A Study in Contrasts

The Folger is an extraordinary building, an American monument to another country’s national hero in the heart of Capitol Hill. Its modernized classical exterior and English Renaissance interior (the contrasting styles are lovingly referred to as “Tudor-deco”) earned it a place on the National Register of Historic Places in 1969. This designation was expanded in 2018 to include the original interior of the building. As soon as it was built, the Folger became a prototype for a wide range of public buildings and monuments across America that maintained a classical spirit while simplifying, modernizing, and abstracting many of classical architecture’s most distinctive features.

Home to the world’s largest collection of Shakespeare-related books, manuscripts, art, and artifacts, the building was a collaboration between Paul Cret, a French émigré trained in the Beaux-Arts style, and Henry and Emily Folger, a New York couple who shared a lifelong passion for Shakespeare and collecting. By locating their monument to Shakespeare and his age at the heart of civic life, the Folgers and Cret made a bold statement in marble and wood: that the wisdom of literature and history are indispensable to the life of a democracy. A Monument to Shakespeare: The Architecture of the Folger Shakespeare Library tells the story of how their combined vision and attention to detail resulted in a building that Emily Folger later described as “The First Folio, Illustrated.”

A Monument to Shakespeare: The Architecture of the Folger Shakespeare Library

HENRY AND EMILY FOLGER wanted to create a monument to Shakespeare in the capital of the United States. This would be their gift to the American people, an architectural presence on Capital Hill, and an anchor to the nation’s cultural mile. A Monument to Shakespeare: The Architecture of the Folger Shakespeare Library shows how the Folgers worked closely with architect Paul Philippe Cret to create a marble building which reads like a book, and whose placement testifies to the hope that Washington, DC, would become the nation’s civic and cultural capital.

FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

April 13, 2019–January 5, 2020
Monday–Saturday 10AM–5PM
Sunday 1PM–5PM
Open late on select Fridays

ON THE WEB

www.folger.edu/exhibitions/monument-to-shakespeare
#BuildingWill

EXHIBITION TEAM

Michael Witmore and Heather Wolfe, Curators
Kristen Sieck, Researcher
Emily Snedden Yates, Exhibition Project Manager
William Davis, Senior Photography Associate
Kate Long, Education Programming Manager
Renate Mesmer, Head of Conservation
Rebecca Niles, Digital Interactive Designer
Shveima Associates, Exhibition Designer
Strato Aerial, Aerial Cinematography

In 1930, the Folgers’ gift to the American people was placed in trust of Amherst College. The Folger Shakespeare Library and its independent Board of Governors remain proud of the continuing connection to Amherst College, whose Trustees manage the endowment of the institution.

Major support for A Monument to Shakespeare: The Architecture of the Folger Shakespeare Library is provided by Vinton and Sigrid Cerf and the Winton and Carolyn Blount Exhibition Fund of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

ON COVER

Detail of white metal grilles for nine windows in Great Hall (Paul Cret, 1930)
Folger Archives


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Paul Philippe Cret was one of America’s most influential architects of the twentieth century. Born in France, he received his degree from the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1902, and then moved to the United States to join the faculty of the School of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. Soon after completing his first major commission, the Pan American Union Building on 17th St. NW (now called the Organization of American States), he enlisted in the French army and served in World War I. Upon his return to Penn in 1919, his style of “stripped classicism,” sometimes referred to as “new classicism” or “modernized classicism,” began to define him: flattened columns and bas-reliefs, with simplified and abstracted features. Cret was already a prominent architect when the Folgers decided to hire him. In making this choice, they followed the recommendation of their consulting architect, Alexander Trowbridge, who, like Cret, had trained at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. From 1928 to 1931, the Folgers were in constant communication with Cret and Trowbridge. Trowbridge, who had already enjoyed a long career as a practicing architect, served as an advisor and liaison between the Folgers and Cret. Cret’s influence on DC architecture is profound: in addition to the Organization of American States building, other Cret projects in Washington, DC, include the Duke Ellington Bridge, the Federal Reserve Building, and the tower of the Bethesda Naval Medical Center.

An Architectural Legacy

The Washington Post published a special supplement on the day the Folger opened: April 23, 1932, Shakespeare’s birthday. The opening ceremony, carried live on national radio courtesy of NBC, was attended by the President and Mrs. Hoover, as well as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The Post called the building “a veritable marvel of cooperative genius,” noting that critics were praising its Great Hall as “beyond question one of the finest rooms in the United States.” The nature of the building as both monument and institution was of interest to many who saw the new building: “Folger Shakespeare Library fittingly takes the place among those other symbols which venerate America’s immortals, the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial,” declared The Evening Star. For Charles Moore, Chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts, Cret’s achievement was his ability to mix different impulses: “The Folger Library Building is distinctly a work of art. The general design is rooted in the past, but it also has elements of the ‘modern’ spirit, on which time alone must pass judgement.” The style, referred to by one critic as “modernized classicism,” would go on to influence other buildings on Capitol Hill, including the Supreme Court and the Adams Building.

For Mr. and Mrs. Folger, their achievement would be more personal. Mrs. Folger described their aims in a talk she gave shortly after the Folger opened: “[w]e wished to get away from mere copying, but not away from the spirit of the best of the past.” Cret’s skillful use of inscriptions and of sculptures, she pointed out, led to a design that was both “simple and noble”—a memorial to a great writer, but also a tribute to the couple’s favorite book. “The Library was to be the First Folio, illustrated,” she said. And in this precious book, the centerpiece of the Folger collection, two passionate collectors and their talented architects found common inspiration.
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