New York has a mantel of Pollard oak and Numidian marble.

boasts a mantel of Siena marble, another Italian marble, brownish-yellow in hue.

On the third floor are extensive dining-rooms, with an ample lobby lounge in their midst. Just east of this lounge is the dominating chamber, with its ceiling of heavily paneled vermilion mahogany, and a mantel found by Mr. Robb in Paris. This mantel is eighteenth-century Italian, and is built of Campan Rouge Griotte, a French marble of greenish background with spots of red, violet and white, quarried in the Hautes-Pyrenees.

On the floor above are smaller dining-rooms and on the top story—the fifth—are the offices of the club, kitchens and shower baths. The basement contains billiard equipment and rooms for the housekeeper and his staff.

As one tours the various rooms of this splendid building, the thought is borne in upon us that, as Mr. French so ably ex-

presses it, "Mr. White's task was not so much to create, per se, a house expressive of his consistent conceptions, along lines easily interpreted and justified by his high ideals of architecture as art, as to furnish for Mr. Robb a house that should in itself be a worthy base for a home.

"This was a difficult task, and it is doubtful if any other architect then working, in America or abroad, could have conceived and executed it with the success Mr. White achieved in this notable house. It is scarcely necessary to claim for it that it was his *chef-d'œuvre*. It was a class by itself; nothing else that he had done, or did since, was comparable with it, or is now comparable with it. It was, and is, a masterpiece; whether more worthy than other masterpieces he created in other spheres of architecture it is useless to argue, because whatever conclusion might be arrived at could not in the least degree affect its peculiar primacy."

(photo caption) "The library in the Advertising Club of New York has a mantel of Pollard oak and Numidian marble."