

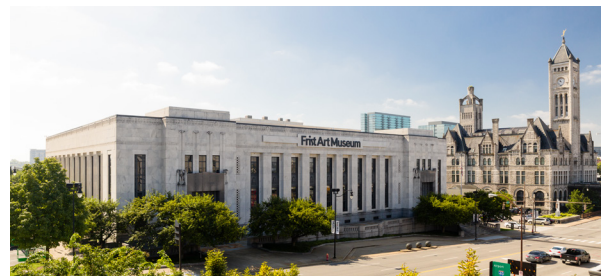
A Landmark Repurposed: From Post Office to Art Museum

Educator Guide



Contents

- 01 Tennessee State Standards and Frist Resources
- 02 A Landmark Repurposed: From Post Office to Art Museum
- 03 Nashville Architecture
- 04 Marr & Holman, Architects
- 05 Nashville during the Depression
- 06 Building a Way Out
- 07 Stripped Classicism
- 08 Art Deco
- 09 Icons of an Era
- 10 The New Post Office
- 11 Recycling the Nashville Post Office
- 12 Art Changes Lives: Celebrating Twenty Years of the Frist Art Museum
- 13 Pre-Visit Activities
 - Enjoy *Art Is All Around You* Videos and Activities
 - Test Your Vocabulary
 - Match the Icons
- 16 Post-Visit Activity: Survey, Repurpose, and Design a Building
- 18 Glossary
- 19 Answer Keys



Cover: John Schweikert

Organized by the Frist Art Museum

Presenting Sponsor



The Frist Art Museum is supported in part by



The Frist Art Museum gratefully acknowledges the generosity of our O'Keeffe Circle members in funding this exhibition:

Judy and Joe Barker
Patricia Frist Elcan and Charles A. Elcan
Jennifer and Billy Frist
Julie and Tommy Frist
Patricia C. Frist* and Thomas F. Frist, Jr., MD
Lynn and Ken Melkus
R. Milton and Denice Johnson
Sid and Linda Pilson
Delphine and Ken Roberts
Anne and Joe Russell
Mr. and Mrs James C. Seabury III
Olivia L. Tyson

This list is current as of January 13, 2021.

*Deceased

We also thank the members of the **Art Deco Society**, whose support helps with the upkeep and maintenance of our historic 919 Broadway building.

FristArtMuseum.org

Tennessee State Standards

Fine Arts Standards

By analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating artworks, students fulfill the Respond domain of Tennessee's Fine Arts Standards. Synthesizing information and contextualizing the works applies to the Connect domain. The Create domain includes the generation, conceptualization, development, and refinement of artistic work.

Social Studies Standards

Fifth Grade

5.15 Identify the causes of the Great Depression, President Herbert Hoover's role, and its impact on the nation, including: consumer credit and debt, Hoovervilles, mass unemployment, soup kitchens.

5.48 Describe the effects of the Great Depression on Tennessee and the impact of New Deal policies in the state (i.e., Tennessee Valley Authority and Civilian Conservation Corps).

High School

African American History

AAH.34 Analyze the impact of the Great Depression and the New Deal on the lives of African Americans.

Tennessee History

TN.51 Describe how the Great Depression and New Deal programs impacted Tennesseans, including the significance of: the Agricultural Adjustment Act, Civilian Conservation Corps, Tennessee Valley Authority, and Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

United States History

US.39 Analyze the causes of the Great Depression, including: bank failures, laissez-faire politics, buying on margin, overextension of credit, crash of the stock market, overproduction in agriculture and excess consumerism manufacturing, high tariffs, and rising unemployment.

US.41 Describe the impact of the Great Depression on the American people, including: mass unemployment, migration, and Hoovervilles.

Critical Thinking in Context

These standards are designed to equip students with specific skills and strategies needed for working with STEM related concepts.

- 1) Develop claims and use evidence to form arguments
- 2) Engage in investigations through science and engineering practices to identify and define global issues, challenges, and real-world problems
- 3) Use research data to refine existing questions, problems, models, and arguments and/or to develop new questions, problems, models, and arguments
- 4) Discuss grade appropriate systemic methodology (e.g., scientific or engineering design practices, etc.) to investigate global challenges and real-world problems
- 5) Analyze the limitations, risks, and impacts of technology

Frist Resources

An audio architecture tour, Spanish-language brochure, and other resources can be accessed at FristArtMuseum.org/landmark.



Seab A. Tuck III, for Tuck-Hinton Architects. *Frist Center for the Visual Arts*. Based on a photograph of the Marr & Holman presentation drawing, *The Tennessean* archives. Graphite on paper, 13 3/4 x 24 in. Frist Art Museum. Photo: Bill LaFevor

A Landmark Repurposed: From Post Office to Art Museum

A society projects its views of itself in its public works. Design choices embody many forces—political and economic as well as cultural. Our government buildings, therefore, must be understood in the context of the American experience.

When the United States of America was founded, its leaders chose the **classical** architectural style to **symbolize** the nation's legitimacy and its government's authority. Weighted with allusions to Greek democracy and the Roman republic, classical architecture's formal properties—symmetry and hierarchy, clarity and predictability—were thought of as instruments that could impose rational order onto a wilderness.

During the 1930s, federal architects relied on a form of classicism to tame the economic wilderness of the **Great Depression**. But while the massive structure built to house Nashville's post office is formal and **symmetrical**, it is "**stripped**" or "**starved**" of obvious classical details. In retrospect, its design reflected economically lean times.

The team of federal and local architects who designed the Nashville post office crafted an imposing monument to government stability. A team of public-spirited citizens poured dynamic new meaning into this vessel with the opening of the Frist Center for the Visual Arts (now the Frist Art Museum) on April 8, 2001. They created an institution dedicated to serving all of Nashville's diverse communities, as well as the people who visit our city.

The result of the collective civic will to turn dreams into reality is a landmark **repurposed** as a place of communal gathering and learning. Today the Frist Art Museum stands firmly on its 1934 foundations, committed to its vision to change how people see and experience their world through art.



William Appleton Potter, architect. The Nashville Customs House, 1876–82. Chromolithographic postcard. Collection of W. Ridley Wills II. Photo: Bill LaFevor



Christ Church Cathedral, ca. 1940. Image courtesy of Nashville Public Library, Metro Nashville Archives



Union Station, Nashville, ca. 1920. Chromolithographic postcard. Image courtesy of Nashville Public Library, Special Collections

Nashville Architecture

The cornerstone for what was originally called Nashville's Custom House, Courthouse, and Post Office was laid by President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877 on Broadway, two blocks from where the Frist Art Museum stands today. Hayes had triumphed in the 1876 election by promising to withdraw federal troops from the South after the Civil War and start a federal building program in the financially depressed region. What became the US Customs House was a realization of his campaign promise.

The Gothic Revival structure, designed by William Appleton Potter (1842–1908), was Nashville's first federal office building. Potter's use of a style not traditionally employed for federal buildings was perhaps intended to make more palatable the US government's presence in a city that had so recently been occupied by Union troops. The elaborate handcarved limestone ornament, the interior cherrywood trim, and the solid brass hardware contributed to the \$404,684.44 cost of the project, making it the most expensive undertaking during Potter's tenure as supervising architect for the Treasury Department.

Two buildings near the Frist Art Museum introduce earlier styles that recall the great cathedrals of Europe. The Victorian Gothic Christ Episcopal Church (now Christ Church Cathedral), built by New York architect Francis H. Kimball, opened in 1894. The Richardsonian Romanesque Union Station, designed by Louisville architect Richard Montfort, opened in 1900 as Nashville's main train depot. The importance of Union Station was a critical factor in the decision to build a new post office next door in 1934. In counterpoint to these older buildings, the symmetrical and streamlined post office would exhibit an updated classical style in which ornamentation is suppressed and linear incisions on the facade lead the eye skyward.



The Architects at Work. In Mrs. J. B. Chandler, "Thomas Scott Marr, Architect." *Silent Worker*, June 1929. Image courtesy of Gallaudet University Archives. Thomas Marr is on the right, and Joseph Holman is in the center.

Marr & Holman, Architects

Thomas Marr (1866–1936), a partially deaf bachelor trained at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was content to remain at the drafting table, live quietly, and travel little. Joseph Holman (1890–1952) brought to the firm not only an interest in architecture and engineering but the enterprising instinct to pursue projects and the ability to charm clients into contracts. It was the perfect partnership.

Architectural practice during the 1920s and 1930s, when the firm was in its heyday, placed limited emphasis on uniqueness of design—at least outside the major urban centers. For Marr & Holman, design was largely a question of **surveying** the latest building types and styles and incorporating current developments into the firm's projects. Architecture was more of a business than a fine art.

On November 5, 1931, Treasury Secretary William Woodin named Marr & Holman the architects for the Nashville post office.

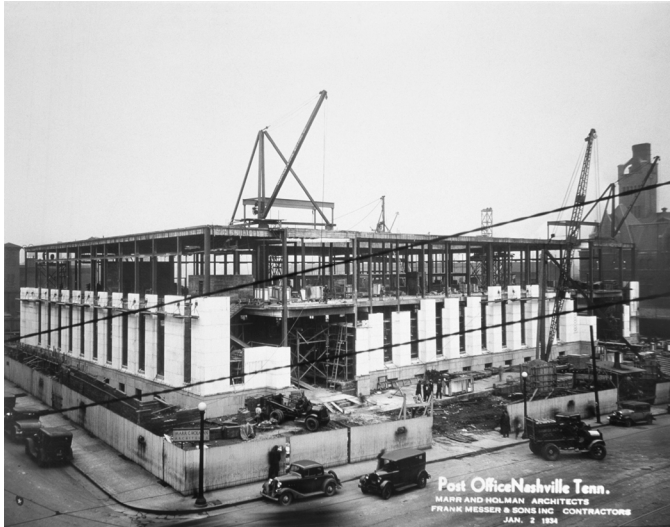


Ben Shahn. Man at a religious meeting, Nashville, Tennessee, September 1935. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Nashville during the Depression

During the Great Depression, hunger and poverty appeared on the streets of Nashville in 1931. Armies of transients camped on the banks of the Cumberland River and wandered through downtown looking for work. The middle class pawned heirlooms to pay for food and clothing, colleges bartered for tuition, and retailers cut prices to the breaking point. Applications for help to the city's charities and public agencies rose from 2,600 in 1929 to nearly 10,000 in 1936, straining resources beyond capacity. "Relief would have to come from the government," writes historian Don Doyle. "Only the federal government was up to the job."

In 1935, Ben Shahn (1898–1969) was on a field assignment for the **New Deal's** Resettlement Administration. The artist's job was to record the socioeconomic geography of the nation's most poverty-stricken regions. Among his hundreds of photographs are a dozen of a Nashville religious meeting. Such meetings were frequently held on Sunday afternoons, on the corner of Lower Broad across from what was then the city wharf on the Cumberland River. Shahn's black-and-white images transcend mere reporting to explore the features of a community facing hard times.



The Nashville post office under construction from the northeast, January 2, 1934. Photograph. Marr & Holman Collection, Tennessee Historical Society, Tennessee State Library & Archives

Building a Way Out

Rather than adding a new loading dock to the Customs House, as originally planned, the Treasury Department decided to provide economic relief for Nashville by erecting a new building whose sole tenant would be the post office. Nashville's postal operations had no compelling need for more space, but people in the construction industry needed work. By February 1931, Congress had added \$330 million to the federal building till. Thanks to the efforts of Tennessee representative Joseph Byrns, an influential member of the House Committee on Appropriations, the allocation for the Nashville post office was \$1.565 million.

By 1930, more than ten thousand trains were used to move the mail. The Treasury Department logically decided to purchase land for a new post office next to the railroad station. The site was occupied by Anthony de Matteo Fruits, auto and tire stores, a pie wagon owned by J. M. Coombs, and two small hotels patronized by salesmen who rode the rails.

The Nashville post office opened for business on November 26, 1934, eighteen months after the start of actual construction.



Photo: John Schweikert

Stripped Classicism

From before the Civil War through the 1930s, buildings constructed by the federal government had an official style, courtesy of the Treasury Department's Office of the Supervising Architect. The supervising architect allowed local architects employed on federal projects little leeway in design. The full-blown classicism of the past—as found in the Nashville Parthenon's pediments, columns, and capitals in the Greek orders—was compromised by the government's need for speed of construction and by the influence of the style known generically as *modernism*.

For the modernist architect, the form of buildings should follow their function, the way the forms of machines do. At their best, such buildings, with their steel frames and transparent glass curtain walls, symbolize a decidedly twentieth-century kind of clarity—the clarity of Henry Ford's assembly-line-produced automobile.

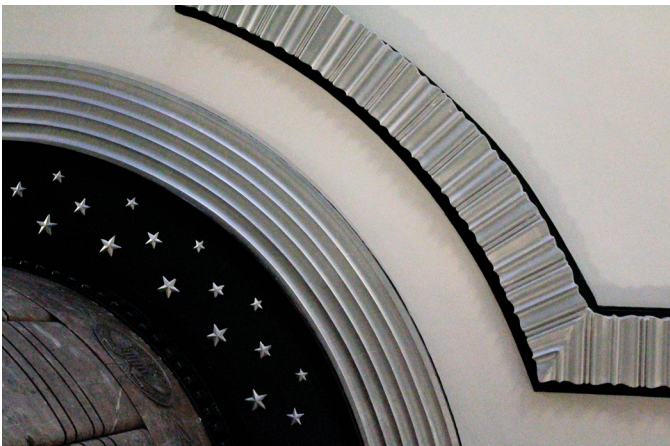
But there was never any real question that federal architecture would go wholeheartedly modern. Government needed to appear as a stable force in an unstable society. Federal architects were called on to express the values of permanence, rationality, and order—values that classicism served so well—but in forms streamlined to suggest forward progress rather than looking backward. The synthesis of modern and traditional produced the style known as "stripped" or even "starved" classicism.



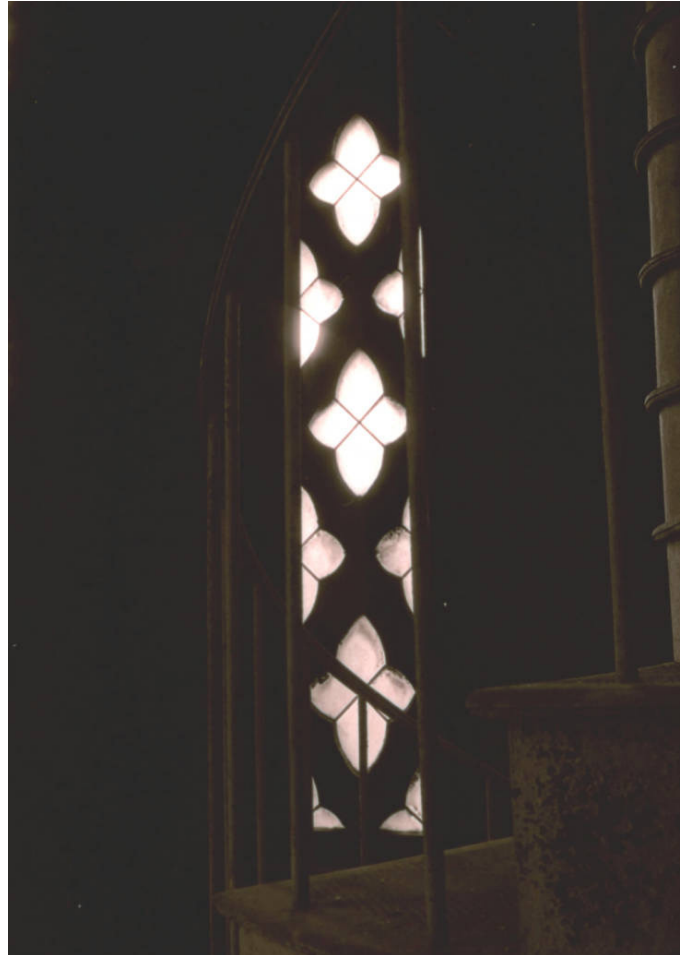
Lobby, Nashville post office. Image courtesy of the Marr & Holman Collection, Tennessee Historical Society, Tennessee State Library & Archives



Tennessee State Capitol Building, circa 1960s. Image courtesy of Nashville Public Library, Metro Nashville Archives



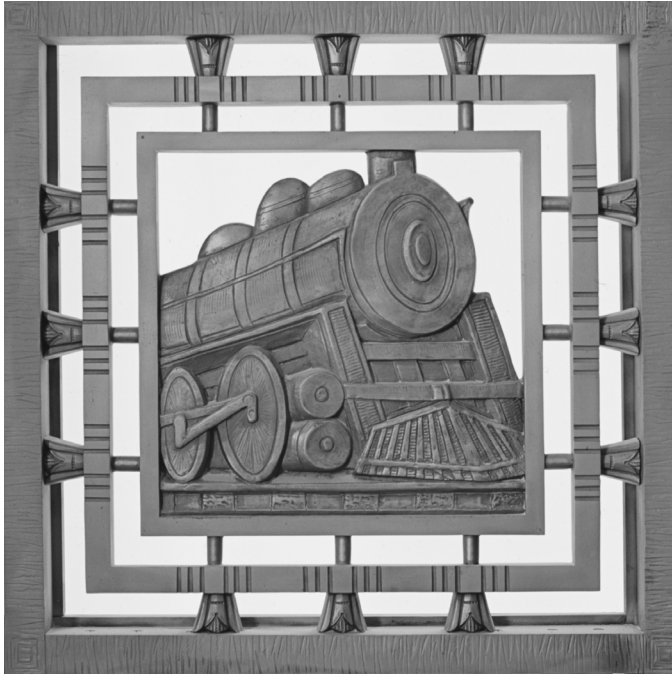
Ceiling detail, Grand Lobby, Frist Art Museum. Photo: Karlie Odum



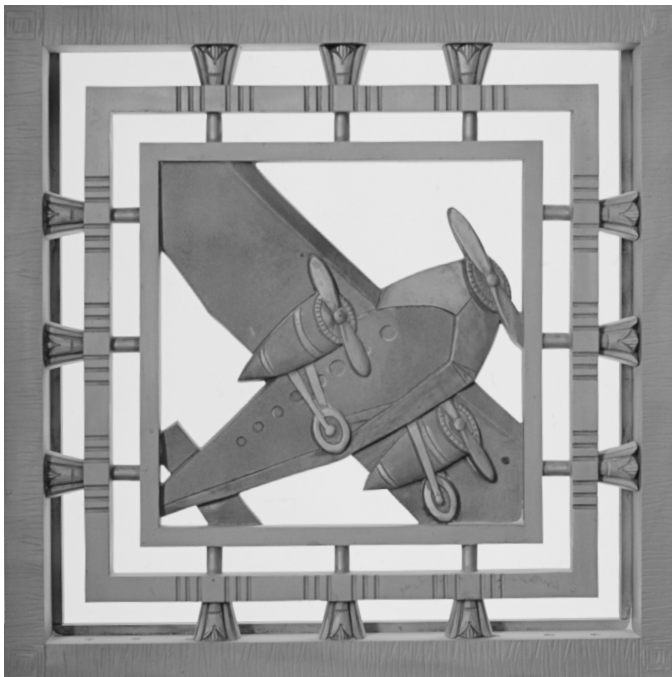
An interior window at the Customs House, 1976. Image courtesy of Nashville Public Library, Metro Nashville Archives

Art Deco

The style of the lobby is what we now call *art deco*. The term comes from the title of an influential exhibition of decorative and industrial arts held in Paris in 1925: *L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*. Art deco designers rejected historicism as inappropriate to twentieth-century structures. In place of the Ionic scrolls and *acanthus* leaves of classicism (as seen in the Tennessee State Capitol) and the Gothic *quatrefoil* and *crocket* (as seen in the US Customs House), up-to-the-minute geometric and floral abstractions were introduced, such as chevrons, arcs, and sunbursts. Art deco buildings broke no new ground in planning or structure; their modernity was strictly a matter of surface treatment.



Locomotive



Plane

Photos: Bob Schatz

Icons of an Era

The frieze of icons represents the speed and power of transportation harnessed to deliver the mail. These icons symbolize a proud history as well as current technology, as celebrated in a 1993 US Postal Service publication:

The Postal Service has helped develop and subsidize every new mode of transportation in the United States. The postal role was a natural one: apart from postal employees themselves, transportation was the single most important element in mail delivery, literally, the legs of communication. Even when the general public was skeptical or fearful of a new means of transportation, postal officials experimented with inventions that offered potential for moving the mail faster.

The icons represent the tools used to craft the economic and cultural prosperity of the nation. The mass-produced motifs symbolize the upward spiral of humankind courtesy of machine production. Taken collectively, these democratically comprehensible images form an allegory of forward motion, industrial progress, and hope for economic revival.



Mail trucks, June 21, 1951. Photo: E. B. Estes. Courtesy of *The Tennessean*



Mail carrier, date unknown

The New Post Office

On Sunday, November 18, 1934, before the postal employees or equipment had moved from the US Customs House to 919 Broadway, postmaster William Gupton introduced the new post office to the public during an open house instead of a formal dedication. Gupton said, "Now everybody is taking a hand in it, and they have a chance to feel that it really belongs to them." An estimated 40,000–50,000 Nashvillians toured the new building and its luxurious lobby.

Countless pieces of mail have been sent through Nashville's post office, which has helped tie the city to the rest of the nation. But, meaningful bonds are ultimately forged by people. In the case of the US postal system, those people include the postal workers who operate it and the customers who use it.



The interior of the post office space during its transformation into an art center

Recycling the Nashville Post Office

In December 1986, the Nashville post office prepared for its last Christmas rush. Postal workers braced for the red-and-green onslaught of an estimated 57 million cards and letters—enough to make a stack 20.6 miles high. In the spring of 1987, Nashville's central postal distribution operations moved to an industrial park near the airport. Airplanes had replaced trains as the means for moving mail from city to city. The site next to Union Station was no longer an attraction but a hindrance.

In 1996, when The Frist Foundation proposed installing a visual arts center in the downtown post office, Nashvillians recognized a compatible tenant. The building's architecture recalled the classically inspired temples to the fine arts that other cities had built long ago.

The post office was also practically as well as symbolically appropriate. Art museums typically require big rooms with tall ceilings, a large loading dock, and plenty of subsidiary spaces for events, administration, archives, and storage.

The post office had all these, on a site at the edge of the city center, with excellent access to artery roads and interstates. The task for the renovation designers was to carve out galleries and open up sight lines and predictable avenues through areas of the building that had once been off-limits to the public.



Grand opening, 2001. Photo: Billy Kingsley

Art Changes Lives: Celebrating Twenty Years of the Frist Art Museum

Approximately seven thousand guests celebrated the opening of the Frist Center for the Visual Arts on Sunday, April 8, 2001. It was the culmination of almost a decade-long civic dialogue and planning process led by The Frist Foundation. Originally inspired by Nashville's Agenda, a 1993 community-wide visioning project, the institution relied on the community's input again when its name was changed to the Frist Art Museum in 2018. Working together for the past twenty years, trustees, staff, and volunteers have endeavored to fulfill the founders' vision of bringing the art of the world to the Mid-South, providing opportunities for learning, connecting and engaging with the community, and being welcoming to all.

Pre-Visit Activities

Enjoy *Art Is All Around You* Videos and Activities



[FristArtMuseum.org/resource/style-in-architecture](https://fristartmuseum.org/resource/style-in-architecture)

Video: Style in Architecture

At-Home Activity: Architecture Scavenger Hunt

Lesson: Cityscape with Personality

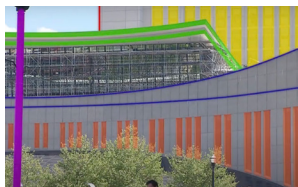


[FristArtMuseum.org/resource/shapes-in-architecture](https://fristartmuseum.org/resource/shapes-in-architecture)

Video: Shapes in Architecture

At-Home Activity: Shape Sculptures

Lesson: Organic and Geometric Shapes



[FristArtMuseum.org/resource/lines-in-architecture](https://fristartmuseum.org/resource/lines-in-architecture)

Video: Lines in Architecture

At-Home Activity: Dream House Drawing

Lesson: Architecture Collage

Test Your Vocabulary

Complete each sentence with one of these words.

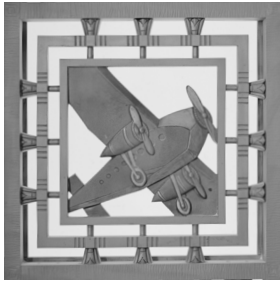
- architecture
- art deco
- facade
- frieze
- icons

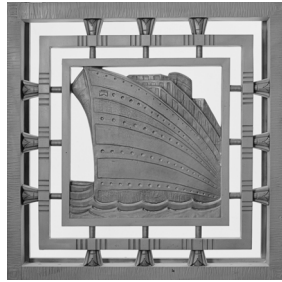
1. At the museum, the cast aluminum graphic symbols that represent the speed and power of transportation are also called _____.
2. _____, the design style of the post office lobby, is characterized by bold outlines and geometric and floral abstractions, such as chevrons, arcs, and sunbursts.
3. _____ is the art or practice of designing and building structures, especially habitable ones.
4. The sculptured panel with symbolic icons in the post office/museum lobby is called a _____.
5. The front, or face, of a building is the _____.

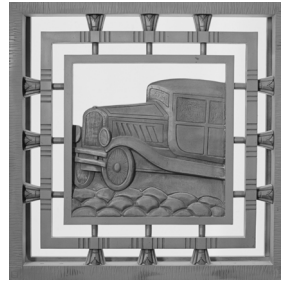
Match the Icons

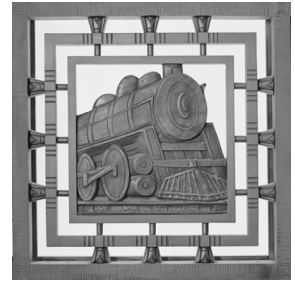
Match the icons with their names and descriptions by writing the number under the corresponding icon.

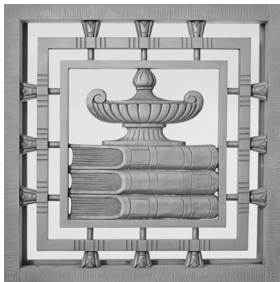
1. Ship: a unique form of moving mail
2. Locomotive (Train): a quick and reliable way of moving mail during the first half of the 20th century
3. Airplane: a fast and powerful way of moving mail
4. Car: a quick way of delivering mail around the United States.
5. Dolphin and Propeller: symbols of ideas moving forward.
6. Anvil: a symbol of industrial progress
7. Microscope and Beaker: symbols of scientific advancements
8. Books and Lamp: symbols of learning
9. Plow: a symbol of economic growth
10. Gears: a symbol of machines and workers
11. Printing Press: a symbol of advancements in knowledge and technology
12. Sickle and Wheat: symbols of the harvest

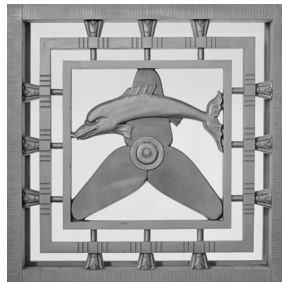


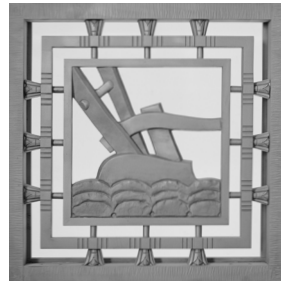


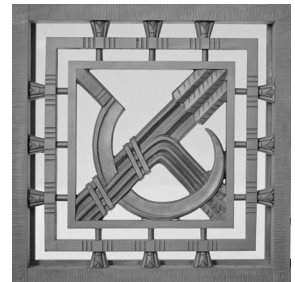


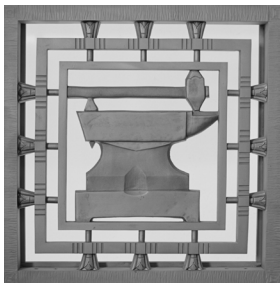


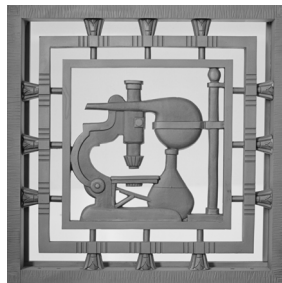


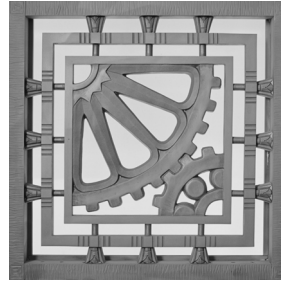


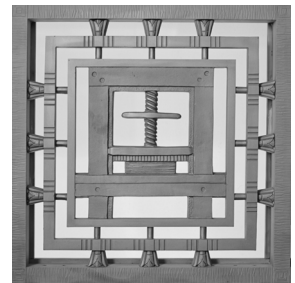












Post-Visit Activity: Survey, Repurpose, and Design a Building

Part 1: Survey

Choose a building in your neighborhood and survey (observe and document) its design, materials, and surroundings.

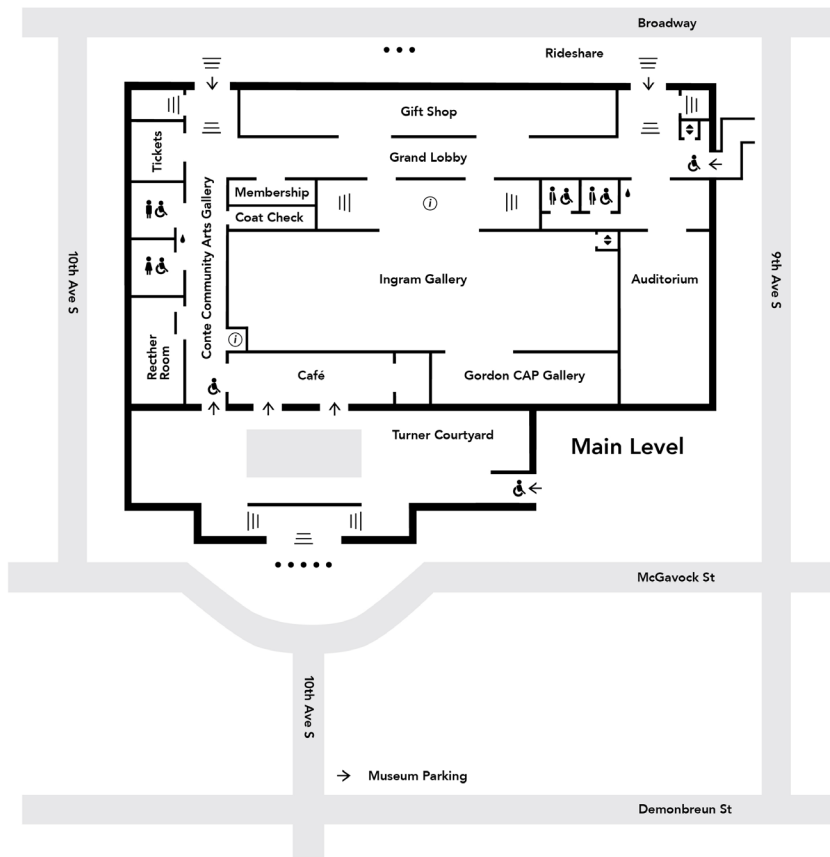
- How is the building shaped?
- What is this building used for?
- How many floors does it have?
- What is the exterior building made of?
- How many windows does it have? How are they shaped?
- How would you describe the building's location and setting?
 - Busy and noisy
 - Quiet
 - High vehicle traffic
 - Walkers and bicyclists in the area
 - Surrounded by lots of buildings
 - Surrounded by open areas and green space
 - Other characteristics
- Observe other details. Do you see any of the following items?
 - Doors
 - Stairs
 - Chimneys
 - **Columns**
 - Garage
 - **Arches**
 - Outdoor lights
 - Other details

Part 2: Repurpose

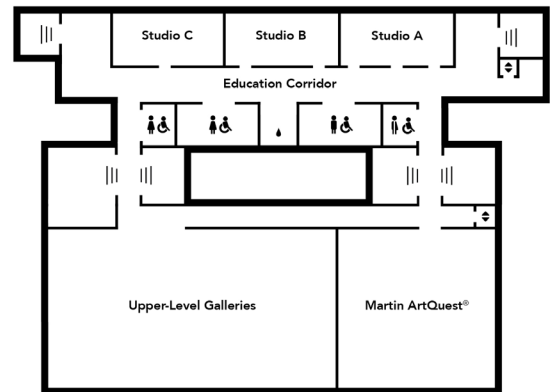
After surveying the building, think about how it is currently being used. If you could repurpose this building to serve another function, what would it be?

Part 3: Design

Main Level



Upper Level



- ◆ Elevator
- ← Entry/Exit
- ≡ Stairs
- ♿ Accessible
- ▲ Water
- ♂ Men
- ♀ Women
- ♂♀ Unisex/Family
- ① Information

Examples of floor plans

After you decide how you would repurpose the building, design a new **floor plan**. A floor plan is a scale diagram of a room or suite of rooms viewed from above. Get creative as you become an architect and redesign the building to serve a new purpose!

- Think of the purposes of your space. How can the structural details you add support its function?
- On a plain white piece of paper, use a pencil to sketch the general layout of your floor plan.
- Add structural details such as rooms, doorways, windows, and halls.
- Think of what the inside of each room will look like. Add features and furniture to complete your design.

Glossary

acanthus: an ornamentation representing or suggesting the leaves of the acanthus, a genus of prickly perennial herbs chiefly of the Mediterranean region

arch: a typically curved structural member spanning an opening and serving as a support

architecture: the art or science of building; the art or practice of designing and building structures and especially habitable ones

art deco: a popular design style of the 1920s and 1930s characterized especially by bold outlines, geometric and zigzag forms, and the use of new materials

classical: of or relating to the ancient Greek and Roman world and especially to its literature, art, architecture, or ideals

column: a supporting pillar consisting of a usually round shaft, a capital, and a base

crocket: an ornament usually in the form of curved and bent foliage used on the edge of a gable or spire

design: to create, fashion, execute, or construct according to plan; to draw the plans for

facade: the front, or face, of a building

floor plan: a scale diagram of a room or suite of rooms viewed from above

frieze: a sculptured or richly ornamented panel (as on a building or piece of furniture)

Great Depression: the period of severe worldwide economic decline that began in 1929 and lasted throughout the 1930s and that was marked by deflation and widespread unemployment

icon: a sign (such as a word or graphic symbol) whose form suggests its meaning

Ionic: of or relating to the ancient Greek architectural order distinguished especially by fluted columns on bases and scroll volutes in its capitals

New Deal: the legislative and administrative program of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt designed to promote economic recovery and social reform during the 1930s

quatrefoil: a conventionalized representation of a flower with four petals or of a leaf with four leaflets

repurpose: to give a new purpose or use to

stripped (or starved) classicism: primarily a 20th-century classicist architectural style stripped of most or all ornamentation, frequently employed by governments while designing official buildings (Wikipedia.org)

survey: to examine as to condition, situation, or value

symbolism: the use of symbols or images to portray an idea or feeling

symmetrical: balanced proportions; evenly distributed physical or visual weight

These definitions are from Merriam-Webster.com unless otherwise noted.

Answer Keys

Test Your Vocabulary

1. icons
2. art deco
3. architecture
4. frieze
5. facade

Match the Icons

From left to right, top to bottom:

Top row: 3, 1, 4, 2

Middle row: 8, 5, 9, 12

Bottom row: 6, 7, 10, 11