IV. LIBRARY HALL: DETAILS AND SOURCES

All four of Ricker and White’s projects seem vaguely familiar, yet not immediately identifiable. The first is a French palace-type of structure utilizing delicate embellishment (Ill. 23); the second, a scheme dominated by two awkwardly placed towers (Ill. 24); and the third building has a badly proportioned clock tower set into an

1 Comparisons serve to indicate the variety of sources readily available to the architects and artist; while not necessarily meant to identify specific antecedents, close relationships are to be noted in a number of instances.

2 The nineteenth century Strassburg University buildings (Ills. 27-28) were also based on French palace architecture. It is not unlikely that Ricker was inspired by such suitable German monuments.
unimaginative facade (Ill. 25).

The last design was the only asymmetrical silhouette offered, sketched almost exactly as eventually built (Ill. 26). White termed its style "Modern Romanesque," and said that it derived from medieval church architecture. ¹ Crediting Richardson with most successfully adapting Romanesque forms in this country, White cited several examples: Trinity Church in Boston, the Pittsburgh County Courthouse, and "the buildings erected by him for the Ames family at North Easton, Massachusetts."² Richardson's designs unquestionably provided the models for the projected library: the general configuration of the Albany City Hall (Ill. 29), and the tower of the Pittsburgh County Courthouse (Ill. 30).

The overall dimensions of Library Hall—now Altgeld Hall—are 118 by 167 feet, and the height of the tower 132 feet above ground (Ill. 4).³ A three-storied structure, the middle floor contained the main library rooms, the second was devoted to offices and seminar rooms, and the museums were installed in the basement. Fireproofing was an absolute necessity and the architects stated that they had been accomplished for the entire building: "... the structural parts are so

¹ 19th Report (1898), 138.
² Illini, Dec. 18, 1896.
³ 19th Report (1898), 138.
protected that the burning of all the inflammable material which may have accumulated therein will not endanger its stability."

In a letter dated March 9, 1896, Ricker wrote that "we consider the color effect of the exterior of the building of great importance, and desire to lay the principal emphasis upon this point."  

19th Report (1898), 138. Ricker and White were knowledgeable constructors, but they misjudged on several counts. They recommended a hot air blast system for heating: "This system is now no more expensive than any good indirect system and possesses many advantages besides affording sufficient ventilation in the large reading rooms.

Even in 1909 reforms were vigorously urged to correct the poor lighting and unhealthy conditions. "There has been complaint of the ventilation in the library ever since the building was built in 1897 and for twelve years the users of the library, not to mention those who must work in it, have suffered from impure air with consequent headaches." Annual Report of the Custodian, 1909, 3, quoted in Lucille E. Wilcox, "History of the University of Illinois Library, 1868-1897." Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Illinois, 1931.

From the time of its opening, librarians and students were not wholly satisfied, and indications are that practicing librarians might have been consulted more in its planning. Two major faults were noted: the insufficient and unsatisfactory elevator service, and the low and inadequately lighted packing room in the basement, which was the only workroom provided. Other early reports listed the absence of book lifts outside stack rooms, disregard of floor levels, and an elevator too short for any known book truck on the market. Annual Report of the Head Librarian, 1897-98, 15-16, quoted in Wilcox.

Ricker to Trustees, Mar. 9, 1806, University Architect. As evidence of the high priority placed on aesthetics, see Ricker and White's extensive correspondence with dealers of stone, University Architect.
Roughly hewn, randomly placed hard pink sandstone from the Kettle River quarry in Minnesota was used—and probably very effectively in contrast to the red tile roof—but weathering and grime have changed the color to more of a greyed-buff (Ill. 31). The richly textured stone catches light and shade and creates an animated surface, a significant element for the facade of the building which has sunlight only in the very early Spring. The stone was cut at the quarry into slabs the thickness of the ashlar courses, but the carving was done on the job, after the material was in place. Records indicate how much time was spent on the work: "cornices of front tower - 2-1/2 days work; corbel in rear stair wall - 9 hours; clustered columns in top of tower - 2 days; large mullions in main tower - 14 days."¹ Because of extensive rustication the structure appears massive, an effect

¹White, undated time sheet, University Architect. The job was still in progress and Draper wrote to the architects: "At the rate of progress now being made in taking away the debris about the library building, the work will not be finished before every one of us having anything to do with the building hears the blast of Gabriel's horn. . . . Kindly put your nerve into this matter." Draper to Ricker and White, Apr. 2, 1897.

The building was erected in less than one year: construction had begun in the summer of 1896, dedication ceremonies were held June 8, 1897, and it was occupied that September.
offset in the tower by light passing through the open spaces between mullions, and by slender clustered columns which emphasize verticality and airiness (Ill. 32).

Meant to be an imposing feature, the entranceway carving details and delicate wrought iron tracery are striking against the rough masonry (Ill. 33). The zigzag or chevron archivolt is exactly like the one at the Ames Library (Ill. 34), but the curled leaf design is similar to fragments of Jedburgh Abbey and the Toulouse Museum capital (Ill. 35). Simple windows at either side of the entrance (Ill. 37) are articulated by an interplay of deeply set arches, sawtooth molding, elegant plant forms, and rugged masonry; rhythmically curling, leafy shapes fill the frieze (Ill. 38)—their forms suggesting earlier motifs in Vézelay, St. Gilles and Vaison (Ills. 39, 40, 42). A gargoyle every bit as fearsome as Viollet-le-Duc's in Notre Dame was placed above a small doorway on the west side of the building. It is the only sculpture of its kind on campus. (Ills. 43-44)

During construction, White stated that the rotunda was the "main feature of the interior. . . ."1 (Ills. 45, 61) Just the year before, Albert F. M. Lange had written, in almost the same words, that the grand court of the Berlin Royal Polytechnikum (Ill. 46) was the "most

1Illini, Dec. 18, 1896.
imposing feature of the interior . . . one of the most beautiful courts
existing today.¹ The Royal Polytechnikum was known as the Bau-
akademie when Ricker studied there; evidently he was affected by its
architectural details, for the stained glass ceiling, colonnaded ar-
cades, portrait medallions, patterned wall designs, and mural decora-
tions were later featured in the Illinois Library.

As originally built, the University rotunda conveyed a sense of
openness and space because of the double stories extending upwards to
the elliptical ceiling, and the reading rooms which stretched out from
either side; a skylight suspended over the opalescent domed stained
glass ceiling reinforced the airy effect by allowing natural and artifi-
cial light into the delivery room below. However, the original plan-
ners did not envision the overcrowding and congestion that necessitated
four additions (Ills. 120-121) and finally another "new" library in 1926.

When the most recent unit was added (Ill. 122), the east reading room
was closed off from the rotunda by walling in the spaces between two
rows of columns, and thus creating a corridor (Ill. 48).²

¹Albert F. M. Lange, "The Royal Polytechnikum at Berlin and
Student Life in Germany," Architectural Record, V (July-Sept., 1895),
72.

²When the east addition was built in 1956, the University had to
have the Minnesota quarry reopened in order to match the sandstone to
the original. Information obtained from E. L. Stouffer, in an inter-
view Dec., 1953.
Structural decorations were detailed by the architects, as in an elevation (Ill. 47) which specified "three different designs in plaster capitals for the first floor, and set alternately." (Text, Ill. 47)

Desirous of maintaining the Romanesque idiom throughout the building, they were apparently stimulated by sourcebooks lavishly illustrated with both authentic and modern versions of the style: the base of a rotunda column recalls similar treatment in Gelnhausen (Ills. 49-50), and painted decorations on the intrados are analogous to those in another German church, St. Michael's in Hildesheim (Ills. 52-53).

Individual elements of the Illinois capital (Ill. 52)—foliage, intertwined bands, abacus pattern—very nearly duplicate those features in a prototype in St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice (Ill. 51), but the nineteenth-century copy reflects the decorative spirit of its time: contours bulge and swell, and feathery flowing shapes swirl in a manner just hinting at Art Nouveau influence.

Newton A. Wells designed and executed the painted decorations; all but the "fresco work" had been completed in four months. 1

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1 20th Report (1900), 260. Wells began his library decorations Aug. 5, 1897! and the four large murals in the rotunda lunettes were unveiled Mar. 13, 1900. See Appendix D for more on the commission and his techniques.
Stenciling patterns to a wall or coloring plaster capitals would seem a less than prestigious undertaking, but at that time, fine craftsmanship was held in esteem and the artist apparently regarded his tedious labors as intrinsically valuable and dignified. \(^1\) The long-established European tradition of integrating frescoes, mosaics and painted decorations into the architectural design of public buildings was gaining popularity, and the artists who mastered these new techniques were achieving status. In 1896, Kenyon Cox observed that Americans were returning to the idea that "the highest aim of art is to make some useful thing beautiful...[and the] highest aim of the painter will be to beautify the walls of the temples and palaces of the people, so that the highest name he will give himself will be that of 'decorator.'" \(^2\)

Stylized organic forms predominated in Wells' designs, formulated by combining Romanesque motifs with contemporary adaptations (Ills. 55-56, 59-60), or by closely following earlier models only; featured were the spiraling, extravagantly shaped floral decorations above the arches (Ill. 54), the fleur-de-lis patterns originally applied

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\(^1\) Art masterpieces were recognized, stated one writer, "because the artists who made them were consumate craftsmen, splendidly gifted and perfectly trained in every detail of practice." A. Lys Baldry, Modern Mural Painters (London, 1902), 9.

to second floor walls\(^1\) (Ill. 61), and the meticulously painted simulated mosaics in the vestibule (IlIs. 57-58). Cognizant of the importance of color, the artist told an audience that its uses could make "your houses warm, sumptuous and inviting; your churches inspiring, stately and religious; your theatres gay and magnificent; your libraries reposeful, dignified and studious."\(^2\)

To achieve that ideal atmosphere, Wells painted architectural details mainly in pallid green, dark red, and muted (or faded) blue;\(^3\) and for the floral decorations he added dulled pink, and more intense greens and blues to his palette. Virtually every capital, arch, frieze, wall and medallion was embellished with copious applications of gold—an abundance planned by Wells even before he received the commission:

All gilding to be the best gold bronze laid with a medium called 'artificial pear oil.'\(^1\) It is a very volatile substance and leaves the metal with a luster equal to that of gold leaf, nor does the metal tarnish or blacken afterward. If this were not used, I should employ water color gold, that is, the same quality bronze laid with water color fresco. With the new medium I can gild upon a flatted oil surface, which cannot be done with gum... 

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\(^1\) Green paint (the anemic variety common to twentieth-century institutions) obliterates all traces of the original wallpaper-like designs.

\(^2\) Champaign County News, Mar. 17, 1900.

\(^3\) It is difficult to ascertain what the colors were like when first applied, for effects of dirt, atmosphere and spotty retouching are evident.
I have made such a free use of gold because it is not only one of the characteristics of the Romanesque ornamentation, but because the style becomes heavy without it. What I have tried to do in the entrance and rotunda is to produce an effect of extreme richness and dignity. The character of the lighting is such that, no matter where one stands in the rotunda, there will be some portion of the gilding that reflects the light from above.

At President Draper's suggestion, medallion portraits of "America's greatest soldiers, statesmen and scholars" were placed in a frieze extending around the first floor of the rotunda (Ill. 61). Conceived in classical style--Roman in this instance--they represent: Hamilton, Fulton, Irving, Mann, Lincoln, Grant, Bryant, Agassiz, Hawthorne, Bancroft, Hudson, Bradford, Washington, Franklin, and Stuart. Imitating ancient coins, bleached, yellow-ochre tones were used to define the facial contours of each subject, and for background, Wells applied the ubiquitous golden hue--now tarnished and dull.

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1 Wells to Ricker and White, c. May 14, 1897, University Architect. Dates for several of Wells' letters and sketches were deduced from related materials.

2 Champaign County News, Mar. 17, 1900.