

The Vermiculation of Washington DC

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This booklet, freely distributed and accompanied by a series of photographs exhibited at the Transformer gallery in June 2012, details the exterior of the Renwick Gallery on Lafayette Square. A focus is placed on the pilasters or columns on the first floor where the stonemason's skill of vermiculation is evident. Here, one can see irregular holes carved into sandstone, intended to represent worms eating their way through the stone, collapsing it into rubble and ruin.



Renwick Gallery, 1863, unidentified photographer

Despite being the only example of its kind found in the Washington area during a research trip in early 2012, vermiculation can be seen on many nineteenth century buildings, its presence suggesting a symbolism at odds with the implied permanence or function of the edifice it often inhabits. For example, several columns at the front of the Irish Stock Exchange on Dublin (originally the city's Chamber of Commerce) are vermiculated, along with doorways into the Architectural Association in London. Several banks, theological colleges and a jail in Belfast all feature similar patterns on their facades. In architect James Renwick's case, he might have come across the style during a trip to Paris in 1864, where he probably saw Hector-Martin Lefuel's additions to the Louvre, another site rife with the pattern.

To contextualize the possible effects vermiculation has caused allegorically or otherwise in Washington, a collection of excerpts are republished here, along with further contextual information. The majority of material was sourced in the Smithsonian Institution Archives, who I thank for their kind assistance.

“William Wilson Corcoran, cofounder of Washington’s Riggs Bank, commissioned this building as a public gallery for his substantial art collection. Construction began in 1859, but when the Civil War broke out, the federal government appropriated the nearly completed building from its owner, a Southern sympathizer, and used it as a military warehouse and later as the headquarters of General Montgomery Meigs. The building was returned to Corcoran in 1869, and he finally opened his museum in 1873 after extensive renovations. The institution moved to a new facility in 1897, and in 1899, the U.S. court of Claims moved in and stayed for sixty-five years. Fortunately, the Smithsonian then took possession of the building and returned it to museum use, as a branch of the Smithsonian American Art Museum focusing on crafts. It was opened to the public in 1972.

The Renwick – probably the only museum named for its architect, rather than its benefactor- imitated the elaborate French Second Empire Style, most notably in the characteristic mansard roof. The use of red brick as the primary finish material seems to be a distinctly American touch, however, as are the column capitals bearing ornamental motifs based on tobacco and corn (surely inspired by Latrobe’s similar designs on the Capitol). Heavy, vermiculated quoins (with irregular, wormlike patterns etched into the stone) and swags bearing Corcoran’s initials add to the liveliness of the facades. The interior is relatively intimate for a museum, though it does boast a quite grand staircase, leading to an equally grand salon with walls intended to be, in the words of E.J. Applewhite, “the color of crushed mulberries.””

Source: Gerald Martin Moeller, *AIA Guide to the Architecture of Washington, D.C.*, 4th edition, 2006, p169.

Renwick's description for the completion of vermiculation on the site describes it as "to be completed with chamfers, chisel dressed and the centers rusticated with tooth chisel, as per plans."

Source: James Renwick, Specifications of the Various Kinds of Work In a Building to be Erected on the Corner of Penn. Avenue and 17th Street, Washington DC, 1858.

Air pollution, bird droppings and water penetration into the porous Seneca Brownstone were all discussed as reasons for a deterioration of the building's sandstone ornamental and vermiculated trimmings. By 1947, an unrealized renovation using limestone was mooted:

"A request is made for the sum of \$177,200 to resurface the brick and sandstone trim exterior of the building, the sandstone portion of which is gradually eroding away. Not only has the sandstone surface eroded to the extent that all character of the original design has nearly disappeared, but large pieces of stone continue to fall, endangering the lives of passing pedestrians. The estimate covers the cutting back to the brick face of projecting sandstone trim, etc., and the facing of the entire exterior with a limestone veneer thoroughly bonded into the existing walls.

Source: U.S. Court of Claims Maintenance Records 1947.

The sandstone continued to crumble. Jacqueline Kennedy writes a letter to the GSA, dated March 6 1962:

"It may look like a Victorian horror, but it is really quite lovely and a precious example of the period of architecture which is fast disappearing. I so strongly feel that the White House should give the example in preserving our nation's past. Now we think of saving old buildings like Mount Vernon and tear down everything in the 19th century – but, in the next hundred years, the 19th century will be of great interest and there will

none of it left: just plain glass skyscrapers. The Fine Arts Commission and the architects want to tear it down and put a park in its place because they think it makes the block more symmetrical. I hope you will use all of your influence to see that this building is preserved and not replaced with a few trees.

Source: Renwick Gallery of Art Library, exhibition notebook of "Lafayette Square 1963-1983, Architecture, Preservation and Presidency."



Photograph detailing crumbling sandstone, ca 1920-59 by Theodor Horydczak

President Lyndon B. Johnson decides to save the building from destruction, and hands it over to the Smithsonian. Universal Restoration Inc. is subcontracted to repair the building's façade between 1967 and 1972. Using photographs taken by Matthew Brady in the 1860s, careful study was made of the compositional forms of its' ornament, much of which now decayed. They remove all sandstone, crush it up and mix it with a new synthetic building compound called Permo-bond. Using this material, the ornament on the façade is recast, placed back in situ and finished with a layer of another synthetic material called Dekoist, "an example of a new direction on historic restoration and preservation, an Amalgam of art and technology fused together by the fire of imagination and the unremitting dedication to the attainment of uncommon standards of excellence."

Source: Press release, Universal Restoration, 1972.

"The exterior restoration by Universal Restoration is impeccable. It is a triumph of American culture over the spiteful neglect with which we treat our cities and the ignorant contempt in which we hold America's aspirations."

Source: Wolf Von Eckardt, The Washington Post, January 22 1972.

"This restored 19th century structure, after a classic struggle for survival, is a noble preservation success. It is nice to report that the good guys won... It is a \$2.8 million restoration miracle."

Source: Ada Louise Huxybale, New York Times, January 28 1972.

By late 1975 pieces of the restored stone started to fall from the building onto the sidewalk below, prompting emergency stabilization work. Several reasons are given for the quick demise of the restoration:

- "General lack of maintenance allowed water to get behind the stone and into the mortar joints."
- "Not having installed an electronic system to defend the building against bird droppings."
- More bizarrely, the Nixon Inaugural Committee of 1972 is blamed for creating an unhealthy environment for the building by "spraying the trees in front of the Renwick Gallery with a highly caustic petroleum product."

Source: The Washington Star, 8 September 1976.

By September 1981 The Smithsonian receive approval from the State Historic Preservation Officer for the use of precast architectural units to replace the deteriorating synthetic sandstone, anchored onto the building by stainless steel dowels. This decision is reached after several unsuccessful attempts to source appropriate natural sandstone for the building. Thomson Industries Corporation carries out the fabrication and installation of these features between 1984 and 1986. This work allows a monitoring system for the building's structure to be installed, "Through the Smithsonian Conservation Analytical Laboratory, scientists planned an extensive monitoring program by installing electronic sensors connected to electronic boards. The master boards are in turn interrogated by a small computer which is programmed to retrieve data every hour. This data is stored in a bubble memory which is immune to power failure."

Source: Renwick Project file for the Office of Design and Construction Smithsonian Institution, October 1987.



Restoration work on the Renwick Gallery, early 1970s