

Richard Morris Hunt designed Gilded Age homes across Newport. A new exhibit honors his work



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Newport Daily News

- A new exhibit at Rosecliff details the life of architect Richard Morris Hunt, the brains behind The Breakers, Marble House and several other Gilded Age buildings.
- The Preservation Society of Newport County was able to secure about 20 items on loan from the Library of Congress, a first for the organization.
- A new lighting system installed for this and one previous exhibit allows the Preservation Society to borrow more items from the Library of Congress in the future.

NEWPORT – A household name among American architects and historians, Richard Morris Hunt and the buildings he designed all but were the blueprint for the ostentatious building aesthetics of [The Gilded Age](#). However, while Hunt's work is well known, the man himself is less so.

[In its newest exhibit](#) at Rosecliff, the [Preservation Society of Newport County](#) takes a more personal look at Hunt, using artifacts from his life and to show how it molded him into the “Dean of American Architecture.”

“As caretakers of Marble House, The Breakers and Chateau-sur-Mer, we are reminded every day of the impact Richard Morris Hunt made on American architecture,” Preservation Society CEO and Executive Director Trudy Coxe said in a press release announcing the new exhibit. “But this exhibition promises to reveal another side of this complex man who did so much to shape our understanding of culture in this country.”

Hunt's work was not just prolific during the Gilded Age, it was practically unavoidable. In Newport alone, he was the artist behind The Breakers, Marble House, Ochre Court, Château-Sur-Mur, the John N. A. Griswold House, which currently houses Newport Art Museum, and the Travers Block, the strip of tudor-style shops just south of Memorial Boulevard, and that's just to name a few. The Preservation Society's chief curator, Leslie Jones, said they are working on compiling a list of the buildings Hunt worked on in Newport.



“His footprint is so much more than just the buildings he created,” Jones said. “America was going through rapid expansionism at this time, in the west but also in cities with industrialization and bringing beauty and aesthetics to these environments with buildings helped Americans create an appreciation and identity through architecture.”

Beyond Aquidneck Island, most of Hunt’s legacy exists in New York, having designed the entrance facade to the Metropolitan Art Museum and the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty. He’s also responsible for the Biltmore Estate in North Carolina, the largest private house in America.

Though the Preservation Society of Newport County owns two buildings designed by Hunt, The Breakers and Marble House, the new exhibit sits proudly inside Rosecliff, which was instead designed by one of his contemporaries. Jones said this decision was made only because Rosecliff has the space for exhibit halls. When Jones gave the media a sneak preview of the exhibit, much of the exhibit narrative was typed out on paper and taped to the walls, items designated for display were yet to be hung up and employees were hard at work getting the hall ready for the official May 30 opening.

The new exhibit on display at Rosecliff takes visitors through the different stages of the Gilded Age architect’s life, focusing on the places he lived and how those places shaped his artistic vision. It starts off in Vermont, where Hunt was born, then details his life in Paris,

New York City and finally Newport, where he was buried in 1895, at Common Burial Ground and Island Cemetery.

An impressive collection of plaster casts, in particular, is used to illustrate how his experience as the first American to attend the prestigious architectural school at École des Beaux-Arts in France influenced his future career work. These casts were often used to add the ornamental flourishes popularly used in the French Renaissance-inspired “chateauesque” architectural style that Hunt helped popularize in the United States through buildings like The Breakers and the Biltmore Estate.

The casts, along with carved wooden panels from a now-demolished home he designed, are also used to demonstrate Hunt’s admiration for the artisanship of the stonemasons and carpenters who physically put the buildings together. He was so popular among these workers, Jones said, that they had a statue built depicting Hunt as a stonemason. The cast for that statue will be on display at the exhibit as well, on loan from the Museum of the City of New York, while the 1,000 lbs statue itself remains on Long Island.

Particularly exciting for the Preservation Society of Newport County is the number of items the curators were able to secure on loan from the [Library of Congress](#), a first-time collaboration for the two organizations. To be able to display these roughly 20 or so items, the Preservation Society installed a special museum-grade lighting system that reduces the potential damage light can have on archival items, especially photographs. With this in place, and a similar system likely to be installed at Hunter House, the Preservation will be able to borrow more items from the Library of Congress for future exhibits, Jones said.

The timing of the exhibition also coincides with recent efforts by the Library of Congress to digitize its Richard Morris Hunt collection, which began in 2024. The exhibit will be on display at Rosecliff starting May 30 through Nov. 2.