

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

# ‘Skyscraper Gothic’ Review: A Spire is Born

Early 20th-century American architects were drawn to the forms of Medieval architecture



Skyscraper Gothic, installation view

PHOTO: FRALIN MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

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Oct. 13, 2021 5:02 pm ET

*Charlottesville, Va.*

‘**Jumping Man,**’ a relief sculpture carved in pine, is a curious relic of an advertising campaign. Under the shadow of a looming skyscraper, we see a young businessman, depicted life-size, as he earnestly jumps on the open bottom drawer of a vertical file cabinet.

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### ‘Skyscraper Gothic’

*The Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia, through Dec. 31*

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That the sculpture is comically bad—the bounding businessman is as inert as a cigar-store Indian—hardly matters. It does just what it was made to do: show that the file cabinets of Shaw-Walker Furniture Co. were “built like a skyscraper.” There could hardly be a better opening to “Skyscraper Gothic,” the small but charming exhibition now on display at the Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia.



Shaw-Walker Furniture Company Inc. 'Jumping Man' (1930-1940)

PHOTO: FRALIN MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

The heyday of Skyscraper Gothic began around 1900, when architects found that the forms of Gothic architecture—slender buttresses that rose without interruption to a pointed arch aimed skyward—suited the skyscraper, and gave it a visually satisfying vertical thrust that no other style could match. To tell this story, curators Lisa Reilly and Kevin Murphy have assembled some 95 objects in a variety of media, including 41 works on paper and 25 items of decorative art.

The king of Gothic skyscrapers, of course, is New York's Woolworth Building, which from 1913 to 1929 was the tallest building in the world. Its image is everywhere here. It is an agreeable surprise to come upon a selection of Cass Gilbert's original working drawings for the building, never before exhibited, and see how brilliantly he detailed it. One is

struck by the exaggerated boldness of the terra-cotta ornament, whose vigorous swinging lines and deep shadows were designed so they could be read from a distance, right up to the crowning finial, even by the viewer on the sidewalk 792 feet below.

But Skyscraper Gothic is not really about how architects once based their skyscrapers on medieval prototypes. Its real subject is how the *idea* of the skyscraper, Gothic or otherwise, came to permeate the visual and decorative arts in the years before the Depression called a decades-long timeout to tall-building construction. We learn here that the skyscraper affected artists in two ways.



Joseph Pennell, 'The Woolworth through the Arch' (ca.1921)

PHOTO: FRALIN MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

On the one hand, they could exploit the building's visual thrill—its sheer skeletal splendor when under construction or how its jagged angularity played against wispy clouds. We

find a good many familiar names, such as Thomas Hart Benton, whose lithograph shows a riveter lighted by the fiery coal-burning furnace in which he heated his rivets, and Lewis Hine, whose photograph of the Empire State Building shows a worker perched precariously but unconcernedly above its naked skeleton. Most treated the skyscraper as a fundamentally romantic object and employed the same pictorial strategies that painters a century earlier had used when depicting ruined Gothic abbeys. Joseph Pennell's 1921 etching of "The Woolworth Through the Arch" would not have seemed foreign to Constable.

On the other hand, artists could apply the language of skyscraper design to the decorative arts in abstract form. Here it was not the Gothic skyscraper that fascinated them but the chiseled forms that skyscrapers began to assume after New York passed its celebrated Zoning Resolution of 1916. To keep buildings from turning streets into sunless and airless canyons, they were now required to step backward at prescribed intervals as they rose.

The forms this created were distinctly modern, a punctuated crystalline cubic language suggestive of jazz syncopation. The exhibition shows the myriad ways it could work itself into consumer products, from handbags to candlestick holders. A century ago one could sit on one of Paul Frankl's lacquered Skyscraper Chairs beneath a skyscraper lamp and pour a drink from Kay Fisker's skyscraper cocktail shaker, while browsing an issue of *Dance* magazine with shimmying terpsichorean skyscrapers on the cover.





Harry Sternberg, 'Riveter' (1935)

PHOTO: FRALIN MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

One of the most striking objects in the show is a metal souvenir of the crown of the Empire State Building, originally intended to serve as a mooring mast for zeppelins—an impractical idea that was never tried. The souvenir, about 6 inches in height, shows such a dirigible, securely docked at the top of the building. It is a poignant reminder that some things never seem to date, while others can look ridiculous after a few short years. Most of the items in this exhibition still look fresh and vibrant, like the Empire State Building itself, and so it is a jolt to see a bulky zeppelin tied to it, looking as quaint as a Mississippi paddle-wheeler.

Before leaving, one should spend some time contemplating the 78-inch-high coin-operated scale of 1927, designed by Joseph Sinel and manufactured by International Ticket Scale Corp. Made of cast iron and finished in chrome, brass and stainless steel, it is so imposing that its makers seemed to think that the zoning laws applied to it and gave it the same taut setbacks of a contemporary skyscraper. It leaves us with a question: What does it mean that skyscrapers, which once set the standard for every kind of consumer product, are now struggling desperately to look as much as possible like that weightless wafer-thin device on the table next to you?

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*Appeared in the October 14, 2021, print edition as 'Medieval Modern: A Spire Is Born.'*

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