

February 19, 2020

Hon. Sarah Carroll, Chair  
NYC Landmarks Commission  
1 Centre Street, 9<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10007

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**232 EAST 11TH STREET**

**NEW YORK NY 10003**

**212 475-9585**

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**Re: Additional research regarding historic significance of 58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street in proposed historic district south of Union Square, home of the National Academy of Design**

Dear Chair Carroll,

I write to share with you additional information we have uncovered regarding the historic significance of 58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street, part of our proposed historic district south of Union Square. During the 1850s and 1860s, 58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street served as the home to the National Academy of Design, the first institution in the United States established by and under the exclusive control of professional artists. Called by Christopher Gray "New York's most powerful art group during the 19<sup>th</sup> century," it was founded in 1825 by a group of artists and architects including Samuel F.B. Morse, Asher B. Durand, Thomas Cole, Rembrandt Peale, and Ithiel Town. The National Academy of Design was also the very first art school established in New York, and its mission was and remains the promotion of the fine arts in America through exhibition and education. The Academy's location here is further testament to the proposed district's central role in the history of the arts in New York City, particularly painting.

In its early years, the Academy was housed in a series of rented and shared spaces throughout Lower Manhattan to allow for exhibitions and to accommodate its professional art school. At this time, there were few public art galleries and no art schools in the city. In 1848 the Academy leased space nearby at 663 Broadway (since demolished), but by 1854 had to leave this location due to financial difficulties. A long-time member of the Academy who served as its treasurer and later the superintendent of its



58 East 13th Street



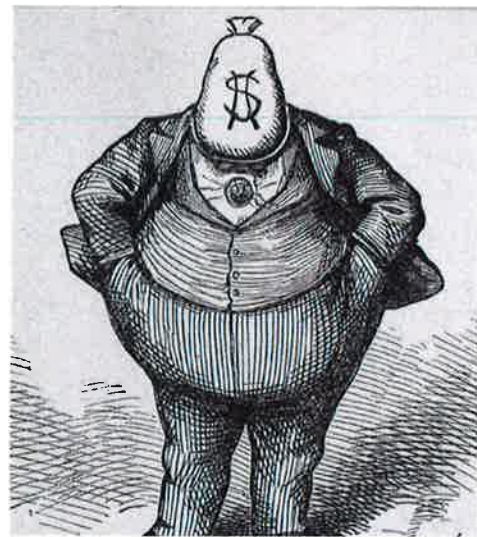
*Thomas S. Cummings, N.A.*

school, Thomas S. Cummings, had a studio at the newly-built 58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street, a 4-story building located just west of Broadway. Upon his suggestion, the Academy moved there “temporarily.” This still-extant building would in fact remain their home for a dozen years, during a crucial period of the Academy’s development.

No. 58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street was built ca. 1853 by Abraham Valentine. Historic maps show that it was originally a brick structure with stores on the first floor. The building retains its 19<sup>th</sup> century cornice, fenestration and massing. From the beginning, 58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street served as studios for artists; besides Thomas

Cummings, painters including John Gott, William Morgan, Fridolin Schegel, and William O. Stone had studios there. Its location had the benefit of being directly across the street from The Bryan Gallery of Christian Art, which opened in 1853 (in a since-demolished building replaced by the Roosevelt Building at 841 Broadway). The gallery was a groundbreaking and expansive showcase for European Art in America. Owned by Thomas Jefferson Bryan, it exhibited his personal collection of works by European and American artists for view by the public, for a fee of 25¢.

Several prominent artists attended the Academy while it was located at 58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street. One was a young Thomas Nast (1840-1902), father of the modern political cartoon. Nast and his family immigrated to the United States in 1846. He dropped out of school by age 13 and attended the Academy until 1855 when he got his first job as an illustrator at *Leslie’s Weekly*. At his next job at *Harper’s Weekly*, he would gain fame for his cartoons criticizing slavery and corruption, most famously of William Magear “Boss” Tweed, which helped lead to the Tammany Hall leader’s downfall.



Cartoon by Thomas Nast of Boss Tweed



Asher B. Durand, *River Scene*. 1854

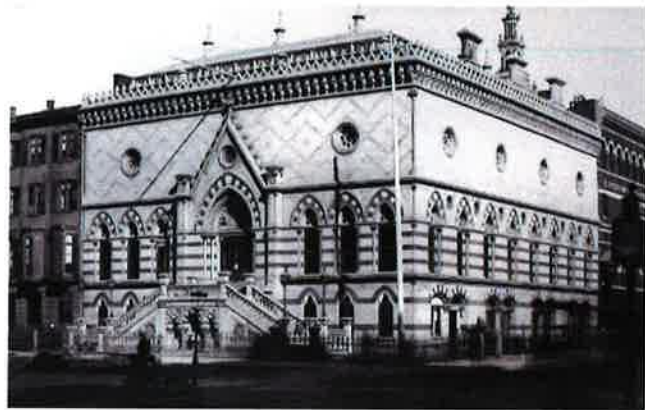
The Academy’s activities while at 58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street included their 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition, held from March 22, 1854 to April 25, 1854. *The New York Times*, in their highly laudatory review of this exhibition, paid special homage to the portraits of William Cullen Bryant and Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, as well as the landscapes painted by Asher Durand who, according to *The Times*, had “the honors of the place.”



Artist's Reception at the National Academy of Design in 1868 as seen in *Harper's Weekly*

According to the Academy's records, they began the practice of holding artists' receptions at 58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street, with their first one held on January 8, 1858. These receptions gave the public the opportunity to interact with the artists before and after an exhibition, and proved very successful. Other art organizations soon followed suit implementing this practice, including the recently-opened nearby Tenth Street Studios, which has now become a standard part of artist exhibitions.

The Academy's success and growth while at 58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street allowed them to, for the first time in their existence, build and own their own home. This resulted in the construction of their new headquarters at 23<sup>rd</sup> Street and Fourth Avenue by architect Peter B. Wight, a Venetian Gothic palazzo considered one of the great landmarks of New York in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Based upon the Doge's Palace in Venice, it was the first example of this architectural style in the United States. Though beloved, the building was sadly destroyed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.



National Academy of Design 55 East 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, 1894



58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street, c. 1940


Since the founding of the National Academy of Design, over 2,100 artists and architects have been elected to its membership, and its member list reads like a who's-who of the art and architecture world over the last two centuries. During its time at 58 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street the Academy's membership included Winslow Homer, James Henry Beard, Frederic Edwin Church, William Parsons Winchester Dana, George Inness, Emanuel Leutze, Jervis McEntee, Victor Nehlig, and Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait.

The Academy's significant place in the development of the arts in New York and in this country is incontrovertible, and the Academy was located on 13<sup>th</sup> Street at both a critical time for the institution and at a critical moment when the area was emerging as an art center. Long after the Academy had left its

former home on East 13<sup>th</sup> Street, No. 58 served as home and studio for many artists throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century-- a testament to this area continuing as an epicenter for the 19<sup>th</sup> century New York art world. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century this area was the center of the Fourteenth Street School of painters, while in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century it would become the center of the Abstract Expressionist movement and the New York School of artists, which moved the center of the art world from Paris to New York.

This history deserves to be honored and preserved, and remains largely intact at this location with the exception of the re-facing of the building. On this basis, and on the basis for the myriad other historic and architectural resources in the area we have detailed to you previously, we again urge you to designate the area south of Union Square an historic district as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



Andrew Berman  
Executive Director

cc: Borough President Gale Brewer  
City Council Speaker Corey Johnson  
City Councilmember Carlina Rivera  
Senator Brad Hoylman  
Assemblymember Deborah Glick  
Community Board 2, Manhattan  
Historic Districts Council  
NY Landmarks Conservancy  
Municipal Arts Society  
Victorian Society of America  
National Academy of Design