



Henry Austin, City Hall, 1861

New Haven, Connecticut

The Gothic Revival

by Gail Leggio

The Gothic Revival was a complex cultural phenomenon, encompassing literature, painting, the decorative arts and architecture. The movement begins in the mid-eighteenth century with Horace Walpole's whimsical long-term building project, Strawberry Hill. The Romantic poets revived the indigenous ballad tradition, rediscovered the poetry of Dante, and took their subjects from medieval legends. For the Victorians, the Gothic Revival was strongly associated with spiritual idealism, which took a variety of forms: the ritualism and theology of the Oxford Movement, under John Henry (later Cardinal) Newman; the neo-medieval architecture and ecclesiastical furnishings designed by Augustus Welby Pugin (1812–52); the Grail myths explored in poetry by Alfred, Lord Tennyson and in art by D. G. Rossetti and Sir Edward Burne-Jones; the evangelical fervor of art critic John Ruskin, who equated virtue with Gothic style. The polymath William Morris adopted the medieval artisan as the model of creative labor, reacting against social injustice and the mechanical ugliness of factory production. Morris's Arts and Crafts Movement extends the Gothic Revival to the verge of the twentieth century.

This summer, the Yale University Art Gallery is examining one particular manifestation of the Gothic Revival, its impact on architectural practice in the American northeast, in

the context of some British antecedents. **Modern Gothic: The Revival of Medieval Art** presents approximately 100 works that illustrate the popularity of the style in Britain and the United States from 1830 to 1875. Included are architectural drawings, paintings, sculpture, furniture and decorative objects. Organized by Susan B. Matheson, with Derek D. Churchill, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue consider the social context and cultural impetus that led to a proliferation of Gothic forms. Modern photographs of private houses, churches, civic structures and collegiate buildings throughout the northeast testify to the impact the Gothic Revival had on the built environment. Matheson declares that she was motivated in part by “the urgent need to preserve these historic buildings.”

Preservation was an important aspect of the Gothic Revival cult from its inception. British and continental European medievalists could find inspiration in the vestiges of surviving buildings around them and draw on the work of antiquarians who were documenting—in drawings and photographs—the architecture and ornament of the past. There were heated debates about the role of restoration in the preservation of these monuments. William Morris was an opponent of intervention, to the extent that he stopped selling his magnificent stained-glass for use in old churches. The Frenchman Viollet-le-Duc (1814–79) was an enthusiastic restorer who rebuilt Notre Dame and the Sainte Chapelle in Paris and the town of Carcassonne in southern France. Viollet-le-Duc admired the Gothic builders for their engineering skills. He also argued that the steep roofs and thick walls of medieval architecture were not only part of northern Europe’s heritage but also more practical—given the colder, wetter climate—than the flat roofs and open colonnades of classical Greek buildings.

The United States possessed no vestiges of a medieval past. Yet the idea of Gothic took hold of American imaginations. Ruskin’s chapter “The Nature of Gothic” in Volume II of *The Stones of Venice* (1853) outlines the moral elements of Gothic: savageness, love of change, love of nature, disturbed imagination, obstinacy and generosity. These are qualities not incompatible with the American temperament; Gothic left room for independence, idiosyncrasy and regional difference.

The American landscape itself seemed to encourage an aesthetic of the picturesque. In contrast to the Georgian symmetry of Neoclassical architecture and the formal garden, Gothic models invited builders to explore irregular outlines and free floor plans. The lack of authentic physical remains fomented improvisation. Gothic Revival developed its own vocabulary in the United States. Published designs by Pugin and other British medievalists provided a starting point, but American architects could be free-wheeling in their interpretation of Gothic motifs. Alexander Jackson Davis (1803–92), a resourceful and inventive builder, worked in various styles, but in the early 1830s he began a series of Gothic-style private residences that range in scale from baronial villa to cottage. Picturesque landscaping was an integral component of the overall aesthetic. Another important builder in the style, Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–52) was a pioneer American landscape architect and an early advocate of a Central Park in Manhattan. Davis and Downing had widespread influence in American architectural history; their ideas were disseminated through pattern books that contained practical construction information. These books helped spawn the vernacular Carpenter Gothic style (sometimes called Victorian Gingerbread) that continues to play a role in the American townscape. Architects across the United States felt free to experiment with the Gothic idiom, responding to local climate, building materials and topography.

The Yale exhibition concentrates on the development of that idiom in the

northeast, where Gothic became an established style for public buildings. Greek Revival, another historicist style, was embraced by Americans as an appropriate embodiment of democracy. Gothic Revival, too, also had strong philosophical implications, becoming identified with spirituality, moral aspiration and learning. Richard Upjohn (1802–78), a transplanted Briton, is best known for Trinity Church in lower Manhattan, its slender spire (until recently soot-blackened) sited between the modern city's concrete-canyoned walls. Upjohn's renovation and enlargement of Trinity (1841–6) draws on the ideal Christian church described by Pugin in *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841).

Gothic Revival was considered the proper style for churches, colleges and other structures dedicated to education, such as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Joseph Smithson's bequest had specified that his gift to the nation be dedicated to "the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." The dozen architects who competed in the 1846 design competition all offered Gothic or Romanesque Revival proposals. One of America's earliest public museums, the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, was created in 1842 by architects Ithiel Town (1784–1844), A.J. Davis and Henry Austin, who referred to English Gothic models. Henry Austin (1804–91), following Ruskin, selected Venetian Gothic for his New Haven City Hall (1861). For practical-minded Americans, there were other reasons for choosing Gothic over Classical. As theorist Robert Dale Owen notes in *Hints on Public Architecture* (1849), Gothic was more amenable to the windows and mechanical ventilation systems of modern buildings. Owen also admired the civic architecture of old European town halls, especially in Belgium.

The quadrangles of medieval Oxford and Cambridge offered models for American collegiate architecture at Princeton and Yale. Gothic Revival visually signaled continuity between Old World and New World learning environments, suggesting a line of evolution from the cloisters and libraries of medieval monasteries. The term Collegiate Gothic most probably originated with Davis. In 1844 Henry Austin created a library for Yale based on King's College Chapel, Cambridge. It is illuminating to realize how persistent and culturally resonant the Gothic Revival style remains in the fabric of American life. As late as 1913, when Cass Gilbert erected a "Cathedral of Commerce" in lower Manhattan, Gothic forms were still transforming themselves. The Woolworth Building, the headquarters of a five-and-ten-cent-store empire, makes clear the similarities between Gothic spire and skyscraper, and the glass mosaics and historiated capitals of the lobby have a playful attention to detail and richness that Ruskin might have admired.

The catalogue to the Yale exhibition contains two intriguing essays, Derek D. Churchill's "A Gothic Renaissance in Modern Britain" and Susan B. Matheson's "Making a Point: Gothic Revival Architecture in America." Fully illustrated, the catalogue also includes a narrative checklist and itineraries, designed to encourage self-guided tours. Henry Austin's Villa Vista in Stony Creek, Connecticut (1878), for example, features a Gothic-arch porch façade as delicate as lace and as dramatic as a Caspar David Friedrich cathedral ruin. At the very least, this project should make us more sensitive to the architectural heritage around us.

"Modern Gothic: The Revival of Medieval Art" continues through July 30, 2000, at the Yale University Art Gallery, Chapel Street at York, New Haven, Connecticut 06520 Tel. (203) 432-0600.