



Sneak peek at the new Richard Morris Hunt exhibit By Helena Touhey

“In a New Light” opens May 30th at Rosecliff

Staff at The Preservation Society of Newport County are hard at work putting the final touches on an upcoming exhibition featuring the life and legacy of Richard Morris Hunt, “In a New Light.”

The show, which opens to the public Friday May 30, features the famed Gilded Age architect and expands the scope of his life to include personal interests and collections.

It spans Hunt’s youth in Vermont, his time as an architecture student in Paris (where he was the first American to attend the famed École des Beaux-Arts, which he re-applied to after an initial rejection), and subsequent years spent designing projects of all kinds, especially homes for wealthy patrons in New York and Newport.

It was in Newport where Hunt met his wife, Catharine Howland, and where he died in July of 1895 (he’s buried in Island Cemetery). Over the course of his life, he visited 200 cities in more than 20 countries. It’s believed that he created over 220 designs throughout his lifetime, although not all of them came to fruition; the exhibit covers many of his early

projects, some of which have since been demolished (among them the Lenox Library and Tribune Building, both in New York), and his involvement as a founding member of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Highlights of the exhibition include items from his personal archive, including framed photographs from a collection of 5,000 images, often showcasing architectural elements in different settings; scrapbooks filled with cut-outs that presumably inspired his design sense (among them is a book filled entirely of people wearing Victorian collars); and sketches from early projects, including designs for the 1883 World's Fair in Chicago, drafts depicting the scale of the Statue of Liberty (Hunt designed the foundation,) and an idea for a chandelier at the Breakers that was never realized.

There is a room featuring recreations of Hunt's work, including the Gothic Room designed at Marble House and the Ladies Room at The Breakers. These recreations, along with a selection of recreated plaster casts (another of Hunt's collections), were hand-painted by local artist Karen Roarke.

Another room features wood panels salvaged from the former Petit Château in Manhattan, and the central hallway is lined with portraits of family members as well as patrons who became collaborators (among them are a painting of Alva Vanderbilt on loan from the Historic Mobile Preservation Society in Alabama and a portrait of Cornelius Vanderbilt II, painted by John Singer Sargent).

Throughout the exhibit, there is wall text lending backstory and context—and which features headers in a playful font meant to reflect Hunt's handwriting and the artform that is an architect's penmanship. A whimsical touch to an exhibition that showcases its subject's own creative impulses and, perhaps, whimsy.

Leslie B. Jones, the Preservation Society's Director of Museum Affairs & Chief Curator, who led members of local media through the exhibit rooms earlier this week, noted that a major component of the show is the number of works on loan, including from the Library of Congress, Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Vermont Historical Society and the Bennington Museum.

A new fiber optic, LED lighting system was recently installed in the gallery space on the second floor at Rosecliff, which has allowed the Preservation Society to display historical items that require specific types of low light (such as "5 fc" or five candle feet).

The idea for this show originated in November of 2023, and the final product features hundreds of pieces collected from dozens of sources; the items loaned from the Library of Congress, of which there are 20, took nine months of negotiations alone. Collectively, they capture Hunt's interests and the ways in which he cultivated culture in 19th century America.

As Jones notes, “Hunt’s footprint was so much more than the buildings he created,” and she hopes that the objects presented in the exhibition help to show him in a new light. This is just a glimpse; for the full experience, visit the Newport Mansions website for tickets & additional details.



A drawing by the 18th-century French architect Gabriel Dumont, collected in Europe by Richard Morris Hunt. During his lifetime, Hunt’s collection and library were considered unequaled resources for the teaching of architecture in America | Courtesy of the Hunt Collection in the AIA/AAF Collection, Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress View Newsletter