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MAS Testimony to the Landmarks Preservation Commission regarding the Proposed Designation of the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room of the New York Public Library

July 18, 2017

The Municipal Art Society of New York (MAS) strongly urges the designation of the Rose Main Reading Room and the Bill Blass Catalog Room in the New York Public Library at 42nd Street. Nearly three years ago, the designation of both these rooms was halted due to critical restoration efforts. Despite their reopening nine months ago, these unique Beaux-Arts interiors remain unprotected by the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC).

For generations, New Yorkers have flocked to the Library, a 1911 Beaux-Arts masterpiece. Part of what makes the monumental building a work of art is its completeness of vision. The architect duo, Carrère and Hastings, not only designed the grand exterior, but also every detail of the interior, down to the tables, chairs, lamps, and chandeliers. Work on the ornate interior, featuring white marble arches and ionic columns, plaster coffered ceilings, and painted murals by James Wall Finn, took a total of five years to complete.

Deborah, Jonathan F.P., Samuel Priest, & Adam Raphael Rose Main Reading Room

The Main Reading Room is a marvel of architecture, one of the largest rooms in the United States without a dome, interior columns, or steel-reinforced walls to support the ceiling. Plaster rosettes and a recreation of the original billowing cloud murals by James Wall Finn adorn the length of the Beaux-Arts gilded ceiling, while marble arched bays rise up to meet it. Wooden shelves outline the perimeter and furnishings designed by Carrère and Hastings fill the hall.

Bill Blass Public Catalog Room

The lofty, airy Catalog Room sits between the designated McGraw Rotunda and the undesignated Rose Main Reading Room. Like its neighbor, the room features ornate ceilings, large bronze chandeliers, a sky mural by James Wall Finn, wooden bookcases, and great arched windows rising multiple stories.

The 1974 designation report for Astor Hall and McGraw Rotunda states, “The interior of this great building is as magnificent as its exterior.” MAS could not agree more. These unprotected spaces endure as a civic beacon of the city’s democratic dissemination of knowledge to this day. In fact, *The New York Times* architecture critic Michael Kimmelman singled out the recently restored Rose Main Reading Room as one of New York’s “most beloved public spaces” of 2016.

To secure these historic rooms for future generations, MAS urges the Commission to designate the Rose Reading Room and the Bill Blass Catalog Room as interior landmarks.