



## *James Monroe Hewlett:* Architect, Muralist, Designer

*A granddaughter's reconstruction of his life and work.* | Anglesea Parkhurst Newman

Ever since I was a child I had heard tales of the world in which my mother, Hope Hewlett, and her siblings grew up. Their early lives were profoundly affected by the deep involvement in the social and artistic doings in New York City, its environs and beyond, of my grandfather James Monroe Hewlett. My mother and her twin sister, Hester, were the eighth and ninth of his ten children. The Hewletts were an old Long Island family. Monroe, as he preferred to be called, was born at Rock Hall in the town of Lawrence on August 1, 1867. That house, built in 1768 by Josiah Martin, is now a museum. In 1894, Monroe married Anna Willets of Brooklyn.

The Hewletts wintered at 77 Columbia Heights in Brooklyn and moved to Lawrence in the summer. For his growing family Monroe designed and had built a large brick and frame house on Rock Hall

property. Monroe's sister, Louise Hewlett Patterson, eventually lived in that house, which was called Martin's Lane, until her death in 1967. I am fortunate to have experienced the easy comfort of the house and its beautiful vistas across the marshes to the Atlantic Ocean.

In the company of my mother and her sisters and brothers and various aunts and uncles who gathered at this wonderful old house, I was privy to their reminiscences about the marvelous events and people they had met. In particular, there were lively stories about the fabulous Beaux-Arts Balls celebrating art and creativity that for many years were held at the Astor Hotel. Each ball had a theme such as "The Arabian Nights," "The Ball of the Gods," and "The Venetian Ball." Monroe created designs for many of the balls. Participants were drawn from the Junior League, and the Hewlett children joined in the festivities when they became old enough. Many of the



**Previous page:** Watercolor by J. M. Hewlett, identified as “Duchy” (location unknown), dated July 25, 1938.

**Above:** Drawing of J. M. Hewlett by Tony Sarg, 1931.

famous artists and architects of the time were involved. I have articles from various newspapers published between 1915 and 1940 describing in detail these balls, which were a high point of the winter social season.

I also have a book titled *The Beaux-Arts Boys on the Boulevards or the Invasion of Paris in 1931*. It is a memento of a voyage to Paris taken by former students of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. They chartered a steamship and named it *American Architect*. As an excuse for their adventure, they decided to donate a flagpole for the Beaux-Arts building. Among the 51 passengers were the celebrated illustrator N.C. Wyeth; the architects Kenneth Murchison and Arthur Ware; and William Van Alen, best known for his work in designing New York’s Chrysler Building. The puppeteer and illustrator Tony Sarg created a little cartoon sketch of every one of them, including James Monroe Hewlett. During the nine-day voyage they sang songs, wrote poems and painted on the walls. It was a jolly group. This was the company Monroe kept.

The term “polymath” has been used to describe Monroe. Architect, muralist, set designer, decorative artist, creator of pag-

eants, and, on occasion, art class instructor—he was all of these and more. He wrote articles for newspapers and magazines, and was free with his critiques of art and architecture. He even gave a radio speech from Rome as the director of the American Academy there from 1932 to 1935.

Monroe studied architecture at the Columbia School of Mines under Professor William Robert Ware, the founder of the Columbia School of Architecture, which began as a department of the School of Mines. Following his graduation in 1890, he spent several years in Paris studying at the École des Beaux-Arts and the atelier of Pierre Victor Galland, the decorative painter. He began his career as a draftsman and apprentice in the offices of McKim, Mead and White. In 1895 he founded, with Austin Lord and Washington Hull, the firm of Lord, Hewlett and Hull. Between 1901 and 1910 this firm was involved in the building of a 121-room mansion (147 according to one account) on Fifth Avenue for Montana’s Senator William A. Clark. The house was much maligned for its opulence and has since been torn down. Some of the indisputably tasteful mansions designed by the firm are described in two books: *New Jersey Country Houses, The Somerset Hills*, by John K. Turpin and W. Barry Thomson, and *Long Island Country Houses and Their Architects, 1860-1940*, by Robert B. Mackay, Anthony K. Baker and Carol A. Traynor.

The firm also designed buildings for the Somerset Hills Club and the Rockaway Hunting Club, as well as many public buildings of note for other institutions, such as the Brooklyn Masonic Temple, The Brooklyn Hospital, St. Jude’s Hospital in Brooklyn, the Smith College Libraries, the Westchester County Courthouse, and New York’s Second Battalion Armory. The firm was highly praised in a November 1909 article in *The New York Times* for its design of a new facade for the Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York when the church was at 44th Street and Fifth Avenue. In collaboration with various sculptors, the firm also designed memorials, among them the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Memorial in Philadelphia (a pair of pylons flanking the Benjamin Franklin Parkway) and the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial at the entrance to Albany’s Washington Park (also known as the Veterans Monument).

It turns out, however, that architecture was not Monroe’s first love. In a 1924 article by John Kimberly Mumford (“Who’s Who in New York...No. 41”) he is quoted as saying he took up architecture as the only artistic endeavor regarded as respectable at the time: “If I’d followed my inclinations I should have gone in definitely for decorative painting.” Even though Lord and Hewlett shared credit as architects with Pell and Corbett for the design of the Brooklyn Masonic Temple, I am inclined to think it was Monroe who was able to employ his color sense in designing the facade of this building. An early experiment in polychromy, it was a sophisticated example of the way that the colors of marble, brick and terra cotta can be used, and elicited high praise in the July 15, 1909, issue of *Architecture*: “The color of the brick is delightful, the method of using terra cotta in the columns, the capital, the belt courses, is the

COURTESY OF MRS. ANGEISEA PARKHURST NEWMAN

best of modern times; one is tempted to say the best of all time.”

The Mumford article was particularly written in praise of Monroe as a model Digressionist. The Digressionists, founded by Monroe and fellow architects Grosvenor Atterbury and Charles Ewing in 1906, consisted of a group of well-known architects and artists whose mission was to create something artistic outside of their usual purview, to be unveiled and evaluated at their annual convocation. The winner, chosen by three judges, was presented with a medallion engraved with the Digressionists’ symbol, a flying fish, and an image of the Acropolis beneath curling waves. Mumford’s premise was that since Monroe had served as president both of the Architectural League of New York, between 1919 and 1921, and later, from 1921 to 1926, of the Society of Mural Painters, he was the epitome of a Digressionist. (I have a little book that was published as a memento of the society’s 1912 dinner and awards. Designed by various artists, each page is an artistic gem. The dinner took place at the Fine Arts Building, and the judges were the portrait painter Douglas Volk, the sculptor Charles Keck, and the landscape painter Ben Foster.)

An article by Francis S. Swales, “Draftsmanship and Architecture as Exemplified by the Work of J. Monroe Hewlett” (*Pencil Point*, March 1928), describes what the author considered to be the beginning of mural painting as a regular profession: “Upon Mr. Hewlett’s return from Paris he found Mr. McKim working away at the difficult task of trying to get the spirit of mural decoration into the system of the painters engaged upon the World’s Fair Buildings at Chicago.” The Fair, a visionary feat with many “firsts,” opened in 1893. It took almost 20 years for Monroe to start painting murals as a business proposition. He had a studio at 163 Clymer Street in Brooklyn, and was often assisted by either Charles Gulbrandson or Charles Basing and Arthur T. Hewlett, one of his brothers.

Many examples of Monroe’s murals are to be found in New York City and environs. They are reminiscent of illustrations in the style of N. C. Wyeth. The former Bank of New York and Trust Company building at 48 Wall Street, which now houses the Museum of American Finance and is part of the New York Heritage Trail, has eight murals, painted in 1929, on the walls of what had been the main banking room. Their theme is the commercial and industrial development of New York. The National Newark Building, which originally housed the National Newark and Essex Bank, has ten murals. Done in 1930, they depict manufacturing in New Jersey. Around 1927, Monroe returned to the Brooklyn Masonic Temple and painted huge murals symbolizing the development of Freemasonry on the walls of the four meeting rooms, which were described in the June 1927 issue of *The American Magazine of Art*. Unfortunately, they have sustained serious water damage.

It is not easy to gain access to some of the locations of Monroe’s murals. I was fortunate to be allowed into the Rotunda of the Bronx County Courthouse, which is normally off-limits to the



Above: *Campidoglio—Noon* (1935), 65” x 44”. Mixed media on canvas. One of four “Fragments of Rome” shown on the 300th anniversary of the settlement of Long Island.

general public. On its walls are four of his murals, executed in 1934, depicting historical moments in the Bronx. An article in the September 2, 1974, issue of *The New York Times* deals with the restoration of these murals. Evidently, they were painted under the auspices of the Works Project Administration’s Federal Arts Project, and the artists were paid \$20 a week. Since each mural was 15 by 36 feet, they must have kept the artists busy for a long time.

The beautiful Sky Mural at Grand Central Station, which opened in January 1913, has been credited variously to the firm of Hewlett and Basing and to the French portraitist Paul-César Helleu. Many articles that appeared at the time give credit to Hewlett and Basing. And, of course, there is family lore, according to which my grandfather was the creator of the great mural. The older folks, one would think, should have known, since they were there. The likeliest attribution is that provided by John Belle and Maxinne Rhea Leighton in *Grand Central: Gateway to a Million Lives*, published in 2000. They say the design on the ceiling was conceived by Helleu and created by J. Monroe Hewlett and Charles Basing.





Monroe also designed murals outside of New York City. Among his many projects were murals for the Providence National Bank in 1930, for Willard Straight Hall at Cornell in 1924, for the Rockland County Courthouse, and for the Elihu Root Auditorium at the Carnegie Institution of Washington, DC. There are stunning designs by Monroe on the ceiling of the entrance corridor of the Carnegie Mellon University of Fine Arts (formerly the Carnegie Institute of Technology) in Pittsburgh, at the end of which is a painting of his friend Henry Hornbostel's New York Connecting Bridge at Hell Gate. (Hornbostel won the design competition for the Pitt campus in 1909.) Monroe must have painted another version of the Hell Gate Bridge for Hornbostel, which was donated to the Museum of the City of New York by Hornbostel's sons Caleb and Lloyd. Monroe also designed the drop curtain and the mural panels at Carnegie Mellon University's Kresge Theater. All of this is described and illustrated in Walter Kidney's 2002 book *Henry Hornbostel: An Architect's Master Touch*. (One of Monroe's brothers, Charles Russell Hewlett, was serving as the first dean of the department of fine arts at the Carnegie Institute when he died there in 1913 at the age of 41.)

Fewer tangible reminders remain of Monroe's designs for pageants and theatrical productions. His work on pageants was not limited to the Beaux-Arts Balls. According to his obituary in the October 20, 1941, *Nassau Daily Star-Review*, "When the United States entered the World war, Mr. Hewlett was asked to work with other artists on designs for spectacular scenes amid which delegations from foreign nations were to be greeted in New York city. The most celebrated result of this collaboration was Avenue of the Allies, on Fifth avenue, reaching from Madison square to 59th street." This celebration occurred in May 1917, but the flag display was used several times during the war to support Liberty Loan Drives. Many are familiar with its depiction by the artist Childe Hassam, featuring the colorful flags of many nations flying on Fifth Avenue.

In 1923, the American Institute of Architects awarded Henry Bacon the AIA Gold Medal Award for his design of the Lincoln Memorial. Monroe, together with the architect Howard Greenley, designed the huge pageant, which took place around the reflecting

pool in front of the memorial. My mother remembered participating in that elaborate ceremony in Washington, D.C. Probably all the Hewlett children were enlisted to take part. In 1970, the Gold Medal was awarded to Monroe's son-in-law and fellow polymath, Buckminster Fuller, who was married to his oldest child, Anne.

And then there were set designs. Monroe first created set designs for Maude Adams, arguably the most popular actress of her day, best known for her performance as Peter Pan. According to Francis S. Swales, Hewlett's architectural work took precedence until 1910, "but an opportunity arrived when Frohman staged Maude Adams in *Chanticleer*. Through the good-will of the painter John W. Alexander, then president of the National Academy of Design, Hewlett was brought into designing the scenery which he then painted on gauze." (Charles Frohman was a famous producer and theater owner.) Monroe, Charles Basing and Arthur T. Hewlett were called on again to do the sets for Frohman's 1912 production of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*. Monroe is quoted by John Kimberly Mumford as having said, "I have always felt that scenery offered the ideal opportunity for an architect to do his experimenting." Maude Adams gave him the opportunity to test his theories. She also spent many hours in the design studio wrestling with staging problems. The scenery in *Chantecler* (as Edmond Rostand's play was properly titled), pictures of which I found at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, is enchanting. All the actors, costumed as farmyard creatures, are proportionate to huge tree trunks and fences, and Miss Adams, portraying a rooster in the title role, is covered in beautiful plumage.

Monroe and Charles Basing designed both the scenery and costumes for the 1916 production at the Metropolitan Opera of *Iphigenie en Tauride*. It seems that Otto Kahn, the financier and patron of the arts, was so impressed by the scenery for a Beaux-Arts Ball, that he wondered why the opera house couldn't utilize that sort of thing. According to Mumford, the architect Christopher Grant LaFarge replied, "Well why don't you?" And he did. It was not until 2008 that the Met presented *Iphigenie* again.

Sometimes one gets really lucky in research, and stumbles across the unexpected. While waiting for some information at the Library for the Performing Arts, I spied a book on set design. Leafing through it casually, I discovered that in 1920 Monroe had designed the scenery for Eugene O'Neill's first published full-length play, *Beyond the Horizon*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for drama. There was never any mention of this among the family or any reference to it in family archives. The sets are out of character with everything else Monroe ever did—not monumental like his murals or grand like those for *Iphigenie*, not whimsical like the Adams plays, and certainly not pretty. The play was called a true American tragedy, and the sets were appropriate to the subject.

In early 1932, Monroe was appointed resident director of the American Academy in Rome. The appointment can only be viewed



**Above:** Wall treatment created for a bedroom by J. M. Hewlett. Featured in *Good Furniture Magazine*, March 1922.

**Opposite:** *American Academy in Rome, May 16, 1933.* J. M. Hewlett appears in profile, center, wearing a morning suit. To his left is King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy.

as a testament to the high esteem in which he was held by his fellow artists. Again, it was the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 that provided the impetus for the creation of a forum in which artists in many fields could collaborate. As Lucia and Alan Valentine put it in *The American Academy in Rome 1894-1969*, at the Fair, "A Renaissance tour de force was being re-created as architect, painter, sculptor, landscaper, and builder wrought together in the classical manner." And, "No one was more profoundly affected than Charles McKim." McKim's vision was a school for American artists in Rome that would become as coveted a place as the well-established French Academy in Rome. In 1894, Austin Lord, Monroe's partner, became its first director. Its beginning was shaky, with finances a major distraction, but by 1932 the Academy was a highly respected—and seemingly solvent—institution. Monroe was offered a very respectable salary of \$7500 and an annual allowance of \$500 for entertaining. Indeed, entertaining was a major function of the director. I have pictures of Monroe showing King Victor Emmanuel III and Benito Mussolini around the Academy. The ample salary is important to note—because soon it became not enough.

The archives of the American Academy are housed, on microfiche, at the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. There I perused and copied every letter that referred to Monroe. By the early 1930s, because of the Depression, the Academy was in deep trouble. And so was Monroe. After his wife, Anna, died, he had married Estelle Rogers. At first they occupied the lovely Villa Aurelia. Then the dollar became deeply depressed against the lira. Dollar-based operating expenses went up and salaries were soon halved. Cost-cutting measures were instituted. Villa Aurelia was closed and the Hewletts moved to Villa Bellaci on the Academy grounds. Driving and travel had to be curtailed when the cost of gas became prohibitive. To make matters worse, some patrons who had subsidized the students and fellows withdrew their support. Monroe was chastised for borrowing money from an Academy fund—although permissible, it was deemed improper. The Valentines' cryptic summary of the Hewletts' brief sojourn in Italy

sheds little light on the immediate circumstances of their departure: "In 1932 he began his appointment as director of the American Academy in Rome, but for reasons not wholly clear, he left in 1934 on leave from its trustees, on the agreement that he would not return to the Academy." Certainly there were trustees who would have ousted him, among them Colonel George B. McClellan, son of the Civil War general and former mayor of New York, whose letters on the subject are downright nasty. Most of the members whose letters I read were sympathetic. Fortuitously, an aunt of Estelle's died, leaving her money. The overdraft was paid and Monroe was still at the academy to hand over the directorship to Chester Aldrich in 1935. Despite its auspicious beginnings, Monroe's tenure as director of the American Academy proved to be a difficult time, hardly a fitting conclusion to his career.

By the time Monroe returned from Italy in 1935, he was 67. He may have chosen to retire, or at least to curtail his activities. Between the fall of 1935 and Monroe's death in October 1941, he doesn't appear to have accomplished much work either in architecture or in mural painting. As far as I can determine, only the murals for the 400-seat auditorium at the Carnegie Institution in Washington, designed by Delano and Aldrich, were completed after his return, in 1938. Rendered in Monroe's signature style, they depict a group of heroic figures—astronomers, geographers, and explorers—typifying the researchers of the institution. And, also in 1938, he designed at least one more Beaux-Arts Ball. Held at the institute's East 44th Street building, it was a much reduced affair, a pale reflection of the galas at the Astor that J. Monroe Hewlett had created in its—and his—glory days. 