

FELIX WARBURG MANSION, Now part of the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1906-08; architect C.P.H. Gilbert.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1504, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On January 8, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Felix Warburg Mansion and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing was continued to March 11, 1980 (Item No. 3). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation, but the representative of the Jewish Museum requested that action on the item be deferred. Subsequent to the public hearing the Jewish Museum submitted statements opposing designation of the Warburg Mansion. The Commission has also received many other letters and statements, both supporting and opposing the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

By the early 1900s, Fifth Avenue facing Central Park had earned the nickname of "millionaires' row." An astonishing panoply of millionaires' mansions had been constructed in which architectural elegance was equalled only by stylistic variety. French Gothic chateaux stood cheek by jowl with Italian Renaissance palazzi, Louis XVI 'hotel particuliers' adjoined Georgian town houses, exuberant Baroque facades abutted restrained classical ones; and, yet, the overall effect remained utterly American. The mansions proclaimed the independence of mind, and proud ambitions of the captains of industry, mercantile magnates, financial wizards, and robber barons who had commissioned them; they flaunted their opulence and displayed unabashed enthusiasm for the beauty money can create. "Millionaires' row" was a quintessential manifestation of America's Gilded Age.

Few of Fifth Avenue's grand mansions have survived, and thus those remaining have become all the more worthy of preservation. The Felix Warburg Mansion is among the very finest left to us -- an exceptionally handsome example of the chateausque François I style, constructed in 1906-1908 for Felix and Frieda Warburg, and designed by C.P.H. Gilbert. At the turn of the century Gilbert was one of New York's best known and most prestigious architects, "a kind of l'architect du roi for American millionaires."¹

Felix Warburg very likely knew Gilbert prior to 1906 since the architect was already at work on a house for his brother, Paul. According to author Stephen Birmingham, Felix Warburg admired the Isaac D. Fletcher mansion of 1899, an elaborate François I mansion by Gilbert at 79th Street and Fifth Avenue, and overrode the objections of his father-in-law Jacob Schiff (who thought such an ostentatious style would encourage anti-Semitism) by commissioning Gilbert to design a François I mansion.² The Warburg brothers, members of the internationally renowned German banking family, emigrated from their native Hamburg to this country, joining the New York banking firm of Kuhn, Loeb & Company. Both married daughters of partners in the firm. While Paul devoted himself primarily to a distinguished banking career, Felix's achievements were more diversified. A highly capable financier, he was also a bon vivant, art collector, philanthropist, and leader within the Jewish community.

Born in 1873, Felix had been sent to Frankfurt as a young man to work in his mother's family business. There, he first encountered his future wife, Frieda Schiff, daughter of Jacob H. Schiff, head of Kuhn, Loeb & Co. Warburg overcame Schiff's initial disapproval of the match (he apparently considered Felix to be too much the "young man about town"), marrying Frieda in New York City in 1895. The couple settled here, and Warburg became an American citizen in 1900. The Warburgs and their four children divided their time between No. 1109 Fifth Avenue, a country estate, "Woodlands," in White Plains, New York, and a house in Palm Beach, Florida. Warburg was a yachtsman, polo player, and an early automobile enthusiast -- he owned a De Dion Bouton -- and had the White Plains house equipped with a garage within the house proper, a rare feature at the time. The houses contained squash courts, and on the children's floor of the Fifth Avenue house, a miniature electric railroad snaked from room to room. Warburg's art collection included paintings by Raphael and Botticelli, but he was most proud of his collection of Old Master prints, for which Gilbert designed a special room on the first floor of the mansion.³

Warburg became a senior partner in Kuhn, Loeb & Co., while also becoming increasingly involved with philanthropic and charitable works. By the time in 1937, the New York Times could characterize him as a man who "enjoyed an international reputation as a philanthropist and champion of social causes."⁴ The list of charities and institutions to which he contributed not only vast sums of money, but also his administrative and organizational skills, is truly staggering. To mention only some of his interests: he was involved with hospitals, aid to children, to the blind, and to the immigrant poor. He organized 75 separate charities into the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, and served as its president and later chairman of the board. As a Commissioner of the New York City Board of Education, he was instrumental in truancy reform, the hiring of school nurses, and the founding of schools for retarded children. He helped to establish the first children's court in New York. His interests also extended to cultural institutions; he was the treasurer of the American Museum of Natural History, served on the boards of the Metropolitan Opera and New York Symphony, and helped to establish the Juilliard School of Music.

Although Warburg by no means restricted his philanthropy to Jewish causes, he was deeply involved with Jewish concerns. During World War I when Central Europe endured desperate privations, Warburg became a founder and chairman of the Joint Distribution Committee, of which he remained head until 1932. He also helped to establish the United Jewish Appeal, and although a non-Zionist, was involved with the Jewish Agency for Palestine, and with the founding of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He served as a director of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, to which his wife, seven years after his death, donated the Fifth Avenue mansion.

Warburg, his father-in-law Jacob Schiff (1847-1920), and brother-in-law Mortimer Schiff (1877-1931) all played important roles in the establishment of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Jewish Museum. The Schiffs, like Warburg, were profoundly committed to philanthropy and to the welfare of the Jewish people. Jacob Schiff had helped to found the seminary in 1886, and was a pioneering member of its board of directors. He donated a building on West 123rd Street that for 30 years housed all the seminary's activities. Mortimer Schiff donated \$50,000 toward the purchase of the Eikan N. Adler library for the seminary, and was instrumental in expanding the library to its position as "the greatest collection of Jewish books and manuscripts in the world."⁵ In 1925, Warburg headed a group which acquired

the Benguiat Collection of Judaica, one of the cornerstone collections of the seminary's Jewish Museum, which had been established in 1904.⁶ To this museum, Warburg made many subsequent donations. The Schiffs also donated a later seminary building at Broadway and 122nd Street.

Given this background it seems especially appropriate that Mrs. Warburg decided to donate the family mansion as a permanent home for the Jewish Museum. In 1944, she wrote:

This gift is not intended as a specific memorial, but rather as an affirmation of my faith in the fundamental principles of our traditions, which can be helpful and constructive in the problems of our world today, and also as a tribute to the men of my family, my father, my husband, and my brother Mortimer, who each in his own way has done so much to build up the seminary toward its present effective usefulness....It gives me great happiness to think that the house my dear husband built 36 years ago as his conception of Beauty and Dignity and which for so many years harbored our harmonious family life and was always open to community interests should be now to live on to further ideals of our family tradition.⁷

In 1947, when the house was officially opened as the Jewish Museum, Mrs. Warburg was an early visitor and reported later:

I confess that the first time I entered 1109 after it had been transformed into the Jewish Museum was a very poignant moment. But I discovered to my joy that instead of depressing me, it gave me a wonderful feeling of happiness. I feel that the spirit of the house and warmth and love it held for so many years still hover in the rooms and somehow must be communicated to many of the visitors who come to it now.⁸

This mansion, Warburg's conception of "Beauty and Dignity," continues to welcome the visitors with whom Mrs. Warburg wished to share it. It is a grandly-scaled building, its style adapted from the transitional Late Gothic and Early Renaissance styles of the Loire Valley. The so-called François I mode was introduced to New York City -- and America -- in the early 1880s by Richard Morris Hunt, at that time the city's foremost architect, with his design for the Fifth Avenue mansion of W.K. Vanderbilt. Although a somewhat similar style had enjoyed a brief vogue in France during the earlier 19th century, the François I style of the later 19th and early 20th centuries was peculiarly American. It was taken up by a number of architects, among them Hunt's former student, George B. Post, as well as McKim, Mead & White, Henry J. Hardenburgh, and C.P.H. Gilbert. Gilbert's version of the style was not merely imitative of Hunt's, for the younger architect preferred Gothic detail almost to the exclusion of Renaissance, and bolder scaling, as reflected in the Warburg mansion design.

Charles Pierrepont H. Gilbert was a native New Yorker, who like so many architects of his time, first attended Columbia University and later the Paris Ecole de Beaux-Arts. After a few presumably adventurous years in the mining towns of Colorado and Arizona, Gilbert returned to New York, and established a partnership with George Kramer Thompson. In the 1880s the young architect received commissions for houses in Brooklyn, in the solidly middle-class Park Slope area, a number of which are now in the Park Slope Historic District. By the 1890s, Gilbert was

practicing independently, occasionally working in collaboration with other architects on individual commissions, or with the builder/developer Harvey Murdock. He seems to have come from an old American family, (he was a member of the Sons of the Revolution and Society of Colonial Wars) and this element of social cachet, along with his undeniable talents as an architect may have helped him to find favor with wealthy and socially prominent clients. In 1898, Gilbert took time out from his career to serve in the Spanish-American War. Upon his return to New York, his career began to really flourish with commissions for a long series of city mansions and town houses, as well as country estates. In 1899 he completed the Fletcher mansion at 79th Street and Fifth Avenue, erected the adjacent neo-Renaissance town house of James E. Nichols, and was at work on a house at 990 Fifth Avenue, the first of a series of commissions for Frank Woolworth -- no longer extant. Among the many houses he designed are the J.R. DeLamar mansion of 1902-1905 at 233 Madison Avenue and DeLamar's country home "Pembroke" on Long Island; the Henry T. Sloane house of 1904-1905 at 18 East 68th Street; the Otto Kahn house of 1913-1918 at 1 East 91st Street in conjunction with J. Armstrong Stenhouse; the Augustus G. Paine house of 1917 at 31 East 69th Street; and three town houses built between 1911 and 1916 on East 80th Street for Frank W. Woolworth's children, as well as Woolworth's Long Island estate, Winfield Hall. These examples run the gamut of styles available to architects and clients of the period -- from an exuberant neo-Baroque manner associated with Beaux-Arts design to a restrained neo-Federal manner, introduced to the city by the firm of McKim, Mead & White. Gilbert was equally at ease with neo-Italian and neo-French Renaissance design, and of course, the Francois I style. He seems to have followed the general trend of the earlier 20th century from richer to more sparingly ornamented designs. The Warburg mansion belongs to the former category, although the elaborate architectural detail is masterfully contrasted with large smooth expanses of unadorned limestone. Gilbert continued to practice at least into the 1920s. He later retired to Pelham Manor, New York, where he died in 1952 at the age of 92.

Gilbert's design for the Warburgs placed the grand, main entrance facade on East 92nd Street, a typical arrangement for Fifth Avenue corner sites. The house is faced in Indiana limestone, a fine-grained, light gray stone, well suited to the Francois I style, since it allows for smooth, pristine wall surfaces as well as sharply-defined, crisply-ornate detailing. The house has steeply pitched slate roofs enlivened by pinnacled stone gables and tall chimneys, copper cresting, and finials. There are five principal floors, a basement below street level, and a sixth story with small copper dormered windows. The 92nd Street elevation is subtly asymmetric, while that on Fifth Avenue is symmetrically disposed. The smooth walls are pierced by windows of various types all typical of the Francois I style: square-headed, "basket-handle" arched, and square-headed with rounded upper corners and ogee-arch enframements. These windows are enriched by a variety of handsome details, including stone mullions and muntins with colonnette-like bases, foliate borders, tracery, and drip moldings terminating in foliate bosses. Projecting bays and balconies further enliven the elevations, which are divided by two molded bandcourses and an elaborately carved cornice into four principal sections.

The broad basket-handle arched entry on East 92nd Street is flanked by small arched windows and surmounted by heavy brackets, one of the building's few Renaissance-inspired details, which support a small balcony with a stone balustrade. Square-headed windows and a service entrance also appear at this

story. The second story, which contains the principal rooms of the mansion, has large windows with ogee-arched drip moldings, and a richly-carved, three-sided projecting bay above the entrance. Paired basket-handle arched windows and a broad tripartite window flanked by pinnacled pilasters are the main features of the third story, while the fourth is recessed at the center with flanking balconied windows. The cornice, with elaborately carved corbeling, supports the great stone gable windows of the fifth story. Two larger gables enframe three smaller ones, and all are lushly adorned with pinnacles and crockets. The roof has two hipped-roof towers and tall chimneys ornamented with engaged Gothic columns.

The Fifth Avenue elevation contains a projecting two-story bay with flanking single windows at each story. At the third story are three basket-handle arched windows, the central one with a balcony and enframing pinnacled pilasters. Similar windows appear at the fourth story, and at the fifth, behind a carved balustrade, is a large stone gable with a smaller one to each side, all similar in design to those of the 92nd Street elevation.

The Felix M. Warburg mansion, one of the finest representatives of its style and of its era surviving in New York, is an eloquent reminder of the initial development of Fifth Avenue as a street of grand mansions and town houses, a testimony to the architectural elegance of an entire age as well as to the talents of an individual architect. Moreover, its current use as the Jewish Museum is a fitting tribute to the original owner and his family--to their beliefs, ideals, and traditions. In a recent statement the Jewish Museum characterized its goals: to be a guardian of the continuity of Jewish life and culture, to "stand as an American institution dedicated to the presentation of all facets of Jewish culture." The mansion itself is a tangible reminder of one facet of Jewish life in American history, and as such is one of the museum's most important treasures.

Footnotes

1. Ada Louise Huxtable, "Design Notebook," New York Times, December 27, 1979, p.C-10.
2. Stephen Birmingham, Our Crowd (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 286-287. Birmingham further records that Warburg's father-in-law, Jacob Schiff, felt that such a house was too ostentatious, and that it would consequently encourage anti-Semitism. It apparently did not. It should also be noted that Schiff's own home at 965 Fifth Avenue was equally opulent.
3. David Farrer, The Warburgs: The Story of a Family (New York: Stein & Day, 1974), pp. 64, 67.
4. New York Times, Oct. 21, 1937, p. 1:3.
5. New York Times, Jan. 25, 1944.

6. The museum was established with an initial gift of 26 objects, donated by Judge Mayer Sulzberger, and was originally housed in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Four major collections now form the basis of the museum's holdings: The Genguiat Collection, the Benjamin Mintz, the Harry G. Friedman, and Samuel Friedenbergs Collections. The Sculpture Court was opened in 1959, and the Albert A. List Building in 1963.
7. The Jewish Museum, press release /undated/, and New York Times, Jan. 25, 1944.
8. The Jewish Museum, press release /undated/. Until her death in 1958, Mrs. Warburg continued the philanthropic tradition of her family. In her will she gave \$50,000 to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Felix Warburg Mansion, now part of the Jewish Museum, has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Felix Warburg Mansion, now part of the Jewish Museum, is a quintessential expression of the Gilded Age in America; that the building is one of the finest examples of the François I style in the country; that it is a major example of the work of C.P.H. Gilbert, one of New York's most prestigious architects in the early 20th century and a specialist in the design of opulent houses; that it is one of the few remaining Fifth Avenue mansions which at the turn of the century earned the avenue the nickname of "millionaires' row"; that the mansion was commissioned by Felix and Frieda Warburg, leaders not only in New York's Jewish community but also as internationally renowned philanthropists; that it was donated to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America by Mrs. Warburg as an affirmation of her faith in Jewish principles and traditions; and that as a testament to the Warburgs and as a home of part of the Jewish Museum, the Felix Warburg Mansion is an extremely important reminder of American Jewish culture.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Felix Warburg Mansion, now part of the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1504, Lot 1, on which the described building is situated as its Landmark Site.

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Photo: Sarah Latham

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1109 Fifth Avenue
Manhattan

Built: 1906-08
Architect: C.P.H. Gilber