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THE WOOLWORTH BUILDING @ 100

Centennial Exhibition opens at The Skyscraper Museum on February 27

1913 was New York's *annus mirabilis* of modern structural wonders, beginning with the February opening of Grand Central Terminal. The "next big thing" was the Woolworth Building, which The Skyscraper Museum celebrates in its centennial year with an exhibition that honors its ambitions and architectural artistry. The exhibit opens to the public on February 27 and runs through July 14, 2013.

On the night of April 24, 1913, the Woolworth Building illuminated the New York night as 80,000 incandescent bulbs throughout the tower flashed on, activated when President Woodrow Wilson flipped a ceremonial switch in Washington, D.C. The brilliant spectacle was a career-crowning achievement for the tower's owner, the five-and-dime store king Frank W. Woolworth, who paid for the skyscraper with his personal fortune and took a hands-on role in every decision of its design.

Woolworth's great Gothic tower—the "Cathedral of Commerce"—became the dominant silhouette on the New York skyline and took the title of world's tallest office building. At 792 feet to the tip of its spire, the skyscraper was a marvel of early 20th-century technology and a masterpiece of the architectural arts. The exhibition examines the many dimensions of the skyscraper's novelty and the achievements of its designers and builders—from the advanced technology of its engineering and construction to the extraordinary abundance and variety of its handmade terra-cotta ornament.

Architect Cass Gilbert, who had once defined the skyscraper simply as "a machine to make the land pay," aspired to elevate his tower beyond the realm of real estate to the status of a civic monument. Tracing the ten-month evolution of Gilbert's design in original sketches, office renderings, and presentation drawings, the exhibition illustrates how the original project for a 20-story office building grew into a full-block site and stretched to 60 stories and a record height that would rule New York and the world until the city's next boom in 1929.

The construction of the Woolworth Building consumed 29 months from the foundation excavations to the final finials of its copper-roofed spire, with accents in gold leaf. The exhibition tracks the construction process, masterfully managed by the general contractor Thompson-Starrett. Items on display include blueprints, construction photographs, contracts and cost estimates, and other artifacts.

A major section of the show focuses on the design, artistic production, and installation of the tower's extraordinary terra-cotta ornament, manufactured by the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company of Tottenville, Staten Island and Perth Amboy, New Jersey. The tower's steel skeleton was covered in more than 15 million lbs. (7,500 tons) of cream-colored glazed terra cotta, sculpted in an array of Gothic buttresses, tracery, finials, and gargoyles. At the upper floors, polychrome accents in bright blues, light green, and golden hues gave the ornament a painterly depth, though the overall effect of the off-white façade suggested a structure of Old World lace. The exhibition also addresses the problems of the maintaining and conserving a tall tower of fired clay that have plagued the building's history from even before its completion and that remain a challenge today. The installation includes new replacement pieces of ornament made by the company Gladding-McBean, as well as the plaster mold in which the pieces were created.

The Woolworth Building's place in popular culture is another subject of the exhibition. Conceived in part as a giant sign on the skyline that advertised the success of the F. W. Woolworth Company and its national and international chain of stores, the tower also became a logo on many of their inexpensive products, such as the sewing needles and dominos included in the show. The image of the skyscraper also appeared on a host of souvenirs, from postcards, paperweights, and spoons, to miniature banks and building replicas. It was also an inspiration for artists, including the early American modernist John Marin, who interpreted the building as the force of kinetic energy in the cityscape.

Working as guest co-curator with Museum Director Carol Willis is Gail Fenske, author of *The Skyscraper and the City: The Woolworth Building and the Making of Modern New York* (University of Chicago Press, 2008). Susan Tunick served as a consultant on the architectural terra cotta section.

Protected as a New York City landmark since 1983, the Woolworth Building celebrates its centennial year in the process of conversion, with office space remaining below and luxury residences planned for the upper tower. Still radiant on the lower Manhattan skyline, the landmark heralds both the brilliant past and future of New York.

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