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BUILDINGS OF DETROIT

Detroit Museum of Art

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By **DAN AUSTIN**
BuildingsofDetroit.com

The old Detroit Museum of Art was known as Detroit's cradle of culture, albeit its time as a museum lasted less than 40 years. Still, its impact on the city's history cannot be underestimated. As the forefather of the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Museum of Art brought culture to the city and masterpieces to the masses. Many of the pieces now housed in the DIA were acquired and originally housed within the old museum's walls.

Before the museum opened, Detroiters would attend "art loan exhibitions," more or less touring museums. The Detroit Art Loan Exhibition's success in 1883 led to the creation of a board to start a permanent art museum in the city. Donating money to the cause were some of Detroit's biggest names, including [Russell A. Alger](http://www.buildingsofdetroit.com/places/alger) (<http://www.buildingsofdetroit.com/places/alger>) Sen. Thomas Palmer and James E. and George H. Scripps. The Detroit Museum of Art was founded March 25, 1885, and incorporated a month later on April 16. An eight-month fund-raising campaign saw 1,919 people donate more than \$100,000 (nearly \$3 million today). On March 21, 1886, a jubilant headline in the Detroit Free Press proclaimed, "It is Raised!"

Building a home

The trustees spent 1886 choosing a site and an architect for their building. There were two locations considered at first. One was on Martin Place near Harper Hospital, which would have cost \$43,000 (\$1.3 million today); the other was on Second Avenue and was offered by its owners for \$56,000 (\$1.7 million today). The issue was hotly debated in the newspapers but was finally settled when a consortium of landowners and supporters gifted land for the museum at the southwest corner of Jefferson and Hastings, where Jefferson and I-375 meet today. The location was the site of the home of Gen. Hugh Brady, who had served in the American Revolution with Gen. Anthony Wayne. The gift saved the board considerable money. The colonial brick home was razed in 1887.

The board's building committee was formed on Nov. 8, 1886, and began a competition for the architectural design. It was stipulated that the building must be fireproof, front on Jefferson and be in the range of \$40,000 (about \$1.2 million today). There were 52 designs submitted to a panel of three architects: Gordon W. Lloyd, Mortimer L. Smith and E.E. Myers. Professor Henry S. Frieze of Ann Arbor served as an adviser.

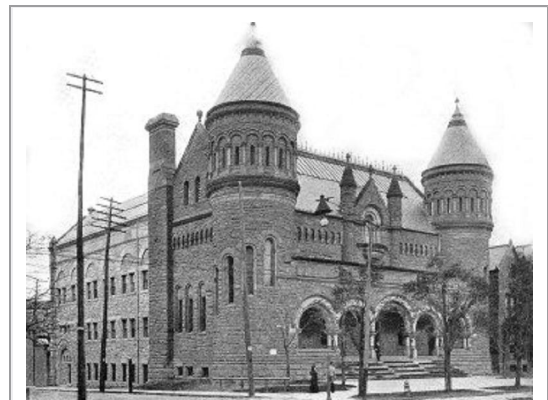
The committee went with the work of James Balfour of Hamilton, Ontario, who entitled his design "Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty." It was a turreted, rugged sandstone building done in the Richardsonian Romanesque style popular at the time. The Museum of Art had a colonnade with five round arches supported on red granite shafts. This entrance was flanked by two conical-topped side towers with turrets and round arched windows. It looked much like a medieval castle, a fitting home for the antiquities that would be housed within. Sculpture galleries and an office occupied the first floor and a single sky-lighted gallery for paintings filled the entire windowless second story. Patrons reached the second floor by climbing the winding stairs in the castle-like corner towers.

The building, quite small when compared with the hulking size of today's DIA, cost \$56,385.44 (about \$1.6 million today) - \$12,600 (\$370,000 today) over the original estimate. The construction contract went to Dawson and Anderson of Toledo, Ohio.

The building opened to the public at 7 p.m. on Sept. 1, 1888, only 16 months after the opening of bids for construction. There was surprisingly little fanfare. The paintings on display were borrowed from private Detroit collectors, including Alger and [Hazen S. Pingree](http://www.buildingsofdetroit.com/places/pingree), (<http://www.buildingsofdetroit.com/places/pingree>) and New York collector George I. Seney, an acquaintance of Sen. James McMillan. The first exhibition ran for 2 1/2 months and drew fewer than 25,000 visitors, handing the museum a net loss of \$1,842.14 (about \$54,000) in the funding of its first exhibition.

The critics were not in love with the building. American author and playwright Julian Street wrote in Collier's Weekly in 1914 that the museum "looks as much like an old waterworks as the new waterworks out on Jefferson looks like a museum." E.P. Richardson is quoted in "Treasures from the Detroit Institute of Arts" as saying the building was "a dignified and well-constructed building for its day."

At the time of its opening, Jefferson was a pleasant, mostly residential street lined with elms. Today, only the Trowbridge (built in 1826) and Sibley (1848)



AKA: Public Welfare Department, Veterans Affairs Department

Address: [704 E. Jefferson Ave., Detroit, Mich.](http://www.buildingsofdetroit.com/places/moa)
([http://maps.google.com/maps?q=704 E. Jefferson Ave., Detroit, Mich.](http://maps.google.com/maps?q=704+E.+Jefferson+Ave.,+Detroit,+Mich.))

Architect: [James Balfour](http://www.buildingsofdetroit.com/places/balfour) ([/architects/balfour](http://www.buildingsofdetroit.com/places/balfour))

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Year Opened: 1888

Year Closed: 1957

Year Demolished: 1960

Owner: City of Detroit

houses and the Christ Church (1861) survive from that era, giving only a small peek into the past, when Detroiters would leisurely stroll along the tree-lined avenue and pay 10 cents to get into the museum.

Growing pains

James Scripps was a major art collector and said the building of a museum in Detroit provided an opportunity for him to realize one of his dreams. "For several years it has been a favorite idea of mine that Detroit might be made the art center of the West, just as Cincinnati is the acknowledged musical center, and just as Florence is the art and Milan the music center of Italy." He spent the equivalent of millions in today's dollars on art around the world and presented the huge collection to the Detroit museum in 1889.

On March 18, 1889, the first art school tied to the museum opened in a converted stable on Woodbridge Street at the back of the site. The school's best known pupil was painter Myron Barlow. Other classes met in the museum's basement. The museum's collection grew through donations of Frederick Stearns, George Gough Booth, Ralph Harmon Booth and Charles Lang Freer, among others, and by the beginning of 1893, it became clear that the expanding museum had run out of space. A fund-raising push looked to collect \$30,000 (about \$899,000 today) to build two wings onto the back of the museum. The effort ran into trouble after the Panic of 1893 threw the country into a period of economic chaos for five years, crippling donations. Still, the money was slowly raised, and construction started Jan. 31, 1894.

By November 1894, the addition was nearly complete. The museum's collections had grown to include everything from paintings and statues to moose heads and tarantulas to model ships. Attendance for 1893-1894 was more than 60,000, and that number climbed to more than 90,000 by 1897, the same year construction wrapped up on the new wings. That's an impressive number considering the city's population was only 285,704 in 1900, while 12% of Detroiters didn't speak any English and 1 in 10 Americans was illiterate.

The museum opened an auditorium on June 21, 1905, in an addition that also housed a library and more galleries. But as William H. Peck noted in his "The Detroit Institute of Arts: A Brief History": "The trustees had no sooner dedicated the 1905 addition to the building than they began to think about an even larger museum in a different location that would offer adequate space for future expansion." The idea of creating a cultural center in the city began to take root and another fund-raising drive was launched, this time seeking \$216,000 (\$5.9 million today) to buy land from the families of Dexter M. Ferry and Palmer's widow, Lizzie Merrill Palmer.

The Detroit Institute of Arts is born

With the era of the automobile came a boom of wealth and population. And as Detroit continued to bustle, the museum's collections swelled with it. The museum had to expand. In January 1919, Mayor James Couzens appointed the first Arts Commission, headed by Ralph H. Booth. Edsel B. Ford and renowned architect Albert Kahn also sat on the commission. Kahn would influence the choice of the new museum's architect – and help make Detroit's art museum one of the finest in the country.

In October 1919, the "Bulletin of the Detroit Museum of Arts" was renamed the "Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts," a change the bulletin called "the beginning of an epoch in the history of Detroit. ... It is an era when art shall become in its broadest sense democratic, with the museum and its valuable collections actually belonging to the people." The art was to become property of the city in December 1919 – and just as important, the city would be in charge of picking up the tab for future acquisitions.

Upon its formation, the commission had three key tasks: continue operating the museum; negotiate the conveyance to the city of the properties of and collections in the museum; and most importantly, decide on how a new building would be designed and built, Peck wrote.

Booth asked Kahn if he would design the DIA, but Kahn declined. Instead, Kahn personally selected Paul Philippe Cret, a native of Lyons, France, to handle the task. Cret formally turned in a proposal for the museum in late 1920, modeling it after the Cleveland Museum of Art. The price tag: \$2.5 million (\$31 million today). The commission ruled it too small and made other changes bringing the total to \$4.5 million (about \$56 million today).

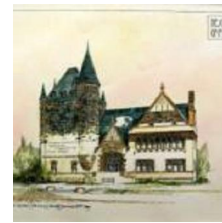
Peck's history of the DIA notes that the "exciting prospect of a new building on Woodward Avenue revived the Detroit public's interest in the museum. The annual report for 1921 presents a positive record of growing activity." Attendance for the year reached 146,000, and the museum on Jefferson hosted special events and lectures 88 days of that year and held 22 special exhibitions. The museum also used the renewed interest and city checkbook to acquire pieces by such artists as Degas, Monet, James A. McNeil Whistler and John Singer Sargent.

Today, Rodin's "The Thinker" looks out over Woodward from a perch in front of the Detroit Institute of Arts, but he once surveyed Jefferson from in front of the Museum of Art. The statue, cast by Rodin in 1904, was given to the museum by Horace H. Rackham in 1922, five years before the move to the DIA occurred.

Cret's plan was more or less firmly in place by February 1922, and the plan was to have the building occupied by early 1925. Ground was broken on the new building on June 22, 1922. Ralph Booth turned the first spade full of dirt. The cornerstone was laid April 29, 1924. "Our city has achieved first place in industry and an enviable place in wealth," Booth said during the cornerstone ceremony. "We are here today to crown these accomplishments by laying the cornerstone of this building which shall testify that our true ambition is not mechanical production only. This but supplies the opportunity with which we shall gather around us the finer things to which we aspire, and give tangible evidence to the world that Detroit is a city of enlightenment and progress. Where we claim the best that civilization offers in order that our lives may be fuller, and richer, and contribute to the true betterment of future generations."

Galleries

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art-artifacts)

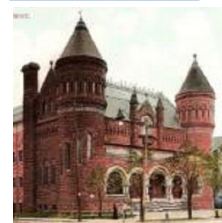
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art-vintage-postcards)

The museum was not only growing but was evolving drastically from a collection of oddities to a renowned, internationally respected institute. Leading the changes was William Valentiner, known as the “father of the DIA,” who joined the museum as an adviser in 1921 and would serve as the director of the DIA from 1924 to 1945. Cret and Valentiner installed some of the newest acquisitions in the Jefferson building as a way to show Detroiters what was to come in the new building. It was Valentiner who oversaw the move to the new DIA – and the abandonment of the 39-year-old Museum of Art. The castle on Jefferson served as the city’s art museum until it closed in July 1927, when all of its treasures were moved to the Detroit Institute of Arts on Woodward. The DIA opened at 8 p.m. Oct. 7, 1927.

Despite losing its treasures – and the tops of its turrets in the 1930s – the Jefferson building survived for more than 30 years. It was turned over to the Public Welfare Department, which operated out of its halls. Then it housed the offices of the Veterans Administration for the last 10 years of its existence until the old museum fell to progress. In February 1957, it was announced that the museum would be razed for the Hastings Expressway, today known as I-75, the Chrysler Freeway. The museum was torn down in 1960.