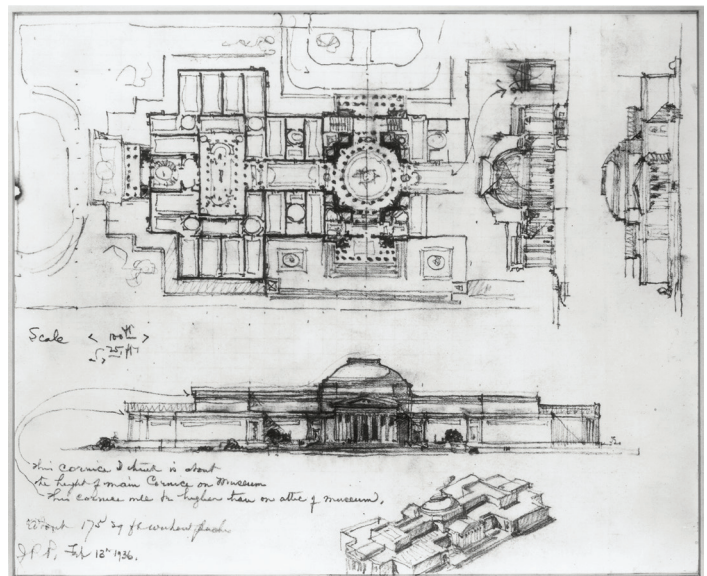


JOHN RUSSELL POPE

Born in New York City, John Russell Pope (1874–1937) was the son of artistic parents. His father was a successful portrait painter and his mother a landscape painter and piano teacher. Although he had originally intended to study medicine, Pope enrolled as an architecture student at Columbia College (later Columbia University) in New York, where he also studied design and archaeology. A prize-winning student, he continued his education at the American Academy in Rome and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He spent five years abroad (1895–1900), studying the architecture and design of the past and executing meticulous, measured drawings of ancient, medieval, and Renaissance examples. Three years after his return to New York, he established his own firm.

One of his early successes was the Temple of the Scottish Rite of Freemasons, 1910–1915, in Washington, DC. Fashioned after one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, the temple incorporated elements symbolic of the Scottish rite, such as Ionic columns 33 feet high representing the 33rd degree of Masonry.

Following this, he was invited to submit designs for the Lincoln Memorial, and his spectacular designs, although not executed, attracted wide notice. Other large commissions in Washington soon followed. Given Pope's abilities in and enthusiasm for classical architecture, it was fitting that he should create monuments for the capital city, including Constitution Hall, the American Pharmaceutical Institute, the National Archives, and the Jefferson Memorial. He also made a contribution to the appearance of federal Washington as a member of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts from 1917 to 1922. He was a member of the Board of Architectural Consultants, which advised Andrew Mellon, then Secretary of the Treasury, in planning the Federal Triangle. This was one of the largest government building projects in U.S. history and is now being reevaluated for its dignity and elegance of detailing.



John Russell Pope, Early Sketch for the West Building, 1936, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gallery Archives

Pope's success in creating designs for both gracious residences and imposing public buildings led to another type of commission: art museums. British art dealer Sir Joseph Duveen commissioned Pope to design new additions to the Tate Gallery and the British Museum in London. When Pope completed the Tate project, King George VI acclaimed the new wing "the finest sculpture gallery in the world."

Pope's contribution to museum design expanded to include American commissions as well. He converted the New York mansion of industrialist Henry Clay Frick into a public art gallery, designed the Baltimore Museum of Art, and designed a Gothic-style armor hall for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Pope's vision of a medieval castle to house the Metropolitan's collections of medieval art (now exhibited at the Cloisters) was never realized.

The culmination of his career as a museum architect, however, was his design for the National Gallery of Art, an institution established by Congress in March 1937. The National Gallery's founder, Andrew Mellon, selected Pope for the project.

Pope's design for the National Gallery of Art was in the form of an elongated "H" with a domed rotunda, supported by a ring of 36-foot columns modeled on the Pantheon in Rome. He studied the possibility of a barrel vault instead of a dome at the center, but this option was rejected. The galleries, extending from the rotunda, were designed to complement the collections they were to house, and peaceful garden courts were planned as areas for rest and contemplation. Phantasia Rose Marble from Tennessee was chosen as the material to face the building. The completed building was one of the largest marble structures in the world. Behind the marble surface were a steel structure and sophisticated systems for lighting and for temperature and humidity control.

Running his office like an atelier—with himself as the design master—Pope relied on his design assistant Otto Eggers to transform his rough sketches into completed drawings. Inspired by both the recent and the distant past, Pope experimented with a number of styles, including Georgian and Tudor, in his residential commissions. Sophisticated homes for wealthy clients became a Pope specialty, and a number of Newport and Long Island summer houses owe their designs to his genius.

The eclecticism of Pope's styles was attributed by one critic in 1911 to "a lively human sympathy—a conscious attempt to make the houses an appropriate background for the lives of their owners." One such house was the residence of Henry White, an American ambassador to France. Later it was the home of Agnes and Eugene Meyer, publisher of the *Washington Post*. Completed in 1910, the building was set high on Meridian Hill, overlooking Washington, DC. Reminiscent of the mansions of Georgian England, it was named in 1914 one of the "two finest houses in America." Interestingly, the other house was also designed by Pope.

A tribute to Pope's genius and modern technology, the construction of the National Gallery was completed after the deaths of its creators. Both Mellon and Pope died in August 1937. Nevertheless, at the time of their deaths, the basic plan for the building was complete. The National Gallery of Art was dedicated on March 17, 1941.