

**THE HISPANIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA COMPLEX**

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**Summary**

The Hispanic Society of America Complex, located in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City, is nationally significant under NHL Criterion 1 as an exemplary representation of a nationally significant shift in both attitudes toward Hispanic culture and understanding of Hispanic-American history in the United States and under NHL Criterion 2 for its association with the nationally significant philanthropist, Archer M. Huntington. Founded in 1904 by Huntington, The Hispanic Society of America was created to “serve as [an] instrument...through which Americans could gain a direct knowledge of their heritage from Spain.”<sup>1</sup> The Hispanic Society of America building, completed in 1908 with additions, and the North Building, opened in 1930, were constructed as part of Audubon Terrace, a cultural center in the Washington Heights neighborhood established by Archer M. Huntington and largely designed by his cousin, Charles P. Huntington. The property includes sculpture by Archer Huntington’s wife, Anna Hyatt Huntington. This grouping of cultural institutions was designed to promote and encourage cultural and intellectual activity, with The Hispanic Society of America Complex as one of its focal points.

**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.****Audubon Terrace (contributing site)**

Audubon Terrace occupies most of an urban block bounded by Broadway on the east, Riverside Drive on the west, and 155<sup>th</sup> and 156<sup>th</sup> Streets on the north and south, respectively. The entrance to Audubon Terrace is through a gate along Broadway. Audubon Terrace itself is defined by a paved terrace bordered on the north and south by rows of neoclassical buildings, only a portion of which comprises The Hispanic Society of America Complex that is being nominated as a National Historic Landmark.

Archer Huntington’s original vision for Audubon Terrace called for a complex of cultural institutions extending from Broadway in Washington Heights down to the Hudson River. Only partially realized, this grand vision terminated short of Riverside Drive where multi-story apartment buildings form a western boundary. Listed in the National Register on May 30, 1980, Audubon Terrace consists of several buildings that historically represented different cultural and religious institutions. The Main Building of the Hispanic Society (1904-1908 with additions) extends along the south side of Audubon Terrace with a rear elevation fronting 155<sup>th</sup> Street. At the east end of the Main Building is the former Museum of American Indians (1916-1922 now a wing of the Hispanic Society property). The south side of Audubon Terrace is completed by two buildings on the west side of the Hispanic Society, the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1921-23), and the American Numismatic Society (1907 and now part of the American Academy). On the north side of Audubon Terrace is the North Building (1923-1930) built for the Hispanic Society and directly opposite the Main Building. On the east side of the North Building is the former American Geographical Society (1910 and now Boricua College). On the west side of the North Building is an open lot, followed by the Church of Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza (1912).

The terrace itself is at two levels that reflect the evolution of the Hispanic Society complex that was originally oriented north toward 156<sup>th</sup> Street. As one enters through iron gates on Broadway, the terrace is depressed below sidewalk grade in front of the former American Indian and Geographical Society buildings. This allows for a set of stairs rising to a second set of iron gates that open on to the elevated portion of the terrace in front of the Hispanic Society Main Building. Because the Hispanic Society’s North Building on 156<sup>th</sup> Street is at a

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<sup>1</sup> *A History of The Hispanic Society of America: Museum and Library, 1904-1954*, (New York, 1954), p. 3.

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lower grade (and occupies the original terraced approach to the Main Building), the statuary group between the two buildings is also lower than the terrace in front of the Main Building.<sup>2</sup>

**Main Building (1904-1908 contributing)**

As noted above, the Main Building of the Hispanic Society stands on a higher elevation than the Hispanic Society's North Building opposite. As the first building constructed by Huntington, the Main Building originally stood on an elevated terrace accessed by fronted 156<sup>th</sup> Street with flanking staircases faced with ashlar limestone and defined by neoclassical balustrades. While these staircases survive, the cast iron fence with limestone piers on 156<sup>th</sup> Street has been entirely replaced by the North Building.

As originally built, architect Charles P. Huntington designed the exterior in a traditional neoclassical style faced with Indiana limestone with a low pitched hip roof covered in copper.<sup>3</sup> The structure itself is constructed of steel and brick. A central pavilion projects from the middle of the seven bay north façade with a pediment and Spanish caravel (sailing vessel) in relief ornamenting the tympanum. The entrance, accessed by a short set of steps flanked by limestone lions on pedestals, consists to two large bronze doors below a transom. The lions were added later and are by sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington. Ionic columns in antis flanking the entrance extend the full two story height of the building to support the pediment. The composition of this façade continues with three bays on either side of the entrance pavilion. Monumental Ionic columns also flank each two-story window bay and support a full entablature with the names of prominent Spanish and Portuguese inscribed in the frieze. At either end the façade of the original building is defined by Ionic columns engaged to massive ashlar piers. The windows have bronze frames and are round arch with six-light mullions on the first floor and single pane double windows on the second floor.

As with the primary elevation, the rear (south on 155<sup>th</sup> Street) elevation is monumental in scale but with an arcade of Ionic pilasters supporting the entablature and hip roof. Between the pilasters are panels with carved figures in low relief. These figures were added in 1939 by sculptor Berthold Nebel and represent the people of civilizations that occupied the Iberian Peninsula.

**Flanking Wings (1915 and 1921)**

The original portion of the Main Building projects forward of its flanking wings. The west wing, replacing a temporary building in 1915, was also designed by Charles P. Huntington. The east wing dates to 1920-1921 but was designed by Erik Strindberg. Both wings repeat the traditional neoclassical motifs, but the façades consist of blind ashlar panels between shallow pilasters supporting a smaller scale cornice beneath a paneled parapet and flat roof. The composition of the south façade (155<sup>th</sup> Street) is similar although there are no public entrances and the sloping street reveals a basement levels above grade for the west wing.

**Interior of Main Building**

The main entrance leads into a hallway with flanking staircases and leads directly into the "Main Court". The hallway itself features tile floors (by the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works) and flanking staircases with iron

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<sup>2</sup> Architect Charles P. Huntington (1874-1919) served as Archer Huntington's architect until his early death. Huntington graduated from Harvard (1893) and the École des Beaux Arts in Paris (1901). "Charles P. Huntington Dies" *New York Times*, October 16, 1919. Audubon Terrace was the work for which he was principally known. His work for Archer Huntington was published in contemporary architectural journals. For the Hispanic Society buildings, see "Museum of the Hispanic Society of America," *American Architect and Building News*, June 30, 1906, Vol. 89, p. 220; "Building of Hispanic Society in America," *American Architect*, May 17, 1916, Vol. 109.

<sup>3</sup> *A History of The Hispanic Society of America: Museum and Library, 1904-1954*, (New York, 1954), pp. 17-31.

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railings and newel posts that curve back above the entrance doors. The Main Court is open a full two stories to the ceiling and is lighted by a decorative skylight. The space is defined by tile floors and arcades on all four sides constructed of terra cotta on marble plinths. The design of the Main Court is in a style inspired by Spanish Renaissance architecture, specifically the Palace of Vélez-Blanco in the province of Murcia. Above the arcades at the second floor level are open galleries with more exhibit space. Spanish motifs include the keystones above each arch with the arms of a province or city in Spain. This space was originally designed as the reading room but became exhibition space as the museum expanded.

The second reading room was initially in the west wing. The west wing served that function only briefly before it was closed for remodeling from 1921-1926, then reopened to display the *Vision of Spain*, a major permanent collection of large paintings created specifically for this room by Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida. The east wing, opened in 1921, contained the third reading room, as well as storage rooms for prints and photographs, and for the sale of the society's publications. The reading room, modeled on the Main Court, is open a full two stories with a skylight above and surrounded by open galleries on four sides. Although this space also features tile floors, the architectural finishes consist of neoclassical piers and varnished woodwork.

**North Building (1923-1930 contributing)**

Designed by H. Brooks Price, this building closed off the original monumental approach from 156<sup>th</sup> Street and completed the reorientation of the complex toward Broadway on the east. The long construction period for this building reflected Huntington's evolving plans for this institution. Although initially designed in 1923, work did not begin until 1926 with completion in 1928. Formal opening to the public was delayed until 1930. Only the south façade opposite the Main Building reflects a formal neo-classical design of Indiana limestone. On the south façade of each wing are carved limestone figures in relief by Anna Hyatt Huntington. One represents Don Quixote (1942), and the other Boabdil, the last Moorish king of Granada (1943).

The rear elevation facing 156<sup>th</sup> Street is brick with limestone trim. Like the Main Building, this façade consists of a center section with flanking wings. The largely functional design of this façade, however, is reflected in the rows of closely spaced pilasters and combinations of blind and glazed windows. The walls are largely without windows and somewhat more ornamental with end columns, pilasters, and entablature, rusticated brickwork and panels with brick diapering. As is suggested by the relative lack of windows, the interior of the North Building is largely for storage but does include gallery space on the first floor with wood paneled walls.

**El Cid Sculptural Group (1927 contributing)**

The composition of the south façade was evidently dictated by the decision to serve as a backdrop for a sculpture group in the terrace by Anna Hyatt Huntington. The façade consists of large paneled walls framed by a neo-classical base, pilasters and entablature. This facade consists of the central section and recessed flanking wings. Directly in front of this façade the terrace contains the bronze sculpture group on limestone pedestals by Anna Huntington. In the center is a large statue of El Cid on a horse. This heroic equestrian figure is surrounded by four smaller bronze statues of seated warriors. On either side is a small reflecting pool linked to the sculpture group by two flagpoles on bronze bases, also designed by Anna Huntington. The flagpoles fly flags of the United States and Spain. Anna Huntington also produced groups of marble and bronze animal figures for the pedestals of the staircases leading up to the terrace in front of the North Building.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *A History of the Hispanic Society of America, op. cit.*, pp. 31-38.

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**East Wing (former American Indian Museum Noncontributing)**

Although not acquired by the Hispanic Society until 2010, the former American Indian Museum building is now internally connected and is part of the nominated property. Constructed as a separate structure, it is a non-contributing building in this nomination. The neoclassical design by Charles P. Huntington was completed in 1922. This building occupies a prominent corner on Broadway and 155<sup>th</sup> Street. Huntington's design and, like the former Geographical Society Building opposite, forms a strong architectural statement with rows of monumental Ionic columns supporting an entablature on all three sides. A third attic story above the roof parapet with its own copper pavilion roof reinforces the architectural importance of this building as part of this grand neoclassical composition for Audubon Terrace. The interior spaces are largely devoid of ornamental treatment and much of the plaster work that existed had been removed by previous occupants. Only the staircase located in the building's west wing features significant ornamental treatment. With no historic connection between these two buildings, there have been openings cut into the walls.