

April 14, 2000

Ms. Peg Breen
New York Landmarks Conservancy
141 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

Dear Ms. Breen:

On May 2 New York City will—for the second time in five years—accept proposals for 2 Columbus Circle, the former Gallery of Modern Art.

The Dahesh Museum is as committed as it was in 1996 to acquire the building and return it to its original—and we believe best—use. We think we are in a stronger position than before to succeed in our goal, but we need your help.

The building was designed for art, and is itself a prime example of American modernist architecture. Its size and amenities—galleries, auditorium, public and office spaces, storage and art handling areas—are precisely what the Dahesh Museum needs to make its unique and exceptional collection of 19th-century European art more accessible to the public and to expand its art education programs.

In the last five years, the Dahesh Museum has proved itself in a modest space on Fifth Avenue. We have organized exhibitions that have traveled nationally and internationally and have collaborated with museums on both sides of the Atlantic. Our school programs have reached into the City's schools at all levels—where the need for art education is most acute—and have brought students from the outer boroughs to programs in our galleries.

We ask you to write a letter of support for the Museum. It would be particularly helpful if your letter were to mention one or more of the following:

- the contribution of museums and cultural tourism to the City's economy,
- the role the Dahesh Museum plays in enhancing art education in the City's schools,
 - the pivotal place the Museum will occupy as a daytime public attraction in the West Side's growing cultural district,
 - the unique nature and quality of the Dahesh Museum's collection,
 - the contributions to scholarship made by its exhibition program,
 - the significance of the Edward Durell Stone building,
 - the need to preserve what's left of the character and scale of Columbus Circle,
 - the importance of art and museums to the quality of the City's life.

Your endorsement for our proposal to revitalize 2 Columbus Circle as an international, world-class museum could well be a determining factor in ensuring its vital role in the public and cultural life of New York City.

Our proposal is due on May 2nd and we would like very much to include your letter with that submission. You may send your letter to the Mayor in care of the Museum or directly to the Mayor – in which case we would like to have a copy to include in the proposal. Either way, we know it will help, and we thank you for your commitment to our goal.

Yours very truly,



J. David Farmer
Director



Mervat Zahid
Chairman of the Board

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DAHESH MUSEUM SEEKS TO REVIVE MUSEUM BUILDING

Museum devoted to 19th-century European art will bring a vital cultural resource to Columbus Circle

The proposed move of the Dahesh Museum to Two Columbus Circle—a distinctive site at the gateway between the Upper West Side and midtown Manhattan, and one designed for the exhibition of fine art—would redefine the Dahesh Museum, Columbus Circle and New York's cultural life as a whole.

First opened to the public in 1995, the Dahesh Museum is the only museum in the United States devoted entirely to collecting, preserving and interpreting European academic art of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The museum's goal is to introduce the extraordinary diversity of 19th-century works produced by artists rigorously trained in academies throughout Europe to a public largely unfamiliar with this influential period in art history. The museum currently occupies two and a half floors of an office building at Fifth Avenue and 48th Street, where it has only 1,800 square feet of exhibition space and too little room for offices and other support facilities.

With a move to Two Columbus Circle, the museum's collection of more than 3,000 paintings, sculptures, works of art on paper and objects from the 19th and early 20th centuries—the largest concentration of academic art in America—will be truly accessible to New Yorkers. MaryAnne Stevens, chief curator of London's Royal Academy of Arts, says that the move to Two Columbus Circle would "guarantee that the Dahesh Museum fulfill its tasks as an institution dedicated to making accessible to the public this particular period of art history." School children—the future museum audience and cultural leaders—will be able to learn about a major art movement, its historical context and how art was and is traditionally made. The Dahesh Museum will become a major institution for the study and appreciation of European academic art, a much-needed resource that does not currently exist in the U.S.

The expanded museum, able at last to display its internationally renowned permanent collection, will also be a destination for art lovers and scholars from around the globe. Says DeCourcy E. Macintosh, executive director of Pittsburgh's Frick Art and Historical Center, "All that needs to happen now is for the Dahesh Museum to relocate itself to more visible quarters—and the rest of the world will flock to your doors." The presence of an active cultural institution at Columbus Circle will generate considerable economic activity in the immediate neighborhood, including increased traffic at restaurants and shops.

Just as important for New Yorkers, establishing the Dahesh Museum at Two Columbus Circle would focus that important hub of Manhattan around a cultural institution open to the public, enriching the community's quality of life. As City University of New York art history

professor William H. Gerds observes, "Given the extraordinary revitalization of the Lincoln Center area, this institution would provide a cultural anchor that would only enhance the property and social values of the entire Columbus Circle region." The museum would be an important link in the cultural corridor between Lincoln Center, the Broadway entertainment area and the museum cluster on 52d and 53d Streets.

Two Columbus Circle was in fact built by A&P heir Huntington Hartford as a museum, the Gallery of Modern Art. Opened in 1964, it was designed to display representational, academic works—precisely the same genres of art that the Dahesh Museum will bring to the site. "Paris has the Musée d'Orsay to provide a huge forum for the display and study of this aspect of art," notes New York University fine arts professor Robert Rosenblum, "but there is nothing comparable in New York."

The building now has an opportunity to once again take its place among New York's constellation of museum gems. Architect Edward Durell Stone created a structure that takes advantage of its unusually shaped site and is ideally scaled to its surroundings. Like all museum buildings, it has functional and aesthetic features specifically geared for its public purpose. Moreover, Two Columbus Circle is a precious rarity: constructed during the peak of the modernist era, it forcefully rejected the glass-and-steel functionalism of the time in favor of a historically influenced design. "The building is without question a landmark," says Yale School of Architecture dean Robert A.M. Stern. "It is an important, thoughtful, and carefully articulated design." The museum's interiors are no less distinguished than its Venetian-style marble façade: among its elegant appointments are walnut paneling, Versailles-style parquet floors, and brass trim.

The Dahesh Museum will preserve the building's unique structure and will benefit from its design. Two Columbus Circle contains 35,000 square feet of usable space, which will allow the museum to display works from its permanent collection, now entirely in storage, and expand its ambitious programming and educational activities, which include gallery talks, symposia, concerts and collaborations with schools.

The Dahesh Museum is a young institution with a long history. Chartered by the State of New York in 1986, its roots go back many decades, to the foundation of a private collection. Taking the name Dr. Dahesh, the Lebanese writer and philosopher Salim Moussa Achi (1909-1984) collected widely, but his great passion was European academic art of the 19th and 20th centuries. Even before civil war destroyed Beirut, there was no place to see Western art there, and it was Dr. Dahesh's ambition to establish an institution to enrich his city's cultural life. At the height of the war, his plans and collection were brought to the United States.

Under the guidance of its trustees and staff, the Dahesh Museum has developed exhibitions and special programs that bring the collection and significant loans to life for the public. Shows have looked at the 19th century's rediscovery of ancient Greece and Rome, the artistic discovery of the Middle East and North Africa—which Europeans called the Orient—and images depicting love, rural life, and tame and wild animals. With more space, the museum will be able to offer a greatly expanded array of exhibitions and public programs.

LEADERS IN ARCHITECTURE AND ART ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESERVING TWO COLUMBUS CIRCLE

A sampling of the many letters and statements of support for the Dahesh Museum's campaign to acquire this historic building

- The building is without question a landmark... a bold attempt to synthesize a Modernist aesthetic with lessons learned from the past. It participated in the dialogue across time that I believe is the essence of architecture, and it did so at a time when this was largely looked down on by architectural theorists and practitioners alike. Directly repudiating the then still-dominant International Style, with its fetishization of functionalism and minimalism, Edward Durell Stone mined architectural history to create an unabashedly decorative building.
The winds of art and architectural fashion continue to change. Now we must take the long view regarding Stone's Gallery of Modern Art, as indeed we must towards our city's entire architectural heritage. We must not succumb to the ever-present tendency to dismiss, or even revile, the recent past. Surely we do not want to repeat the mistakes of the early Modernists who tore down so much of the decorative Victorian architecture we now highly value and rigorously preserve... From the first, Stone's building has been alternately praised, criticized, and argued about; let's make sure Two Columbus Circle is preserved for future generations of New Yorkers to enjoy, consider, debate and learn from. --*Robert A.M. Stern, Dean, Yale School of Architecture*
- The Dahesh Museum would offer a valuable return to the building's original function, particularly interesting considering the nature of the art to be shown. It would exhibit works, largely from the nineteenth century, that are infrequently displayed in other New York museums. The struggles over tradition, style and form during and since that time are intense, and there is a great deal at stake culturally. I as an artist would not be in sympathy with most of the art that the Dahesh Museum would exhibit, but it is for precisely that reason that I support its acquisition of the building. --*Leon Golub, artist*
- The proposal to lodge the Dahesh Museum in Two Columbus Circle is wonderfully imaginative but also, in fact, the most logical resolution for that structure's use. The building strikes an agreeably surprising and graceful note in Columbus Circle, and it particularly suited the purposes to which Huntington Hartford and later the New York Cultural Center put it, namely the exhibition of "difficult" academic art— much the same types of paintings that to which the Dahesh's energies are devoted and in which no other New York institution has shown sufficient interest. --*James David Draper, Henry Kravis Curator of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, Metropolitan Museum of Art*
- As the dust of revisionist thinking on art has settled down and nearly every 19th century artist seems to have his own monograph, the lasting value of the Huntington

Hartford Museum and its truly international influence is all the more apparent. Few of us have been inside and know the true charm of that place, moving from landing to landing with all that beautiful wood! The Dahesh's collections seem perfectly matched to those spaces, and indeed the artistic tradition that still haunts them. --*Joseph J. Rishel, Curator of European Painting and Sculpture, Philadelphia Museum of Art*

- The once-forgotten art of the 19th century is being reexamined by new generations of art historians and museum-goers. Paris has the Musée d'Orsay to provide a huge forum for the display and study of this art, but there is nothing comparable in New York.

Relocating the Dahesh Museum to Columbus Circle--in the very building where the Huntington Hartford Museum provided the New York art public its first opportunity to reconsider the 19th century in terms of the masters buried by modernism--is a perfect answer to many prayers. --*Robert Rosenblum, Professor of Fine Arts, New York University, and Curator, Guggenheim Museum*

- I strongly believe that the building, intended as a museum, would best be used if it reverted to its original purpose, and the Dahesh Museum would be an ideal occupant in size, vitality and mission. --*Constance Lowenthal, Executive Director, Committee for Art Recovery, World Jewish Congress*
- Two Columbus Circle is an important location that has been associated with cultural uses since its opening as the Gallery of Modern art in 1964. Indeed, the location provides an anchor for a cultural and educational corridor that includes the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Fordham University and several museums, including my own institution. How exciting it would be to have the Dahesh Museum here as well!... The Dahesh Museum is one of the fine, smaller cultural institutions that define the essence of the City and quality of its life. Although a young institution, the Dahesh has already established a reputation for integrity, scholarly rigor and an impressive commitment to public service. --*Gerard C. Wertkin, Director, Museum of American Folk Art*
- ... As the chief executive and thus the current custodian of New York's greatest history repository, I write today in support of maintaining Two Columbus Circle for cultural use by both New Yorkers and their visitors. I further hope that such a sustained cultural amenity can be realized through a sale to the Dahesh Museum... . It is a "win/win" opportunity of the rarest kind and one that will reinforce and extend the West Side's civic profile with a Columbus Circle gateway that greets those who appreciate New York in its glorious entirety as the world's ultimate classroom. --*Betsy Gotbaum, President, New-York Historical Society*

WHAT THE DAHESH MUSEUM WILL DO AT TWO COLUMBUS CIRCLE

Proposals for conservation and renovation

- The Dahesh Museum will preserve the existing building at Two Columbus Circle, which was constructed in 1964 by Huntington Hartford as the Gallery of Modern Art. Because the building was designed for the display of a specialized collection of academic art—exactly what the Dahesh Museum intends to bring to the site—it will remain largely as it was originally designed, with its materials and finishes preserved.
- The Dahesh Museum will perform extensive structural renovation work, including the installation of a new roof, repair and cleaning of the building's marble façade and an updated climate control system. In areas where collections will be housed and exhibited, insulated buffer partitions will supplement exterior walls to protect artworks from humidity fluctuations. These efforts will return Two Columbus Circle to a condition worthy of a first-class art museum.
- As they did in the Huntington Hartford Gallery, visitors will take an elevator to the top exhibition floor, then descend by an open stair through galleries on the floors below. The building provides about 14,000 square feet of exhibition space.
- The fifth floor will house educational programs for children, adults and students. The sixth floor will be used for storage of collections, while the seventh and eighth floors will be converted into administrative offices, a library and archival facilities.
- The ninth floor, formerly a restaurant, will be a multi-purpose space for public events. The kitchen can be reconfigured into a space for art conservation. The original 154-seat auditorium on the basement level will be a center for the museum's public programs.
- The lobby can be reconfigured to include such features as a reception desk, coat check area, coffee bar and museum shop, all consistent with the building's overall design.
- Interior detailing will be restored to its original splendor. Gallery floors will be refurbished and wood trim refinished. Walls, ceilings and painted trim will be repainted or hung with damask. Bronze balustrades along the grand staircase will be restored, and the patterned floor in the lobby will be brought back to its original condition. All lighting will be restored and upgraded to contemporary standards.
- The building can be made completely accessible to the disabled with the addition of new openings in the elevator shafts at the mezzanine landings of the gallery's grand staircase. In an effort to maximize the building's public space, these landings were designed as exhibit areas, a function that the Dahesh Museum intends to preserve. The lobby entrance will also be altered to accommodate wheelchairs.

A BUILDING DESIGNED FOR FINE ART

Two Columbus Circle was a significant part of New York's cultural landscape

The history of 2 Columbus Circle is a classic New York saga of an idiosyncratic dream turned into an inimitable feature of the cityscape. In 1956, A&P heir George Huntington Hartford II announced his intention to build a distinctive home for his art collection, and that he would do it on the most unlikely of sites: a wedge facing Columbus Circle, a tiny patch in the heart of the city. Hartford was a vocal detractor of modernist art and architecture, which at the time was remaking New York's skyline in hard-edged glass-and-steel boxes. He wanted his museum to reflect an approach to architecture that was as classic as his art holdings.

Hartford found an ally in architect Edward Durell Stone. Once a strong proponent of International Style modern architecture--in New York City, the Museum of Modern Art stands as his prime early effort--Stone came to reject its sleek forms in favor of more ornate designs that harkened back to historical influences. Chosen for the job in 1958, Stone drew on Venetian traditions, which can be seen in the colonnades encircling the structure's ground floor and arching windows on the top. The Romanesque church of St.-Germain-des-Près in Paris influenced the clusters of portholes that frame the building's unusually angled edges.

Stone conceived a tower made of poured concrete, which he explained "is a plastic material; it doesn't commit an architect to a rectangle." That was no small consideration, because each side of Hartford's Columbus Circle lot was a different length, forming a lopsided trapezoid. The need to have a large elevator to move artworks up and down, another for patrons, and then an ample staircase to conform to code severely restricted the space available for exhibitions. Stone ingeniously incorporated those obligatory elements into his design. He described the focus of his ten-story building as "a grand staircase, with the galleries serving as landings." As in the Guggenheim, visitors to the museum took an elevator to the building's top exhibition floor and made their way down through the galleries, here via the staircase. Small rooms on either side of the central areas provided the rest of the museum's hanging space.

As it neared completion, the building distinguished itself with its unusual gray-white marble-sheathed exterior, which New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable described as "a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollypops." (Nonetheless impressed, Huxtable praised Stone's creative use of the building's awkwardly shaped lot, calling it "the expert manipulation of space by an expert hand.") Those lollypops were in fact the crowns to a fanciful colonnade at street level--the arcade it forms is a surprising rarity in New York. Perhaps most strikingly, Stone's rebuke to modernism's glass towers was a nearly windowless structure--windows were limited to the lobby and penthouse archways. Hartford defended the absence of windows as a sensible way to protect delicate works of

art, and any survey of museums worldwide would note a lack of windows in art-exhibiting areas.

The museum finally opened in March 1964, after costing nearly \$10 million to build. Called "The Gallery of Modern Art Including the Huntington Hartford Collection"--the unwieldy name conceived to placate the nearby Museum of Modern Art, which feared confusion--the building held as much gallery space as MoMA originally did. Even with the structural constraints, Stone managed to make room for some of his employer's more eccentric desires: proclaiming that "a museum is really like a church," Hartford had a massive pipe organ installed, which pumped music through the galleries. In the spirit of the South Pacific-crazed early '60s, the building also contained a Polynesian-themed restaurant, the Gauguin Room, in its ninth-floor penthouse. An elegant auditorium in the basement provided a space for lectures and other events. To complement the ornate exterior, Stone outfitted the galleries with lavish decorative elements, with walnut paneling and parquet floors, brass trim, gold-and-red carpeting and leather furniture, cultivating an atmosphere of clubby refinement.

In its five years as Hartford's museum, its creator's particular taste showed through in exhibitions that ranged from its opening survey of the artist Pavel Tchelitchew to the first great American exhibition of paintings by the Pre-Raphaelites and Dwight Eisenhower's artwork. Through it all, Hartford remained committed to a central vision for his project: a home for representational art in an era that had consigned realist painting and sculpture to the margins.

The museum was costly to maintain, and its sponsor eventually looked for collaborators to help keep it running. In 1969, Fairleigh Dickinson University took over its operations, renaming it the New York Cultural Center and shifting the institution's focus to an imaginative mix of contemporary and traditional art. The center met with popular and critical acclaim but, lacking sufficient funding, closed in 1975.

The Gulf & Western Foundation purchased the building and donated it to New York City in 1980, a gift that included a renovation. It subsequently served as the home of the city's Department of Cultural Affairs. Until April 1998, the city's Convention and Visitors Bureau operated a tourist information center in the building's lobby.

In July 1996, New York City announced its decision to sell Two Columbus Circle, in addition to the Coliseum, its neighbor to the west. The city's Economic Development Corporation issued a request for proposals for the site, which permitted demolition of the building. In November 1998, the EDC announced that the city had narrowed the bidding down to two candidates: the Dahesh Museum and developer Donald Trump, who is seeking to tear down Edward Durell Stone's building and construct a luxury hotel on the site. Community opposition to the possibility of the building's demolition has been strong, prompting a December public demonstration at which residents and elected officials spoke out in favor of its preservation as an art museum.

THE MAN WHO REBUKED MODERNISM

Two Columbus Circle is a fanciful legacy from architect Edward Durell Stone

Two Columbus Circle is just one piece of the architectural legacy left to New York City by Edward Durell Stone (1902-1978), who built his reputation as a skilled practitioner of modernism. His first signature work was the original 1939 Museum of Modern Art building, which he codesigned with Phillip Goodwin. Sheathed in concrete and designed to provide open and flexible exhibit space, it defined museum design for its generation. An early American devotee of the International Style, Stone designed distinguished homes, including the Mandel House (1933) and Goodyear House (1939) in New York's suburbs. As the interior designer of Radio City Music Hall, a job he assumed in 1929 after attending architecture school at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stone expressed modernism through art deco detailing. In 1948, his Fine Arts Center opened to serve his undergraduate alma mater, the University of Arkansas. Stone's place among the modern greats seemed assured.

But Stone had doubts about the International Style. Influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright, Stone started experimenting with wood, brick and other organic materials in the 1940s. His life and career took a more dramatic turn in 1953, when he met Maria Eleana Torchio on a flight from New York to Paris. By the time the plane reached the English Channel, Stone had proposed marriage, and he later described her influence as a personal "renaissance." On their honeymoon, he sketched what would become the United States Embassy in New Delhi, a structure which Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith called "perhaps the most beautiful building ever accomplished by the government of the United States." Inspired by the geometry of Eastern design, expressed in a filigree that defined the building's outer walls under a shady arcade, the embassy foreshadowed the monumental style that would mark the rest of Stone's career.

While abroad on international commissions, Stone took time to explore architectures of southern Europe and the Middle East, influences that flourished in his subsequent work. Among his points of interest: Egyptian Queen Hatshepsut's colonnaded tomb in Thebes, the supremely ordered temple of Bacchus in Syria and the Byzantine church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, which has inspired structures as far-flung as Venice's San Marco, the Taj Mahal, and Stone's own Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (1971). The Gallery of Modern Art at Two Columbus Circle, completed in 1964, is New York's most vivid display of Stone's Mediterranean influences. Stone called the Hartford commission "romantic--a radical departure, with its arches and use of rich materials." Sheathed in gray-veined white marble, trimmed with portholes inspired by the Parisian church of St.-Germain-des-Près. The Venetian-themed design, a rebuke to the International Style that still dominated Manhattan building, was an ideal complement to the museum's collection of classic art.

Until sidelined by failing health in 1974, Stone ran a private practice in New York. His other late works include the General Motors building (1968), the State University of New York at Albany (1963), and Pepsico's headquarters (1973).