

“The Old World for the New”: Developing the Design for The Cloisters

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THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY of The Cloisters, which opened to the public in 1938, is an appropriate moment to review its early history and in particular to examine the architectural design of this remarkable museum (Figure 1). Overlooking the Hudson River from the northern end of Manhattan, The Cloisters, a branch of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, includes five different cloisters and a succession of chapels and exhibition halls, all constructed within an encircling rampart wall and crowned by a tower. This is the setting for a major collection of medieval works of art, some incomparable treasures—such as the Unicorn Tapestries—among them.

Standard accounts of The Cloisters pay deserved tribute to the roles played by three men in its development: George Grey Barnard (1863–1938), the collector and entrepreneur who in 1914 created the first “Cloisters”; John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874–1960), the patron to whose generosity and discernment the present building bears witness; and James J. Rorimer (1905–66), the curator who presided over the later stages of the planning and the actual construction and who was in 1955 to become director of the Metropolitan Museum. Relatively neglected in recent years, though no less important, were the contributions made by the Cloisters architect, Charles Collens (1873–1956), and the curator in charge at the outset of the project, Joseph Breck (1885–1933).¹ A study of the original records, hitherto unpublished, serves to bring the work and ideas of these two men into sharper focus.

To understand how the present Cloisters developed, we must first go back to Barnard’s private museum on Fort Washington Avenue.² The display of architectural elements and sculpture there reflected his strong vision of what a museum of medieval art should be (Figure 2).

He wanted his museum to evoke the solemn but vigorous piety of the Middle Ages and to enable Americans to acquaint themselves not only with medieval art but also with the age in which the art was produced.³ To create that atmosphere he artificially weathered his museum, a basilica-plan brick shed, by hosing down the walls while the mortar was still fresh. The interior was lit by the steel and glass roof and the warm glow of candles. Museum attendants, dressed as monks, ushered visitors into the “sanctuary.”⁴ The desired effect of these dramatic and decidedly fanciful touches was, according to Barnard, to create an ambience evocative of the Middle Ages.

While the Metropolitan Museum maintained Barnard’s “cloisters” for two years after its purchase with funds given by Rockefeller in 1925, plans were made for its expansion by adding onto the exterior Romanesque cloister from the monastery of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, which Barnard had installed outside the north flank of the museum building (Figure 3). Before these plans were realized, however, Museum officials and Rockefeller became increasingly dissatisfied with the site and the interior design.⁵ Barnard’s methods of display were viewed as questionable. Objects were exhibited in cluttered arrangements that had no archaeological integrity, and often the original context or function of a work of art was ignored in its presentation (Figure 2).⁶ For example, the numerous freestanding sculptures were perched atop colonettes, balustrades, and capital fragments. Critics felt that Barnard’s construct of a medieval world had been achieved at the expense of the art he so admired.

A passion for things medieval also motivated Rockefeller. In 1930 he donated to the city of New York a fifty-six-acre tract on the northern tip of Manhattan, originally the C. K. G. Billings estate, intending to build



1. The Cloisters in Fort Tryon Park, overlooking the Hudson River

there a new museum to house the Barnard collection. Rockefeller was clear in his priorities. He wanted to create a monument on this wooded promontory that would complement, in similar medieval splendor, his imposing neo-Gothic Riverside Church, a few miles to the south. The exterior of the building should, above all, present impressive views from this new city park, named Fort Tryon after the Revolutionary War fortifications located there. To the Metropolitan Museum director, Edward Robinson, he wrote: "My first object in offering to erect such a building . . . is for the enhancement of the attractiveness of the park. That being the fact . . . should any questions arise in planning the interior of the building that involved the sacrifice of its exterior appearance, I should be strongly inclined to favor the latter rather than the former."⁷

Rockefeller's ideal structure for the site was the romantic ruin of a fortified castle. Remembering his visits to the massive remains of Kenilworth and a well-loved

description in Sir Walter Scott's book of the same name, Rockefeller visualized a model of Kenilworth Castle crowning the highest point in Fort Tryon Park. It apparently did not concern him that the medieval elements in the Barnard collection were from churches and monasteries in southern France and Spain, not from an English castle. What interested him was the air of grandeur evoked by the ruins.

As a philanthropist, Rockefeller had become particularly interested in building monuments to bygone eras. At the end of World War I, he funded the restoration of Reims Cathedral and the palaces at Fontainebleau and Versailles. By 1923 he had also built the neo-Gothic Park Avenue Baptist Church. In the late twenties and early thirties, while working on the Cloisters project, Rockefeller was also supporting the creation of Colonial Williamsburg and supervising the completion of Riverside Church.⁸ Whether it involved new construction or the restoration of existing buildings, Rockefeller was determined to evoke the past.

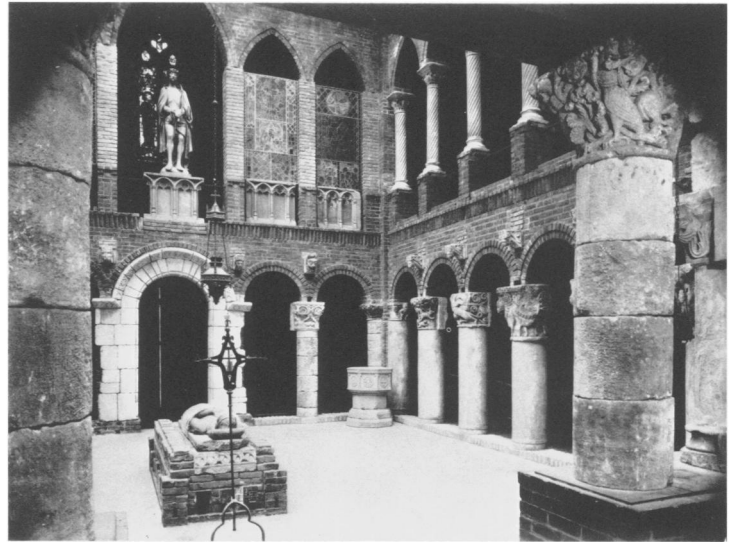
At the same time, Rockefeller was an important col-

lector of world art. By the late twenties he had amassed a collection of splendid medieval objects. Some were donated to The Cloisters, among them sixty-nine Gothic stained-glass roundels and forty-two Gothic sculptures, as well as the famed Unicorn Tapestries.⁹ His view was that the beauty inherent in these works should be evoked architecturally by the museum structure itself. “To the fullest extent possible, consistent with its exterior beauty and charm,” he insisted, “I should want the building to be internally adapted to its purpose of providing an appropriate home for the present cloister collection.”¹⁰

The interior of the new museum was the primary concern of Joseph Breck.¹¹ Educated at Harvard, Breck was appointed assistant curator of Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum in 1909, then under the direction of W. R. Valentiner. From 1917, as curator for decorative arts of all periods, Breck concentrated primarily on the design of gallery spaces and the display of objects. This experience led him to prefer a succession of distinct gallery spaces, a preference that he later applied in planning The Cloisters. He believed that each gallery, through the sympathetic treatment of ceiling, doorways, and windows, should be suited to the exhibition of art from a single period and region. The design of the building itself should ideally establish a clear division of the collection into a chronological, stylistic, and geographic progression. This, to Breck’s way of thinking, was the best way of presenting the material in order to educate the public on the history of art in the Middle Ages. It would straighten out the confusion of mixed styles found in most medieval monuments, which were often built over several centuries, and it would improve upon the disturbing, jumbled nature of the old Barnard installation.¹²

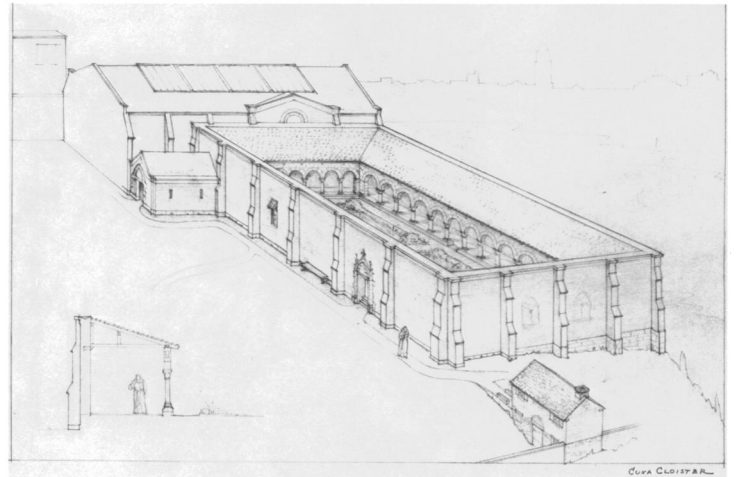
Breck’s attention to the interior design of The Cloisters was meticulous, and his concern for detail led him to study medieval manuscripts for examples of architectural elements, such as walls, railings, windowsills, and stairways. More than any other planner, Breck grounded his design ideas in medieval precedents and his knowledge of original monuments was far-reaching and thorough.

By the end of 1930, Rockefeller came to realize that a fortified castle would not be an appropriate setting for a collection of medieval religious objects. Still, his choice of a dramatic promontory dictated a structure of greater scope and ambition than Barnard’s brick “basilica.” Barnard himself, with characteristic exaggeration, wrote: “In comparing it to the quiet, modest land and



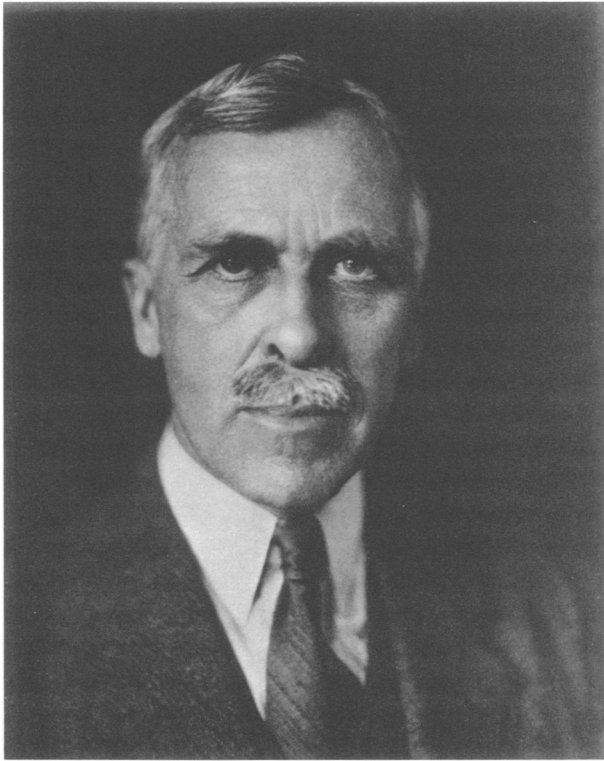
2. Interior view of the Barnard Cloisters

3. Architectural drawing of the Cuxa Cloister addition and the Barnard Museum. Cloisters Archives



plain entailed beside my cloisters, this point and its demands compare with a Pope beside a cloistered monk. The point demands big affects, heavy architectural plans, and much that must be built of ‘modern’ material. . . . We would needs consider something like a Saint Peter’s of Rome.”¹³

Rockefeller turned in January 1931 to the architect he had chosen for Riverside Church, Charles Collins of



4. Charles Collens (photo: Collens family)

the Boston firm Allen, Collens and Willis (Figure 4). Collens was an obvious choice to submit a proposal for the new museum; this would be the third project on which Collens and Rockefeller had collaborated. Their first was the Park Avenue Baptist Church of New York, begun in 1921, and they were still engaged in building Riverside Church, the “Saint Peter’s of Rome” for Rockefeller.

Collens understood Rockefeller’s intentions for the Fort Tryon museum better than anyone else. He knew that the philanthropist wanted an imposing ensemble situated dramatically at the high point of the park, and he had seen Rockefeller’s original idea for building a fortified castle evolve into a preference for some sort of religious complex that would logically house several cloisters. He was also aware of Rockefeller’s “aversion to the use of a chapel or church in connection with the museum, also that [it] should not adhere too strictly to any monastic form.”¹⁴ At the same time, Collens recognized that Rockefeller had no clear image of what he wanted for the museum and that flexibility in providing a number of different schemes was called for. A 1928

proposal incorporating Rockefeller’s romantic ruins of Kenilworth into one possible scheme, drawn up by Otto Eggers of the architectural firm of John Russel Pope, had lacked just this flexibility (Figure 5).

Collens expressed his philosophy to Breck in one of their earliest contacts: “I think it would be well to develop one scheme in which the monastic form is accurately adhered to; a second scheme with a paved courtyard and free buildings about this courtyard, with some of those buildings enclosing the cloisters, and a third scheme in which we develop a pure museum without any attempt at medievalism.”¹⁵ Collens presented seven schemes to Rockefeller and Metropolitan Museum officials in March 1931, all of them integrating the columns and sculpted capitals of Barnard’s “cloisters” (Figures 6–20). The range of building types was impressive and clearly grew out of Collens’s familiarity with medieval structures.

His first contact with medieval monuments had occurred during his teens, when his family moved to Germany and traveled in northern Europe for two years.¹⁶ He returned to the United States to complete a degree in mathematics at Yale but was back in Paris in 1900 for three years of architectural study at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*.¹⁷ During these years he traveled with a sketchbook and developed an avid interest in medieval art. Working professionally in the United States, Collens became known as a leading practitioner of neo-Gothic architecture. In New York, he designed Memorial Chapel and the Brown and James Towers at Union Theological Seminary (1910); in Gloucester, Massachusetts, he built a medieval castle for John Hayes Hammond, Jr. (1928). Collens also designed libraries, dormitories, and lecture halls at many universities, including the library (1905) and Taylor Hall (1913) at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, and the library at Columbia University Teacher’s College (1924). These projects had followed the neo-Gothic tradition, derisively labeled “campus gothic” by critics of the style.¹⁸ In fact, by the time of Collens’s professional achievements, the medievalizing taste in architecture was on the wane in America.¹⁹

Collens skillfully turned his position as a late practitioner of the neo-Gothic architectural style to good use. For many of his projects he effected a rigorous evaluation of the preceding century of American design, tallying in his own mind the successes and failures of the style in particular buildings of his predecessors or his contemporaries. Often he was forced to do so, because the

building he was assigned to construct would directly confront an earlier one in neo-Gothic style. To create a building with new ideas, in this well-worn style, he returned to the great medieval monuments of Europe for fresh inspiration. For example, in a proposed reconstruction of the Catholic church of St. Vincent Ferrer, located at the corner of Lexington Avenue and 66th Street in New York, Collens intended "to produce a new structure, following as closely as possible the best examples of the French Gothic. The proximity of St. Patrick's Cathedral makes this a somewhat difficult problem, as it is necessary to vary the architecture in such a way as not to recall too strongly the motifs which Renwick used so successfully on the Cathedral."²⁰

Despite his extensive experience in neo-Gothic design, Collens found no American architectural precedent for the project Rockefeller and the Metropolitan Museum were planning. Although some American museums had already experimented with the exhibition of medieval works of art in period contexts, these installations took the form of isolated rooms in larger buildings of a very different architectural style. Collens's criticism of

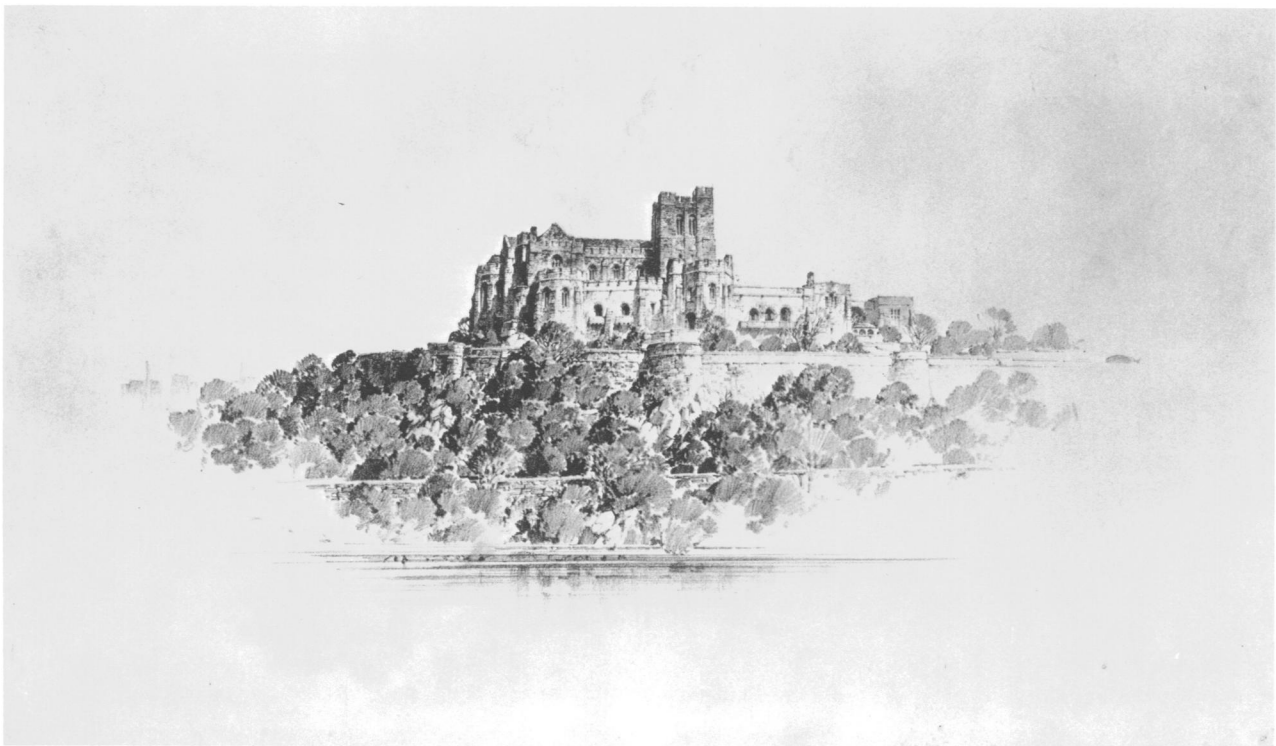
5. Proposal drawing for the Metropolitan Museum's medieval museum by Otto Eggers, 1928. Cloisters Archives

this approach after visiting the Philadelphia Museum of Art was strong: "You are led up to a cold, soulless building and up a stupendous staircase. From there you suddenly enter the Gothic section. Somehow, I could not get in the mood for that Gothic section because my mind had not been attuned to the exhibit by a proper approach through a sympathetic atmosphere."²¹

Similarly, he attacked the placement of medieval objects in a neutral setting, as at the Detroit Institute of Arts, where:

for the art expert the setting and lighting may be such as to enable him to examine all parts of the exhibit with the greatest amount of ease, you cannot feel that those exhibits are in their natural setting. I am afraid that I am one of a very large body of laymen who would much prefer to see a fourteenth century Madonna set in a niche with a sanctuary lamp as its lighting than to have the same Madonna placed on a wooden standard, suitably labeled, and so lighted that every detail is brought out in strong relief.²²

A number of smaller projects, private museum-residences, provided Collens and the planning committee with general inspiration, if not specific ideas. For example, Isabella Stewart Gardner's Fenway Court in Boston had been completed as early as 1902. In it she re-created



a fifteenth-century Venetian palace using original architectural elements, with galleries opening into a flower-filled courtyard surrounded by three stories of Venetian arcades. The General Church of the New Jerusalem in Bryn Athen, Pennsylvania, had erected a “Gothic” cathedral designed by Collens’s contemporary Ralph Adams Cram. Both the church and the adjacent “Romanesque” manor for Raymond Pitcairn, the leader of the religious community, were constructed according to some of the practices of medieval masonry workshops, including the use of full-scale models and a flexible architectural design.²³ Collens could also look back for ideas at his own design of Hammond Castle in Gloucester, Massachusetts.²⁴ Although the planners of the new museum had rejected something similar to Barnard’s museum, they were well aware that they at least shared his intentions for the display of medieval objects, even if they questioned his results. All participants agreed that they wanted to create an evocation of the Middle Ages; the question was how to do so.

Museum officials took the project beyond the Metropolitan and discussed it with a broader community of museum professionals. W. R. Valentiner (1880–1958), who had left the Metropolitan Museum to become director of the Detroit Institute of Arts responded in a seven-page report, dated August 20, 1931, to the members of the Cloisters Museum Building Committee concerning particular features of the seven schemes proposed by Collens.²⁵ Valentiner’s comments are an interesting indication of his theoretical concerns about the museum world at the time, and they reflect both his professional development under Wilhelm von Bode, director of the Berlin Museum and the general level of German idealism in the field of museology.²⁶

Valentiner believed that a primary purpose of any museum was to communicate the spirit of a particular period of art, and to this end he praised the plan of a branch museum devoted to only one period of art: “One of the first principles of education in art is to concentrate the public on one great epoch in history and not let the mind of the museum visitors wander about through collections of other epochs until it has thoroughly absorbed the spirit of this one period.” The dilemma then became how to capture the spirit of an age, whether to place the medieval objects in a neutral surrounding or to incorporate them into a “medievalized” edifice. The problem with the latter solution, according to Valentiner, was the difficulty involved in capturing the spirit of the art in any new building. There were not enough architectural elements from the Barnard collection to

reconstruct an entire monastery, and Valentiner felt, as did many of his contemporaries, that the contrast between old and new stones would be too jarring, or that the general public would confuse the old and the new.

Collens himself had suggested in conversations with Breck, perhaps not entirely seriously, that several medieval European ruins be purchased, dismantled, and shipped to New York to be used as building materials. This, he claimed, would ensure the warmth and ambience of the very walls of the museum.²⁷ In all this discussion the premise was that the materials and the way they were handled were different in the twelfth century than in the twentieth. That modern stone lacked some undefined, unreproducible spirituality of the period was the one point on which all museum officials seemed to agree.

Yet in his report, Valentiner also warned against a slavish imitation of a medieval monastery:

for it has been proved over and over again that it is impossible to bring back to life the style of another epoch or to copy old buildings in such a manner that they are not a disappointment to everyone who has seen the originals. Especially the medieval styles are so much removed from our own period, are so much the expression of the spirit of their epoch, that every imitation will prove to every sensitive person that the essentials, the spiritual part of it, which alone has value, are entirely lacking.

He joined other contemporary critics in deploring the neo-Gothic style of church architecture as “cold, lifeless and empty modern copies of Gothic churches [which] appear only after a generation which were considered true to the originals at the time they were created.” The example he cited was St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York, the very building against which Collens had recently measured his talents in medievalizing church design. Valentiner’s conclusion was that the American public “has nowhere the possibility of seeing old buildings of a period before 1600, and if a suggestion could be given of the general effect in regard to the masses and outlines of these buildings, and if this suggestion will be vivified as in the present case, by such magnificent originals as the cloister courts, on the inside, it would help to the enjoyment and understanding of the visitors.” Valentiner’s prescription, then, was that in general outlines the new building in Fort Tryon Park should be reminiscent of medieval architecture, but should have no imitated Gothic or Romanesque chapels, portals, windows, or buttresses.

Valentiner’s report drew from Collens an impassioned

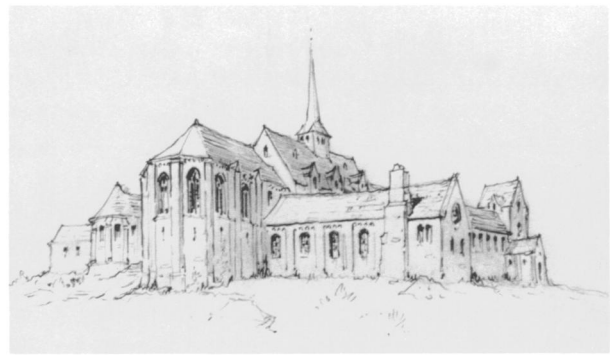
defense of his position, summarized in a letter to Rockefeller dated August 25, 1931.²⁸ Collens's goal in designing the new museum was very much to recapture the spirit of the Middle Ages and he believed this could be done.

Mr. Valentiner says that no attempt at imitating any of the earlier styles is successful. I think that many thousands of people have gotten great enjoyment out of Trinity Church at the head of Wall Street. I, myself, frequently go in there and the atmosphere created by that church is one which gives me the greatest amount of pleasure. . . . The Riverside Church, while it is in no sense a copy of Chartres Cathedral, I think gives a good many people some of the same re-action which they get from visiting Chartres.

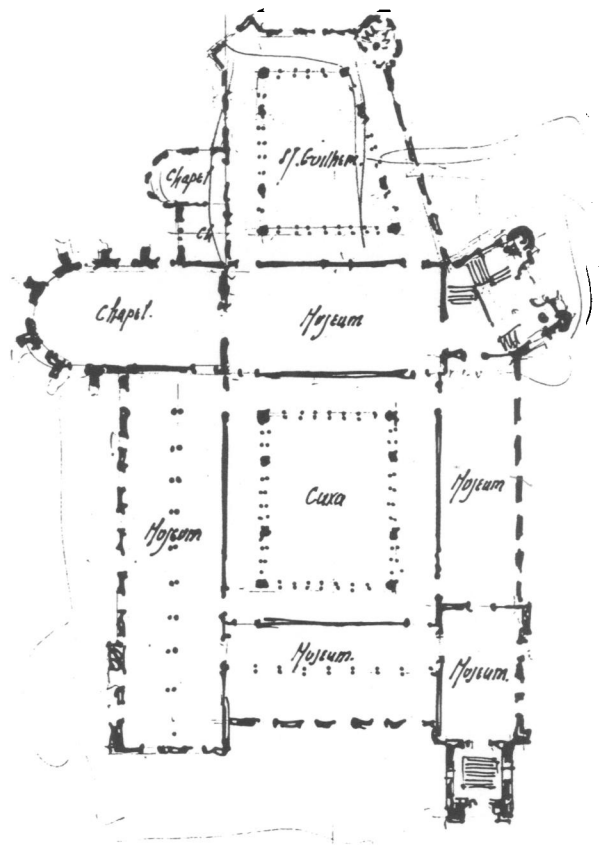
Drawing on his architectural background, Collens saw the starting point for this recapturing of the past in the organization of space in the museum. "A museum of this character should be very intimate, should be self-enclosed, should have no large rooms and the windows should be comparatively small, in order to obtain a subdued light."²⁹ He agreed that "the rooms and chapels should all be treated in a very simple way without any ornamentation which would conflict with the real exhibits. The shape of the room and the character of the ceiling, the general fenestration, and the doorways should all, however, be in agreement with the type of exhibit to which the room would be devoted."³⁰

Collens was against making the museum a composite copy, and here he differed with Breck. In a letter to Rockefeller describing his first scheme, Collens stated: "There has been no attempt made to copy any particular monastery, and when this was originally suggested by Mr. Breck, I argued very strongly against such an attempt. We have simply proceeded along the logical basis of using the chief exhibit of the Barnard cloisters as the nucleus about which we have grouped low exhibition halls, done in a simple sympathetic architecture, and placed a tower in a perfectly logical location in order to give accent to this group." For this general grouping he depended on the character of such monuments as the church at Monsempron or the monastery of St. Trophime in Arles. It was the massing of the buildings and their proportion and relationship that he felt could evoke a medieval setting. Concluding his response to Valentiner's report, he insisted, "I feel so very strongly that any attempt to divorce the three cloisters from the architecture in which they originally existed would entail a serious danger. We owe a certain responsibility to the cloisters themselves."³¹

The seven different schemes—elevation sketches and



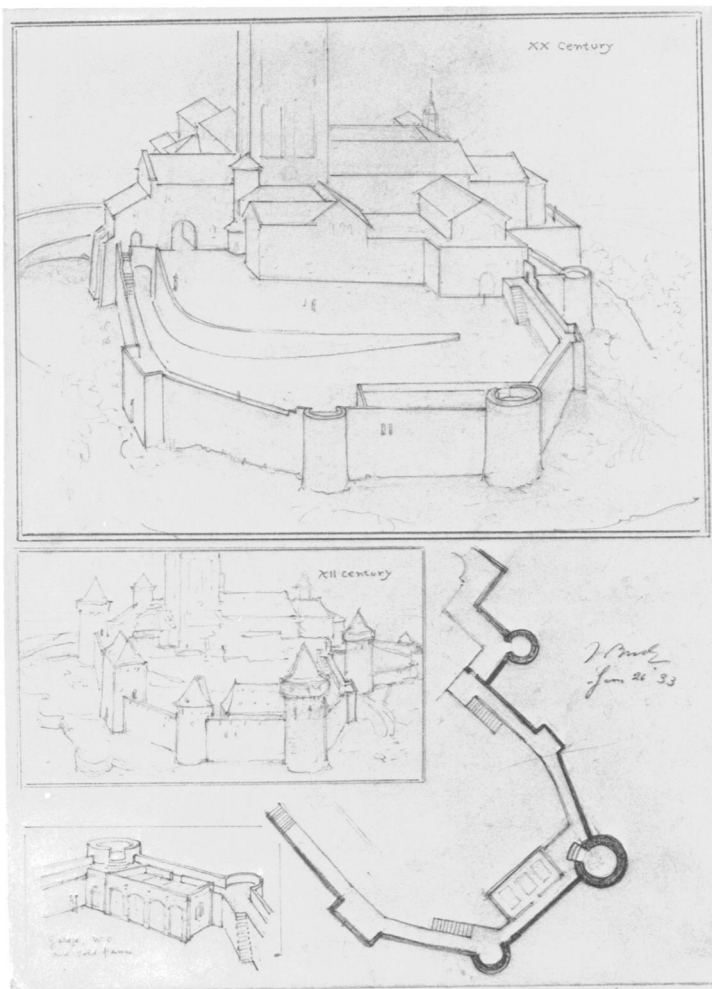
6, 7. Scheme No. 1, sketch and plan by Charles Collens. Cloisters Archives



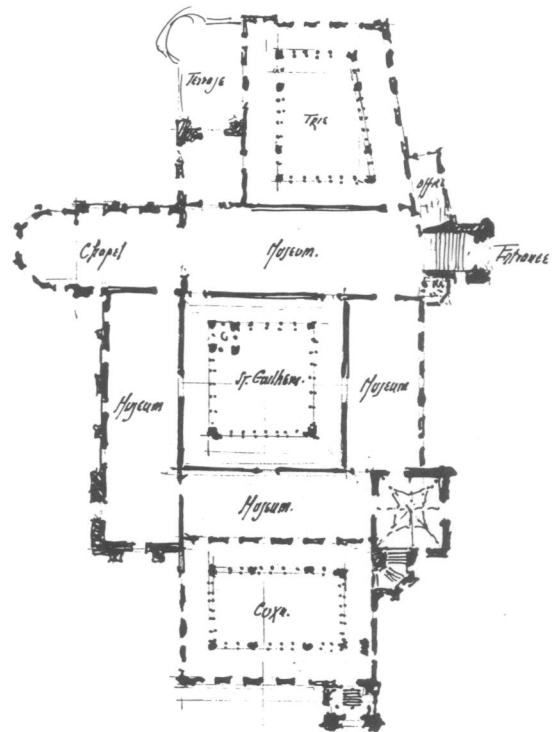
rough plans—that Collens submitted in March 1931 reflected his statements to Rockefeller. In the first scheme (Figures 6, 7) only a Romanesque chapel and the St.-Guilhem Cloister elements would directly reproduce the rooms of a monastic complex. The other, neutral galleries were arranged around the Cuxa Cloister to allow the easy circulation of visitors from the entrance through rooms organized chronologically from

Romanesque to Late Gothic. Outside, a forecourt and ramparts, gatehouse, and fortified entrance were similar to structures at Carcassonne (Figure 8). Scheme 2 developed a much larger plan, still centered on the Cuxa Cloister (Figures 9, 10). It included two more of Bernard's cloisters, those from Trie and St.-Guilhem-le-Désert. Breck was intrigued by this scheme, with its four separate chapels, because each could be representative of a step in the development of medieval architectural styles, and he made sketches to show this neat chronological progression paralleling the traffic pattern (Figures 22, 23). He criticized this plan, however, because its combining of three cloisters with only small chapels was historically inaccurate. Any real monastery with that number of cloisters would have housed a far larger population of monks than could be accommodated in the small chapels. If the cloisters were to remain the focus of the new museum, as they should, since they represented some of the finest architectural sculpture in the collection, a more prominent churchlike structure should be built.³² Collens answered this criticism with scheme

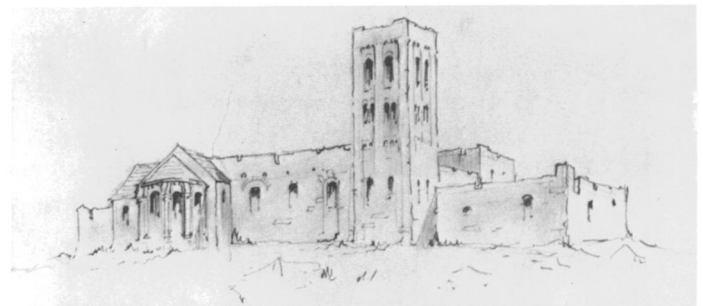
8. Pencil sketch of Cloisters exterior with inset of Carcassonne by Joseph Breck, June 26, 1933. Cloisters Archives

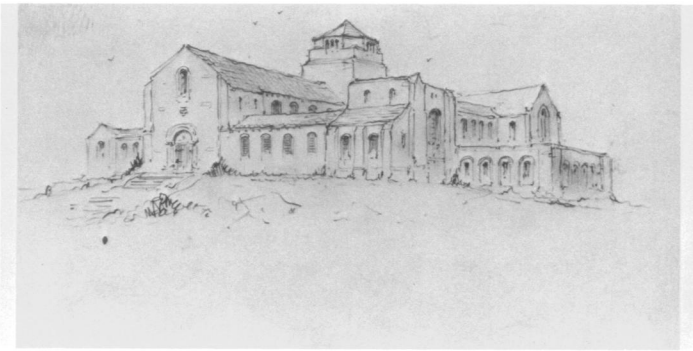


9, 10. Scheme No. 2, sketch and plan by Charles Collens. Cloisters Archives

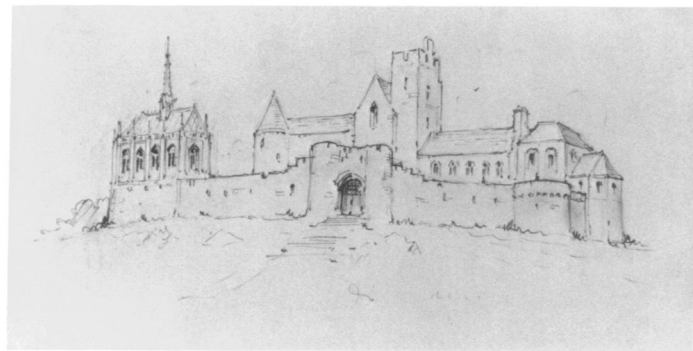


11. Scheme No. 2A, sketch by Charles Collens. Cloisters Archives

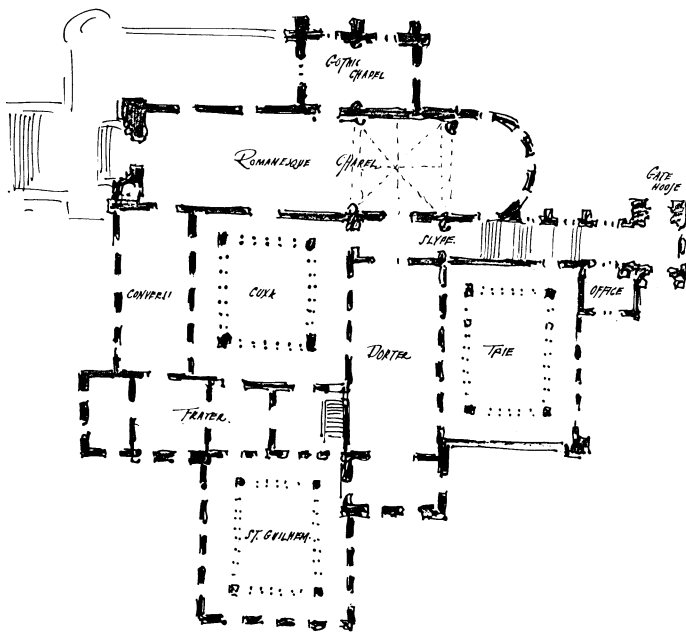




12, 13. Scheme No. 3, sketch and plan by Charles Collens.
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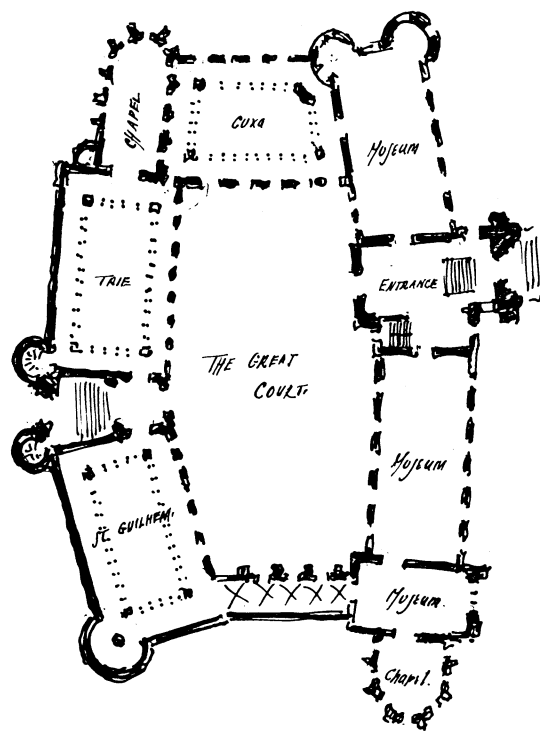


14, 15. Scheme No. 4, sketch and plan by Charles Collens.
Cloisters Archives



3, based on the priory of Grandmont, which had a large "Romanesque Chapel" (Figures 12, 13), to which he appended the Cuxa, St.-Guilhem, and Trie cloisters. Scheme 5 (Figures 16, 17) also featured a major church structure, this one modeled on Romsey Abbey in England. Scheme 4 (Figures 14, 15) represented the greatest amalgam of styles in a single plan; the Romanesque keep and fortifications were crowned in one corner by a replica of the Sainte Chapelle of Paris. Scheme 6 (Figures 18, 19) included an English Gothic chapel and scheme 6A (Figures 19, 20) was a considerably reduced plan focusing on the cloisters themselves.

Collens produced a plaster model of the first scheme by the end of March and a full model by mid-May 1931. Having supplied the Metropolitan Museum with an impressive array of options, the architect left for a sum-

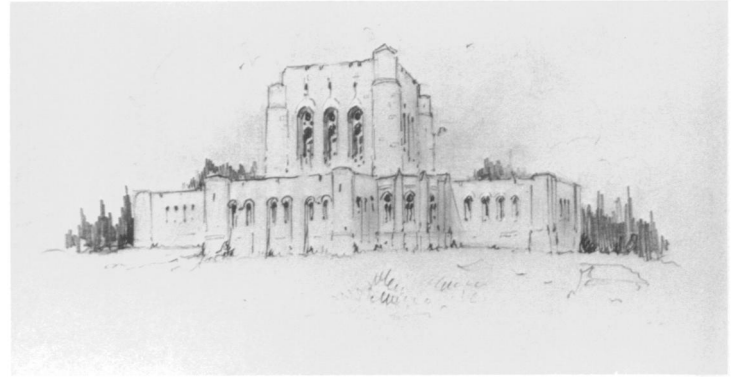


mer study trip to the south of France and Spain, financed by Rockefeller, to search for architectural inspiration and for facts about the original setting of the antique elements that would be incorporated into the new museum. The Cloisters project was fresh in his mind and his route was planned to cover those areas from which the collection originated. As he traveled, he recorded detailed impressions of numerous medieval monuments in a journal, which he submitted to Museum authorities along with a sketchbook upon his return.³³

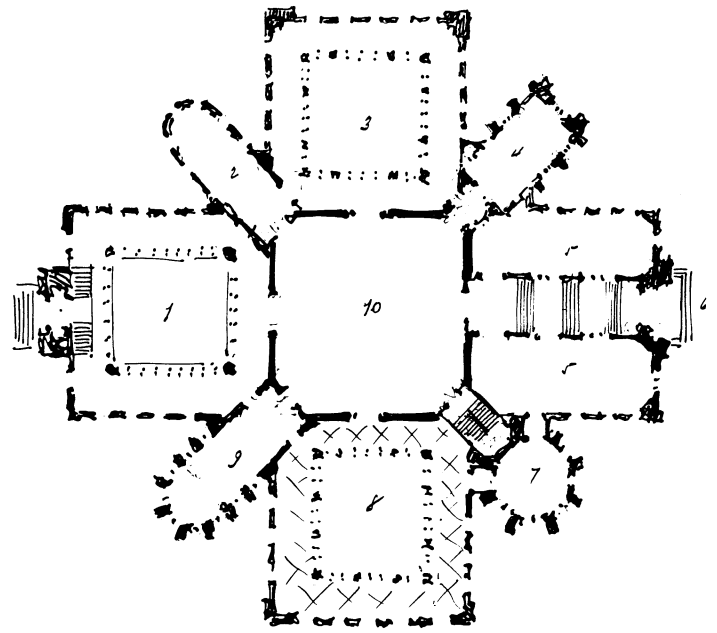
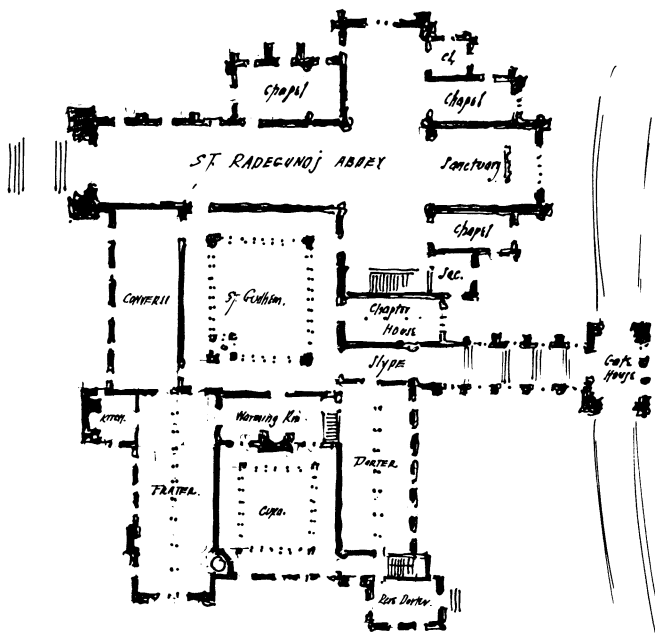
In November Collens's appointment as project architect and the first scheme (Figures 6, 7) in its rough



16, 17. Scheme No. 5, sketch and plan by Charles Collens.
Cloisters Archives

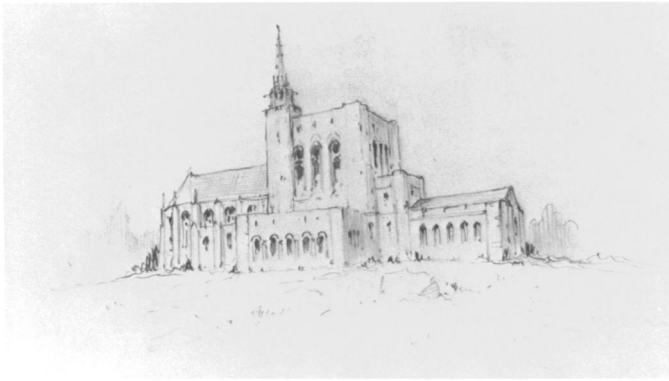


18, 19. Scheme No. 6, sketch and plan by Charles Collens.
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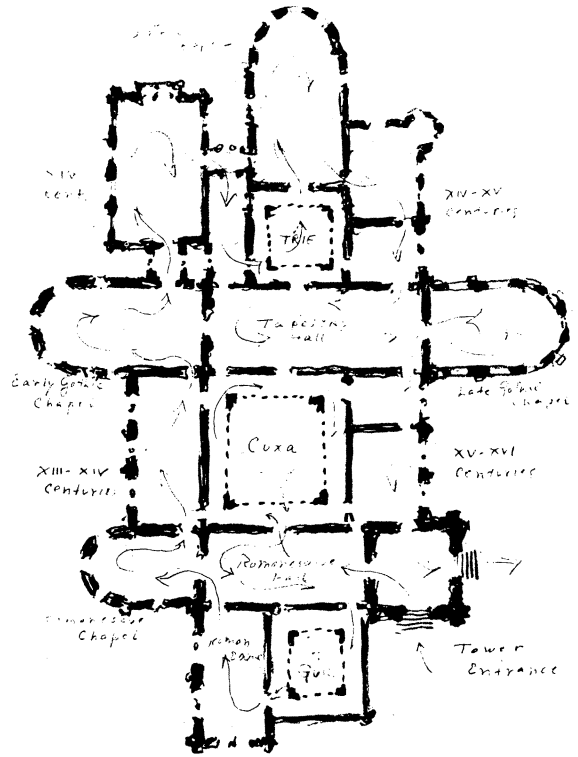
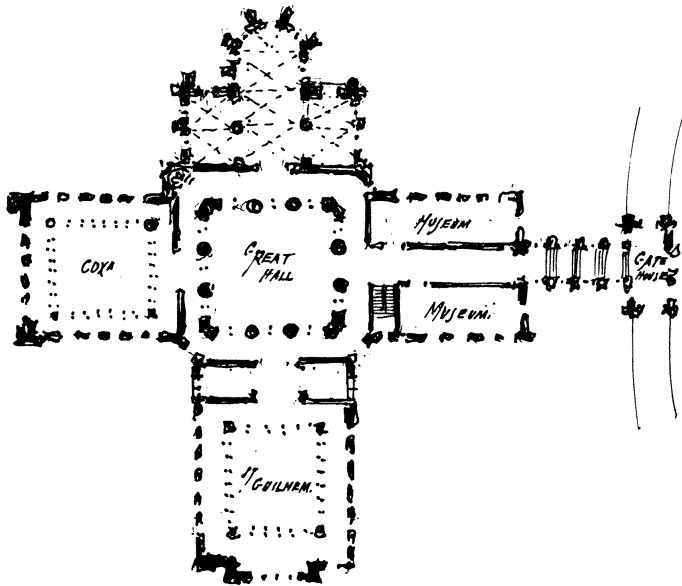


state were approved by the Board of Trustees.³⁴ Collens and Breck were charged with the detailed development of the plans, and the correspondence between them, letters often exchanged daily, provides an exceptionally full record of their progress. As they evolved the details of the interior design, certain differences in philosophy became apparent. Breck was more literal-minded than Collens; he wanted to go further in assigning actual monastic functions to all the rooms of the proposed museum, some of which the architect had indicated as neutral gallery spaces. For example, in his variant of Collens's scheme 3 (Figure 23) Breck added a "kitchen," "chap-

ter" (chapter house), and undefined "prior" (abbot's lodgings?) to the areas assigned as "frater" (refectory) and "dorter" (dormitory) by Collens. Breck also advocated a direct relationship between the design and the size of a fictitious monastic community. In October 1931 he had written to Collens: "Concerning the Romanesque Chapel, were your sketches based on any definite model? I should be glad if you would let me know if you have any existing chapel in mind. If we could find one that came near to meeting our requirements, would it not be better to follow this than invention?"³⁵ And over a year later, he reiterated, "In principle,



20, 21. Scheme No. 6A, sketch and plan by Charles Collens. Cloisters Archives



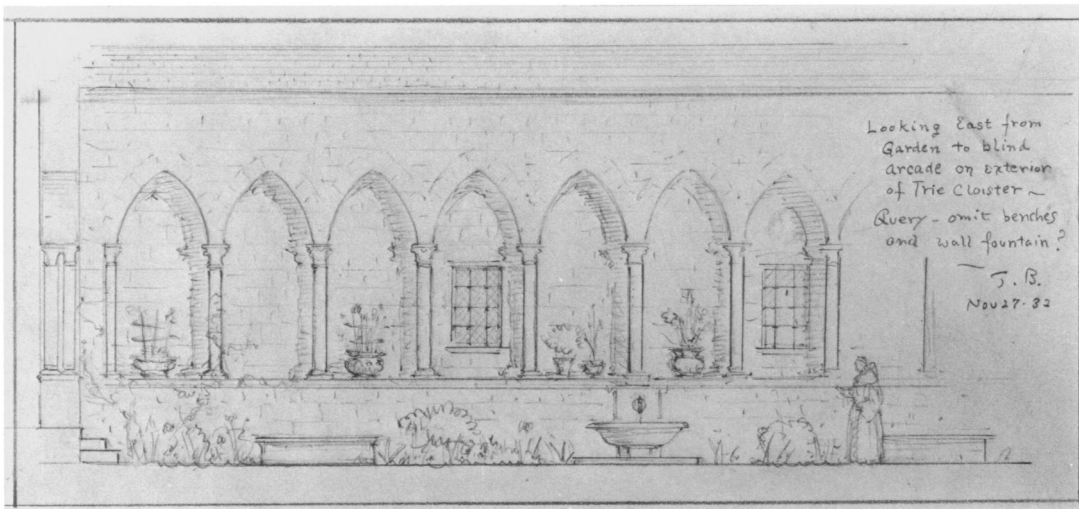
22. Variant of Scheme No. 2 by Joseph Breck. Cloisters Archives

23. Variant of Scheme No. 3 by Joseph Breck. Cloisters Archives



I think we should follow the perfected styles rather than provincial variants or experiments. When we start to invent there are so many pitfalls ahead of us."³⁶

Breck's correspondence with Collens is filled with references to buildings in Europe, and his suggestions were always accompanied by careful pen-and-ink sketches. For example, working on the exterior cloister gardens, he sent Collens ideas gleaned from manuscripts (Figure 24). This project seems to have rekindled Breck's artistic talents, which had first been developed at Harvard, where he illustrated the *Harvard Lampoon*. His watercolor drawings of proposed rooms were used

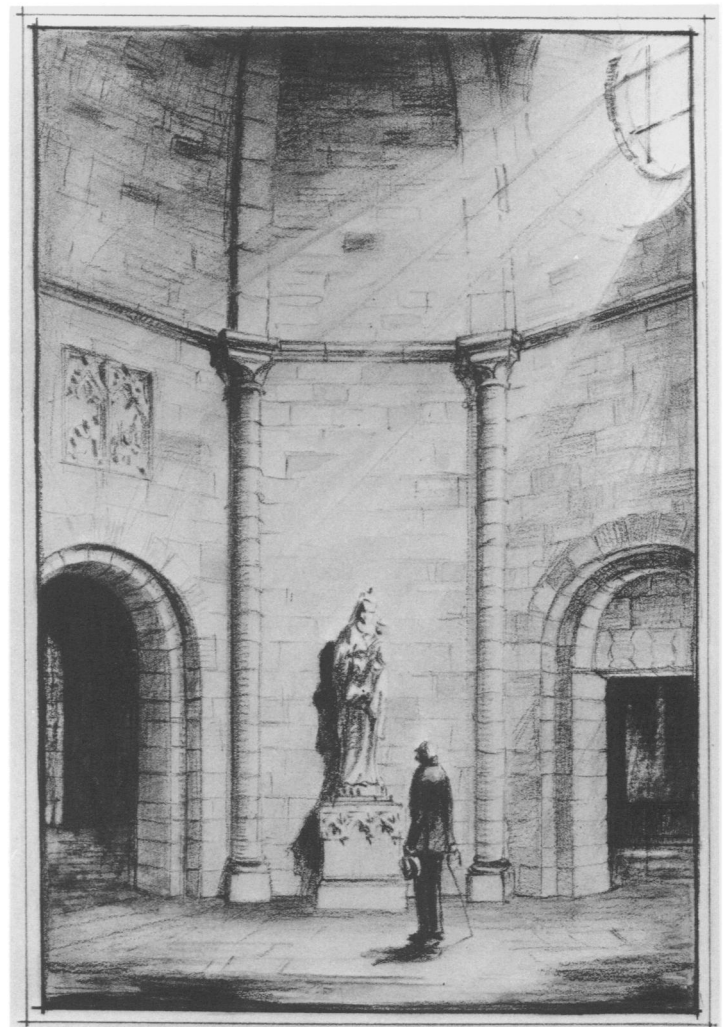


24. Trie arcade, corner of enclosed garden by Joseph Breck. Cloisters Archives

25. Entrance hall with figure of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., by Joseph Breck, March 3, 1933. Cloisters Archives

by the Museum Building Committee to assess and approve the design (Figures 25, 26). There are also a number of finished, rather fanciful drawings in the Cloisters archives that are unrelated to the actual project, drawings that Breck seems to have created for sheer pleasure (Figure 27).

In March 1932 Collens argued for a mixture of Gothic and Romanesque arches, combining the capitals of Trie and St.-Guilhem-le-Désert in one cloister to represent a protracted period of construction, common in the Middle Ages.³⁷ Running counter to Breck's didactic organization of material by style, Collens appealed to the organic evolution of medieval structures, whose elements often reflected building campaigns stretching over several centuries. This was the composite effect he had achieved at Hammond Castle, where a "Romanesque" tower section abutted a fourteenth-century style great hall, and yet later buildings flanked the courtyard.³⁸ Collens was also motivated in this suggestion by the practical necessity of having too few architectural elements from Trie, St.-Guilhem-le-Désert, or Bonnefont-en-Comminges for each to form a spacious four-sided cloister. In this instance Breck won his point and got all four cloisters—a four-sided circuit for the largest one, Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, two sides of the arcade from Bonnefont, and a very small Trie and St.-Guilhem.



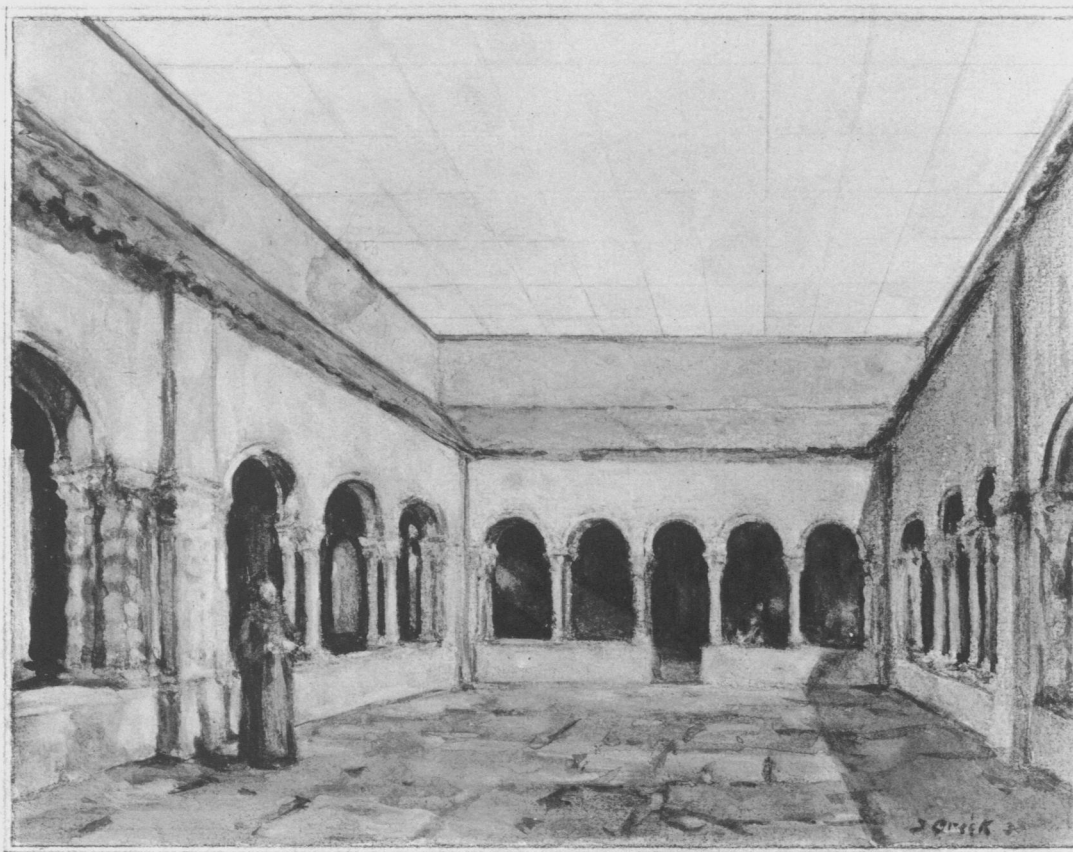
The design of the St.-Guilhem-le-Désert cloister proved particularly difficult. The sculptures were deemed too fragile for exposure to the elements, yet no satisfactory covering could be designed. One sketch shows a full second story of windows and a rather ghoulish monk (Figure 28). The solution at the Philadelphia Museum—electric lighting and an upper story—were rejected, and finally Collens devised a glass roof that gave the impression of an atrium space without the hazards.

Problems invariably arose with the introduction of undisguisedly modern elements, such as windows,

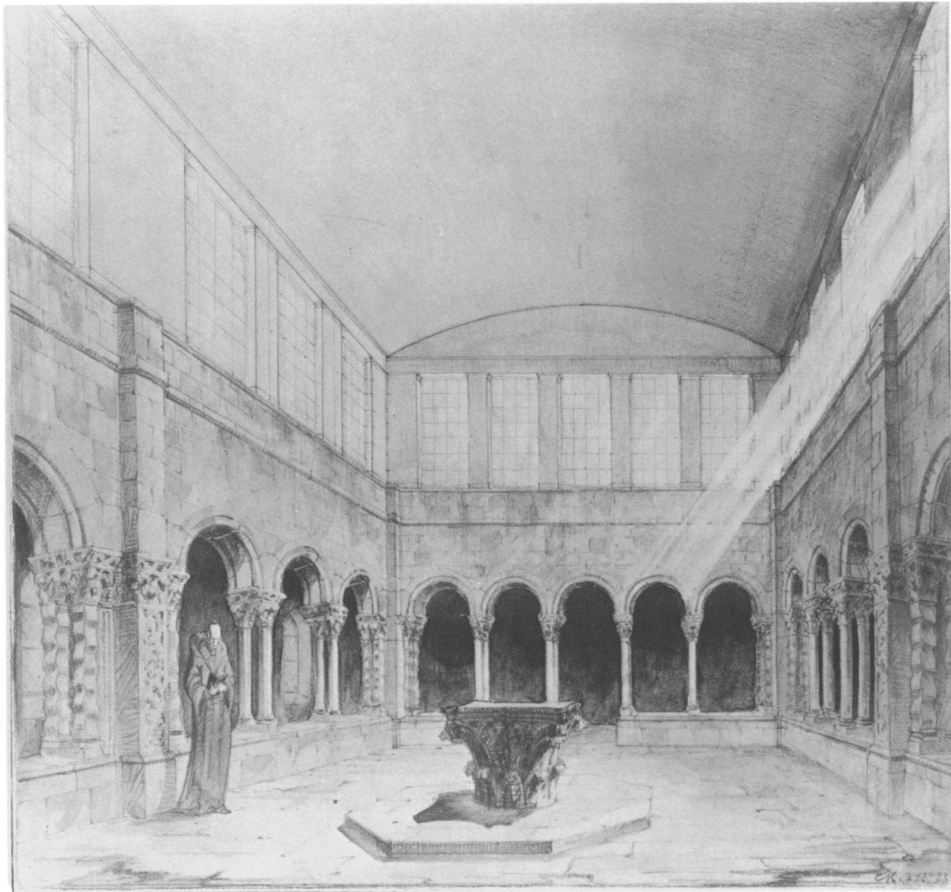
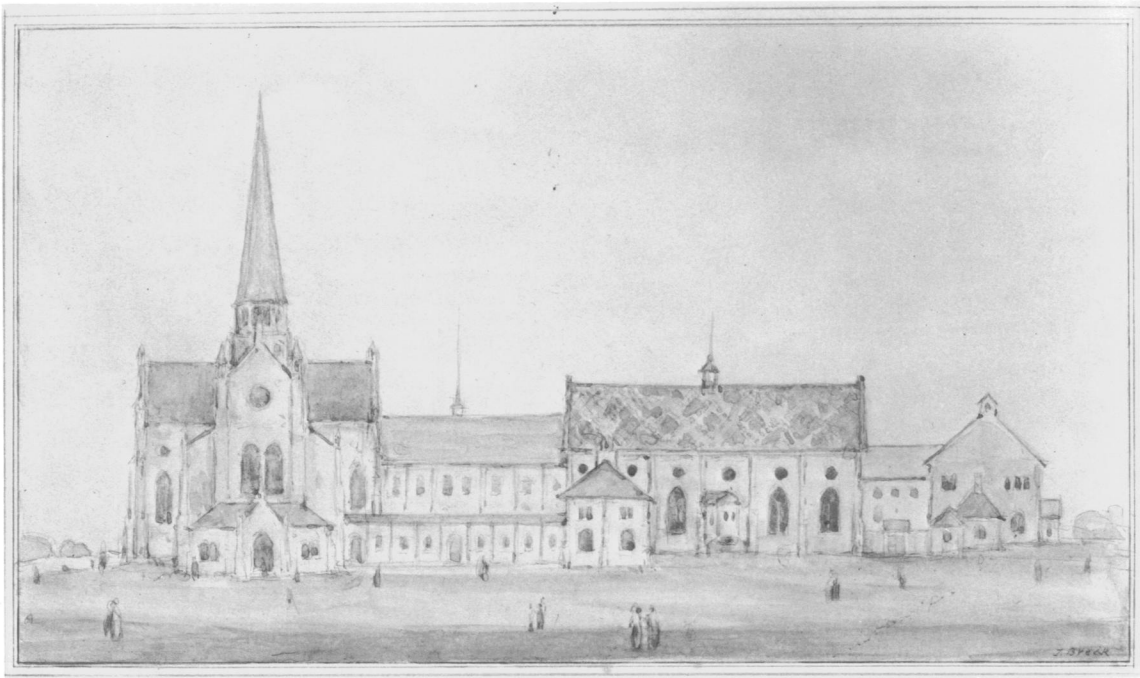
26. The Cloister of St.-Guilhem-le-Désert (stamped: "Design approved as shown. Building Committee for Cloister Museum") by Joseph Breck. Cloisters Archives

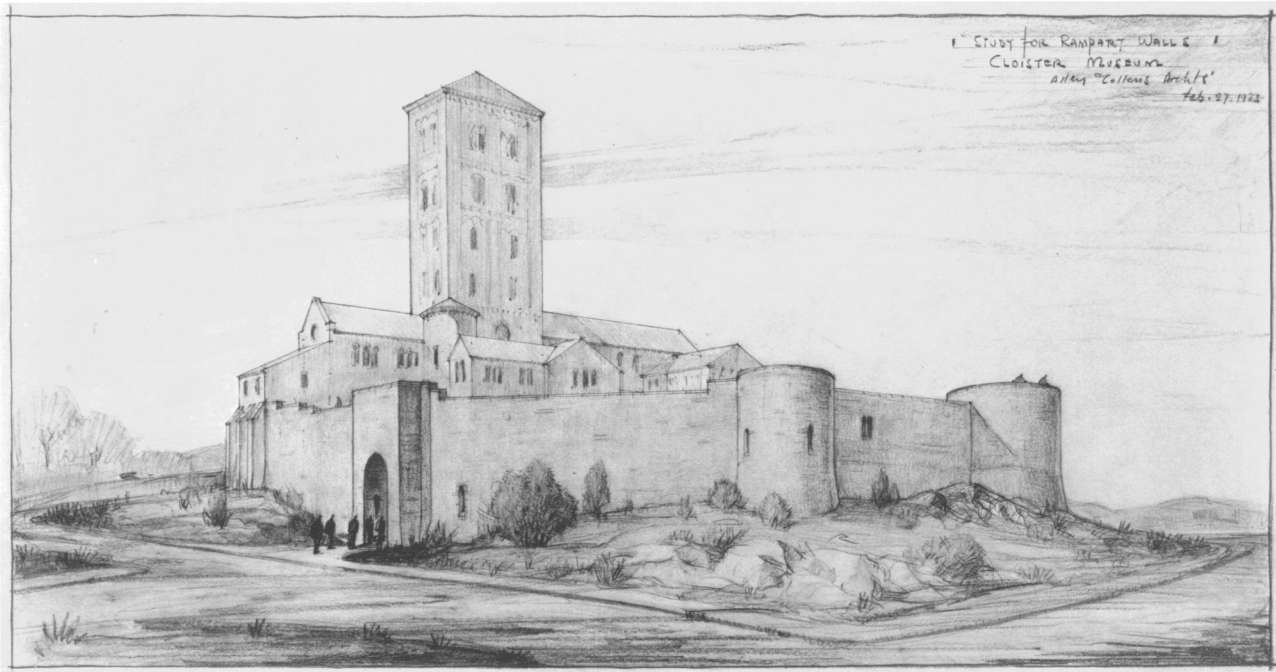
heating grates, and electric lights. Breck wrote to Collens about the boiler chimney. "It is a temptation to make a campanile or a belfry or something other than a chimney out of it, but we must resist! There are some existing Romanesque chimneys that might give you a suggestion."⁹⁹ Breck referred Collens to the entry "cheminée" in Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire raisonné* (1868–75).

By May 1932 the rampart walls had been designed. Their placement and height and the choice of stone were planned so that they appeared to be a natural outgrowth of the rock promontory (Figure 29). In fact, the museum was designed and built around the highest point in the accented stone promontory, and its rock juts up into the lowest level of the building, much like the "mont" of Mont-Saint-Michel. That Collens and Breck had by this point reached a common vision of the



Design approved as shown
Building Committee for
Cloister Museum
March 31, 1933





29. Study for rampart walls by Charles Collens. Cloisters Archives

museum is reflected in numerous watercolor sketches each man made of the finished building in its wooded setting (Figures 30, 31). At times these studies seem to have been made as the amateur artists sat side by side looking at the project site. Breck urged the start of construction of the museum, but Collens, who was always in close touch with Rockefeller, replied, "Our purpose is to completely clean up this building so that when construction goes ahead the contractor will have all the information necessary to build the job."⁴⁰ Before leaving for a winter of travel, Collens summed up a busy year and a half of work: "I am leaving this job with a feeling of confidence because it looks to me as though we have practically everything settled except for minor details. I do not believe that construction will start next spring unless something very radical takes place in the general condition of things."⁴¹

During Collens's absence, however, the relationship between his partner, Harold Willis, and Breck was less smooth. Willis was much younger than Collens and

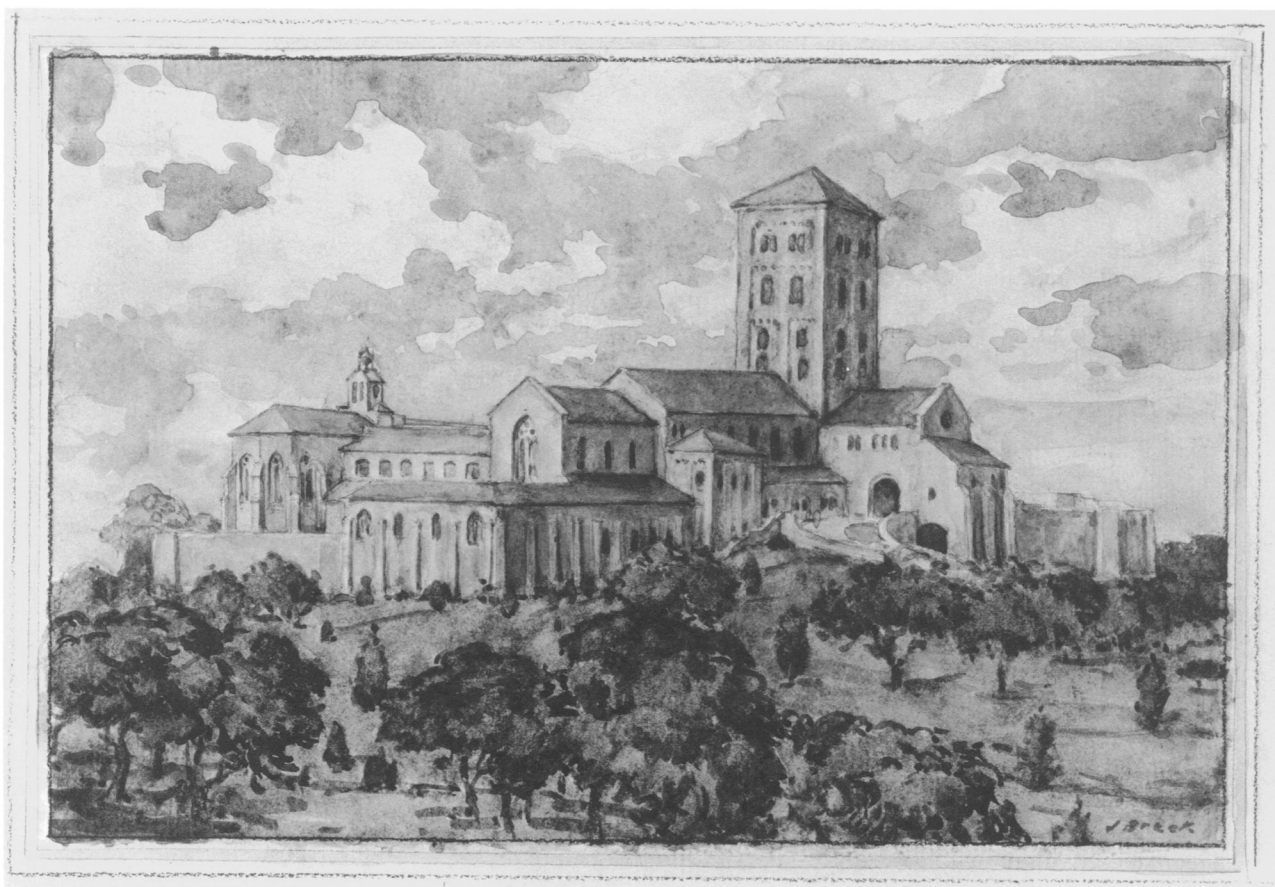
27. Scheme A, the new museum: "Cistercian Plan" by Joseph Breck. Cloisters Archives

28. The Cloister of St.-Guilhem-le-Désert by Joseph Breck.

Breck and was frequently impatient with Breck's suggested changes. By February he warned Breck that the very paper of the drawings was wearing out with constant erasures.⁴² Breck may have used this opportunity of working with the junior partner of the firm to push certain major changes he would not have put before Collens. In any case, it seems that the suspension of the close collaboration between Breck and Collens put the project on shakier ground. Willis lamented, "We have lost two months in restudying and redrawing,"⁴³ and he reminded Breck:

At the time of Mr. Collens' departure we had a complete set of working drawings, structural drawings, heating and ventilating and lighting drawings, and Mr. Collens and Mr. Rockefeller and I did not consider these drawings as studies. Mr. Collens understood at the meeting, which consisted of Mr. Collens, Mr. Blumenthal, Mr. Eidlitz, Mr. Rockefeller, Mr. Nelson Rockefeller and yourself, that the plans of the museum as presented were accepted and approved.⁴⁴

By spring of 1933, James J. Rorimer, Breck's assistant, was increasingly involved in the meetings between Breck and Willis and had developed a good rapport



30. Watercolor of Cloisters exterior, view from south, by Joseph Breck. Cloisters Archives

with the younger architect. Rorimer spent much of that spring photographing and pacing off the construction site and supervising the laying out of the contour plans. When Collens returned in May, Breck, Rorimer, and Willis hurriedly updated him on the progress, or lack thereof, in the plans. Collens then met with Rockefeller, and his dissatisfaction with the intervening months must have been a topic of discussion. In a Building Committee meeting of May 26, a document was drawn up committing the plans to no further changes.⁴⁵ In view of the events of the winter, this must have been directed at Breck, and Collens took on the task of soliciting his signature before those of the other committee members. He discouraged Breck's repeated requests for another meeting of the committee and for another chance to talk with Rockefeller, and he even avoided seeing Breck when he came to New York to meet with Rockefeller about the museum. It seems clear from his actions

that Collens was distancing himself from Breck, who left for his summer travels in Europe on June 25.⁴⁶ While walking at Villars-sur-Ollon in Switzerland, Breck died suddenly of a heart attack. This unexpected news, wired to the Metropolitan Museum on August 2, marked a turning point in the progress and collaboration of the planners.

The day after Breck departed, Rockefeller had written to Collens urging him to complete the project, and by August 16, the fortification walls were begun. After Breck's death, Collens entered into a closer collaboration with Rorimer, who had assumed Breck's position as curator of Decorative Arts. Rorimer had strong feelings about the window and doorway treatments designed by Collens, and he frequently took liberties in fitting authentic material into the fabric of the building. In contrast to Breck's literal-mindedness, he occasionally argued for a dramatic effect rather than authentic ensembles.

He suggested, for example, that a “stunning [stained-glass] window” be placed in the wall of the Romanesque chapel only several feet from the floor.” In this instance, Collens dissuaded him from anything close to a Barnard installation.

Rorimer was decisive about one of the two areas of the museum that at this late date remained unfinalized. On the east side of the building, a long Gothic gallery was to have above it a second-floor room for special exhibitions. Access to this second story was indicated on the plans by a stairway and balcony; the design had been modified many times with no satisfactory solution. Rorimer argued for the suppression of the upper space altogether, since it would contain no original medieval architectural elements. Instead, the ceiling of the first-floor gallery was raised and the balcony/stairway was omitted.

The second and last lingering problem area of the museum, the southeast corner, was not worked out until construction was well underway. It was stalled by delicate negotiations with the French government over the chapel of Saint Hubert from the town of Chauvirey-le-

Châtel. In July 1936 this chapel was officially presented to Rockefeller in appreciation for his generous funding of restoration work in France after World War I. Rumors of the gift were strong enough in 1933 for Collens to have included it in the plans and model, extending from the southeast end of the museum into the Trie Cloister (Figures 32–34). But popular French outrage over this donation of a national treasure to an American millionaire was forceful enough to scuttle the plan, and the Gothic chapel remained in France. Collens finished the southeast wing of the building with a room devoted to the six stained-glass panels from the Carmelite convent of Saint Severinus at Boppard, on the Rhine.

What Charles Collens managed to create in his design for The Cloisters was a unique integration of object and architecture, of medieval and modern stone. The project drew from Collens his finest performance, for in The Cloisters he culled the best from the previous century of neo-medieval architecture in America. With Breck, he drew inspiration from the monuments of Europe for validation of the architectural composition they created in sympathy with the art objects to be housed.

31. Watercolor of exterior view from south by Charles Collens. Cloisters Archives



He steered a satisfying middle course between a building style at odds with the period of art represented and an overbearing medieval replica that would have submerged the original objects. What he achieved was a harmonious setting for the Museum's authentic architectural elements and objects.

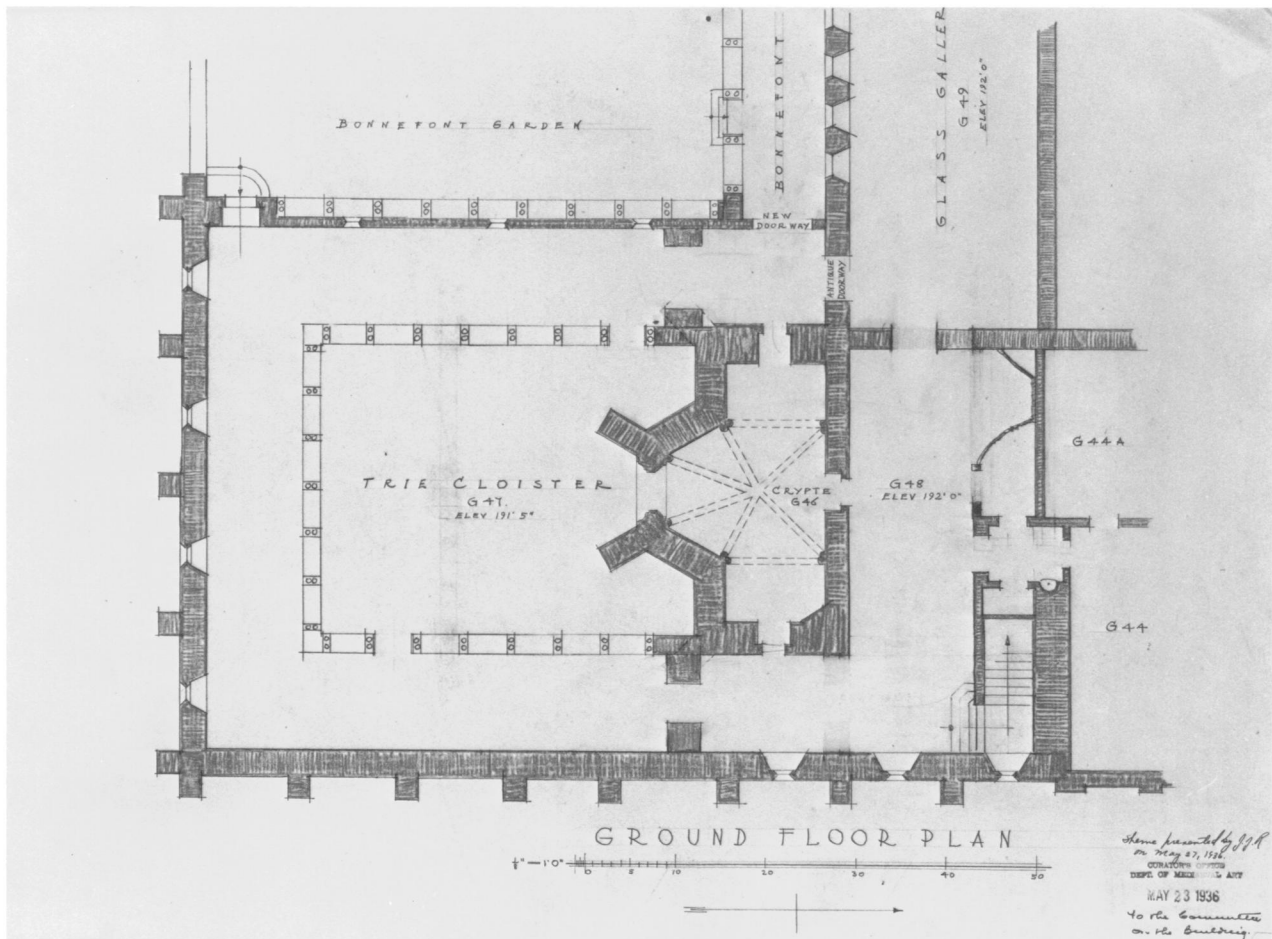
The Cloisters was much praised at its opening on May 14, 1938. Lewis Mumford lauded Charles Collens for the creative evocation of a medieval building.⁴⁸ George H. Edgell, director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, remarked, "I visited the Cloisters yesterday for the first time, and feel that you [Collens] have produced one of the most beautiful things existing in the Old World for the New."⁴⁹ Rockefeller, reflecting on his collaboration with Collens, wrote to the architect, "With the Riverside Church and The Cloisters, both in New York, you have two monuments to your creative genius and artistic skill that will endure for generations

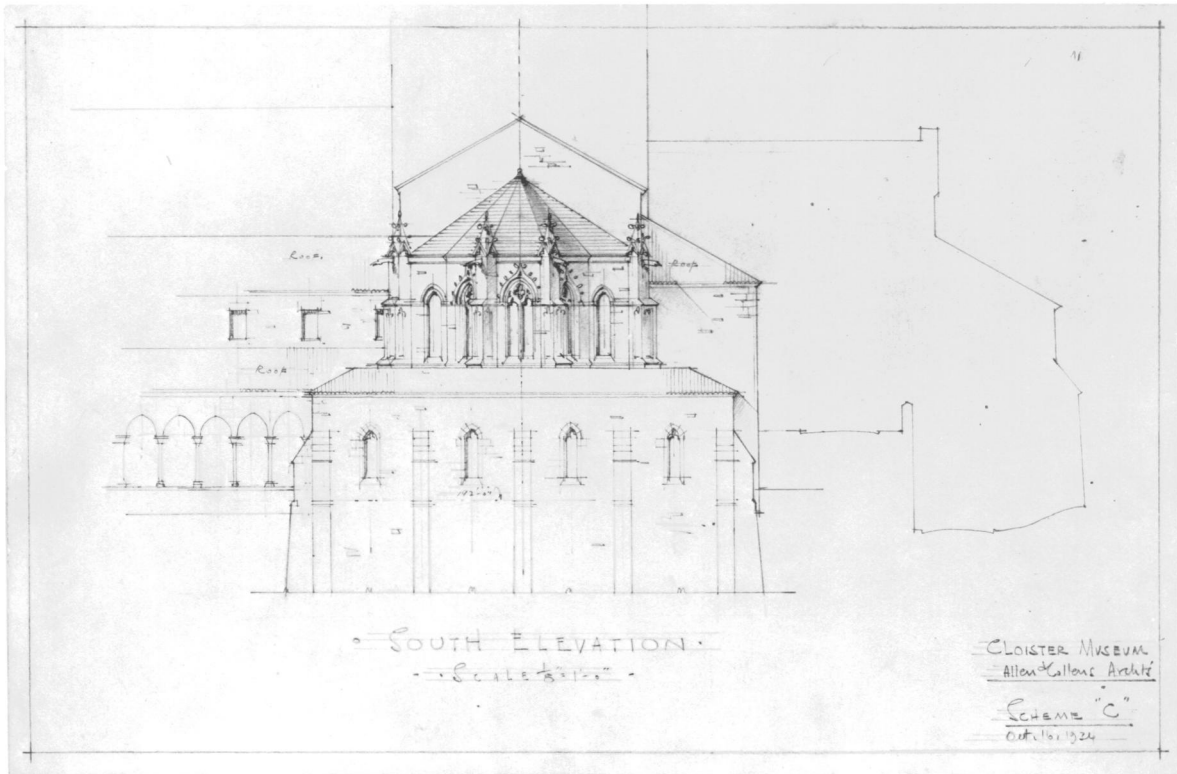
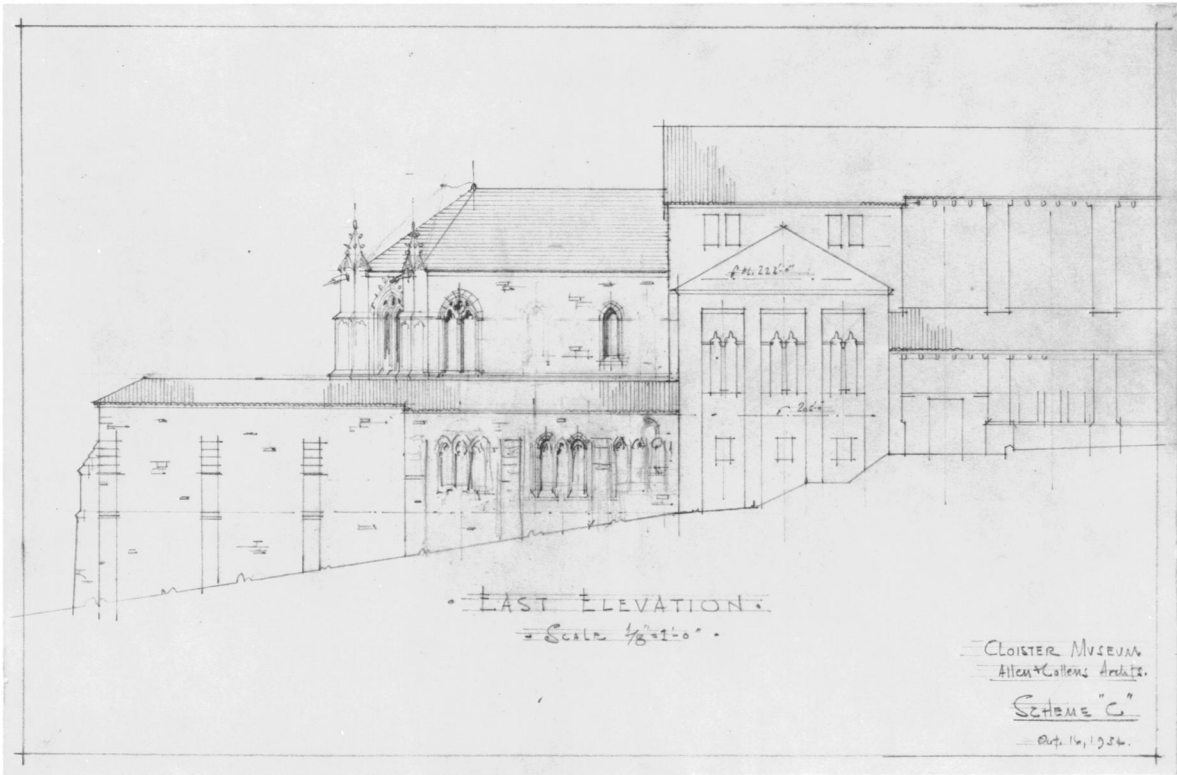
and generations to come."⁵⁰ The celebration this year of the fiftieth anniversary of The Cloisters is also a celebration of the work of this talented architect, who together with Rockefeller, Breck, and Rorimer, provided a worthy setting for a major part of the Metropolitan Museum's outstanding collection of medieval art.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It was in preparation for the anniversary that I began this research, thanks to a Summer Graduate Assistantship from The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The initial direction and continued support of Mary B. Shepard, Associate Museum Educator, and the help of Robert Goldsmith, Head of Operations, and Lauren Jackson-Beck, librarian at The Cloisters, and Jeanie James, archivist at the Metropolitan Museum, are greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank the family of Charles Collens for their generous cooperation.

32, 33, 34. Scheme C by the architectural firm of Allen, Collens and Willis, ground-floor plan, east elevation and south elevation. Cloisters Archives





NOTES

1. Two accounts of the creation of The Cloisters underestimate the contributions of Collens and Breck: see Calvin Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1970) p. 256; and J. L. Schrader, "George Grey Barnard: The Cloisters and the Abbaye," *MMAB* 37 (1979) p. 46. For a more balanced view of each man's contribution see Katherine S. Rorimer, in her introduction to the revised edition of James J. Rorimer's *Medieval Monuments at The Cloisters. As they were and as they are* (New York, 1972) p. 7; and Robert A. M. Stern, G. Gilmartin, and T. Mellins, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York, 1987) pp. 126–131.

2. For histories of Barnard and his collections see Harold Dickson, "The Origins of the Cloisters," *The Art Quarterly* 28 (1965) pp. 253–274; Mahonri Sharp Young, "George Grey Barnard and The Cloisters," *Apollo* 106 (1977) pp. 332–339; and J. L. Schrader, "Barnard." The standard biography of John Davison Rockefeller, Jr., is R. B. Fosdick's *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.: A Portrait* (New York, 1956). For background on James J. Rorimer, Rockefeller, and Barnard, see Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces*, chap. 19.

3. Schrader, "Barnard," p. 46.

4. Dickson, "Origins of the Cloisters," p. 257.

5. Germaine Bazin, former director of the Musée du Louvre, compares Barnard's composite structure to Alexandre Lenoir's pastiches for his Musée des Monuments Français in *The Museum Age* (New York, 1967) p. 255.

6. Schrader, "Barnard," p. 43.

7. Letter from Rockefeller to Robinson, Dec. 4, 1930, The Rockefeller Archives, Pocantico Hills, North Tarrytown, N.Y.

8. In chapters 14 and 19 of his biography *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, Fosdick discusses these and other building projects of his fruitful career.

9. Schrader, "Barnard," p. 44.

10. Letter from Rockefeller to Robinson, Dec. 4, 1930. The Rockefeller Archives, Pocantico Hills, North Tarrytown, N.Y.

11. All biographical information that follows is taken from an obituary in *The New York Times* (Aug. 3, 1933).

12. Letter from Breck to Collens, Feb. 2, 1931. Cloisters Archives.

13. Letter from Barnard to Rockefeller, June 20, 1916. The Rockefeller Archives.

14. Letter from Collens to Breck, Mar. 9, 1931. Cloisters Archives.

15. Ibid.

16. The following biographical information is taken from a five-page typescript autobiography, property of the Collens family.

17. The architect's own words, "At the beginning of this century, every aspirant for architectural fame felt that his education

could not be completed without some years spent at the Beaux-Arts," appear in the first of a three-part article, "The Beaux-Arts in 1900," *American Institute of Architects Journal* 7 (1947) pt. 1, Feb., pp. 80–86; pt. 2, Mar., pp. 144–151, and pt. 3, Apr., pp. 187–196. These essays constitute a delightful series of personal reminiscences of an American architecture student in the ateliers of Paris. See James P. Noffsinger, "The Influence of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts" (Ph.D. diss. Catholic University, Washington, D.C., 1955), for a study of the influence of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts on American architects.

18. For an example of the criticism raised over Riverside Church see W. A. Taylor in *American Architect* 139 (1931) pp. 32–33, 68, 70, 72; for the architects' rebuttal, see C. Crane, "Why We Made It Gothic," *American Architect* 140 (1931) pp. 26, 27, 122, 124.

19. For a survey of the medievalizing movement in American architecture, see Wayne Andrews, *American Gothic: Its Origins, Its Trials, Its Triumphs* (New York, 1975); Calder Loth and Julius Trousdale Sadler, Jr., *The Only Proper Style: Gothic Architecture in America* (Boston, 1975); and M. Whiffen, *American Architecture: 1607–1976* (London, 1981).

20. "Reconstruction of the Church of St. Vincent Ferrer: Allen and Collens and J. W. O'Connor, Associated Architects," *American Architect* 96 (1909) p. 76.

21. Letter from Collens to Rockefeller, Aug. 25, 1931. MMA Archives.

22. Ibid.

23. For the background on the building of the church and residence, see the introduction by Jane Hayward in J. Hayward and W. Cahn, *Radiance and Reflection, Medieval Art from the Raymond Pitcairn Collection* (New York, 1982) pp. 32–47.

24. C. B. Witham, "A Visit to Medieval Europe in America," *Stained Glass* 64 (1969–70) pp. 22–24.

25. Report of W. R. Valentiner to the Metropolitan Museum (1931). MMA Archives.

26. While his innovative contributions to the Metropolitan were many, his creation of separate galleries incorporating painting, sculpture, and decorative arts of each period arranged in historical sequence anticipated the plans for The Cloisters by twenty years. See M. Stern, *The Passionate Eye: The Life of William R. Valentiner* (Detroit, 1980), and the preface to the catalogue *Masterpieces of Art* for the W. R. Valentiner Memorial Exhibition at the North Carolina Museum of Art, April 6–May 17, 1959.

27. Charles Collens, "Report of Trip in Connection with the Medieval Museum at New York [1931]" (typescript) MMA Archives.

28. MMA Archives.

29. Remarks taken from "Explanation of Preliminary Sketches Proposed Medieval Museum. Fort Tryon Park, New York." MMA Archives.

30. Charles Collens, "General Explanation of Preliminary Layout #1," Apr. 29, 1931, MMA Archives.

31. Letter from Collens to Rockefeller, Aug. 25, 1931. MMA Archives.

32. Letter from Breck to Collens, Mar. 10, 1931. Cloisters Archives.

33. Collens's itinerary began at Bordeaux and included Pons, Saintes, Ecoyeux, Angoulême, Périgueux, Sarlat, Souillac, Rocamadour, Cahors, Monsempron, Moissac, Toulouse, Tarbes, Pau, Lourdes, St.-Bertrand-de-Comminges, Saint-Gaudens, Saint-Lizier, Foix, Aix, Saint-Martin-de-Canigou, Prades, the monastery of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, the monastery at Elne, Perpignan, Carcassonne, Font Froide, Aden, Aigues-Mortes, Montmajour, Arles, Aix, Cluny, Nevers, Bourges, Sens, and Paris.

34. Letter from Rockefeller to William Sloane Coffin, Building Committee Member and Museum Trustee, Nov. 11, 1931. MMA Archives.

35. Letter from Breck to Collens, Oct. 27, 1931. Cloisters Archives.

36. Letter from Breck to Collens, Nov. 9, 1932. Cloisters Archives.

37. Letter from Collens to Breck, Mar. 9, 1932. Cloisters Archives.

38. Witham, "A Visit to Medieval Europe in America," pp. 22-24.

39. Letter from Breck to Collens, Feb. 19, 1932. Cloisters Archives.

40. Letter from Collens to Breck, July 18, 1932. Cloisters Archives.

41. Letter from Collens to Breck, Dec. 5, 1932. Cloisters Archives.

42. Letter from Willis to Breck, Feb. 8, 1933. Cloisters Archives.

43. Ibid.

44. Letter from Willis to Breck, Mar. 3, 1933. Cloisters Archives.

45. Letter from Coffin, N. Rockefeller, Winlock, and Breck to Rockefeller, June 6, 1933. Cloisters Archives.

46. See correspondence of June 6, 1933, Breck to Collens; June 13, 1933, Collens to Breck; June 14, 1933, Breck to Collens; and June 21, 1933, Collens to Breck. Cloisters Archives.

47. Letter from Rorimer to Collens, Sept. 25, 1933, and Collens to Rorimer, Sept. 28, 1933. Cloisters Archives.

48. Letter from Rockefeller to Collens, Aug. 19, 1938. Property of the Collens family.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.