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Landmarks Preservation Commission
December 20, 1984; Designation List 173
LP-1523

SAKS FIFTH AVENUE, 611 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1922-24; architects, Starrett & Van Vleck.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1285, Lot 1.

On September 11, 1984, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Saks Fifth Avenue and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 17). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Statements were received supporting and opposing designation. A representative of Saks Fifth Avenue spoke in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Saks Fifth Avenue is one of the grand flagship department stores that turned Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan into the city's and the country's premier shopping street. Saks's move from Herald Square to Fifth Avenue at 50th Street continued the northward push of department stores along Fifth Avenue, and opened its northern stretch to further development. Designed by department store specialists Starrett & Van Vleck and built in 1922-24, Saks had to conform both to the conservative impulse to harmonize with the architectural character of Fifth Avenue, as promulgated by the Fifth Avenue Association, and to the modern requirements of an up-to-the-minute luxury department store, as well as to the new zoning law of New York which mandated upper floors to be progressively set back from the lot-line. The resulting design was a handsome, but restrained and dignified neo-Renaissance style retail palazzo, with its administrative offices occupying the less visible setback stories above the seventh floor.

Saks Fifth Avenue immediately established itself as one of New York's finest stores, and has maintained its reputation to this day, surviving as one of the remaining intact great department store buildings of Fifth Avenue. Saks also stands at the center of Fifth Avenue's famous stretch from 42nd to 59th Streets. Closing the vista of the avenue from the Channel Gardens in Rockefeller Center, Saks forms, with the Center buildings and with the adjacent St. Patrick's Cathedral, the visual and symbolic heart of Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan.

Saks Fifth Avenue

Saks Fifth Avenue had its origins in Washington, D.C. in 1867, when nineteen-year-old Andrew Saks opened a small menswear shop with earnings from his newspaper delivery route.¹ By the mid-1880s Saks had expanded his D.C. establishment and opened satellite stores in Richmond, Virginia, and Indianapolis, Indiana.

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While Saks's stores were growing, however, New York was becoming the country's center for high-class clothing stores. In the decades following the Civil War a rapid growth in commerce and industry had "brought quick fortunes to many."² New York entrepreneurs constituted a new elite; unsure of their social standing, however, they struggled to consolidate their hegemony by making conspicuous displays of their wealth. New York's dry-goods merchants recognized the opportunity to make wardrobes a tool of class competition. "In an age when show was so important, great pains in personal adornment became necessary... (as) each social occasion required a new outfit."³ Shopping became the daily pastime for New York's ladies of social consequence. Between the 1880s and 1900, various dry-goods businesses including B. Altman & Company, Siegel-Cooper Company, Best & Company, and A.T. Stewart & Company thrived on "Ladies' Mile" and "Fashion Row," the areas just below and above Union Square along Broadway, Fifth and Sixth Avenues.⁴

In 1892, Saks entered the New York clothing market, buying into a manufacturing firm on lower Broadway. Reentering the retail market, in 1900 Saks bought a site on Herald Square,⁵ and opened a department store, preceding moves there by both R.H. Macy & Company, which moved in 1901, and Gimbel's which moved in 1910. When Andrew Saks died in 1912, his son Horace Saks took over the management of the company.

One of Horace Saks's first projects was to explore the possibility of moving Saks to Fifth Avenue. In so doing, he was following the path of major competitors including B. Altman, which had moved to Fifth Avenue in 1905, and Bergdorf-Goodman, which had moved there in 1914.⁶ He investigated a site on Fifth Avenue at 42nd Street, but shelved his plans in 1917 when the United States entered World War I.⁷ After the war ended, the country entered a period of economic prosperity, and Saks & Company flourished. By 1921 Saks was earning profits of one million dollars per year.⁸ When in 1922 the landlord of Saks's Herald Square building doubled the rent, Horace Saks decided to revive his plans to move to Fifth Avenue. Choosing a site on the block between 49th and 50th Streets, then known as "Upper Fifth Avenue," Saks bought the Buckingham Hotel and the Belgravia Apartments.

In the middle of Saks's chosen site, however, and refusing to sell for anything but the highest price, was the four-story brownstone New York Democratic Club, harboring the "smoke-filled rooms" of city and state politics.⁹ Saks first commissioned his architects to design a U-shaped building which would wrap around the Democratic Club, but then dismissed the plan as extravagant and impractical. Short of cash and determined to leave the 34th Street site, Saks arranged to merge his company with that of his friend Bernard Gimbel, who for over a decade had been Saks's competitor on Herald Square.¹⁰ The result of the merger was that Gimbel's assumed the lease on the Saks-Herald Square building¹¹ and became "the largest and most important retail enterprise of its kind in this country and abroad,"¹² while funding Saks's debt of \$3,500,000 and paying \$8,100,000 in stocks and notes for full ownership of the company.¹³ Saks then bought out the Democratic Club, and soon thereafter began proceedings to build his new store. Saks planned to continue operating his Herald Square store, announcing in 1924, "we feel confident...that this present locality will be a retail shopping center for many more years."¹⁴ To distinguish between the two stores, Saks dubbed his new establishment "Saks Fifth Avenue."¹⁵

Fifth Avenue, The Department Store, And Saks

At the time the Saks Fifth Avenue project was begun, Fifth Avenue had become established as New York's premier shopping boulevard, and, in the words of a contemporary guidebook, as "the country's leading fashion center: the Fifth Avenue label represented the best in American taste."¹⁶ Beginning with the erection of the B. Altman & Company store at 34th Street and Fifth Avenue in 1905, the Avenue saw a progression of grand department stores gradually grow northward. The pace of development, slowed by World War I, picked up in the 1920s, and in 1923 alone, as Saks was under construction, \$130 million worth of new construction was underway.¹⁷ According to the New York Times:

Fifth Avenue has been transformed...with surprising speed from a thoroughfare devoted entirely to the residential and club purposes to a street a very large part of which is now devoted to retail business enterprises and activities of a kindred nature.¹⁸

Saks Fifth Avenue continued the trend northward, and was the first department store to open in this part of the avenue.¹⁹ According to the New York Times, the new store was "considered the most modern and up-to-date building of its kind in the world," and marked "the opening of a new shopping centre on upper Fifth Avenue." ²⁰

The Saks management claimed that the new store would be "the largest in the world devoted exclusively to wearing apparel and accessories."²¹ The enormous new building opened with its display windows showing such luxury items as a \$3000 pigskin trunk, \$1000 racoon coats, chauffer's livery, and "foot muffs" for trips in automobiles. An electric numbering system over the 50th Street entrance summoned chauffers to pick up wealthy patrons at the door. By the end of the year, Saks reportedly had set up some fifty thousand charge accounts, including most of the city's wealthiest families.²²

Such a splashy, expensive, prominent new luxury store, part of the 1920s boom phenomenon, attracted great attention, and its opening on September 15, 1924, was greeted by "throng" of patrons and onlookers. As described in the next day's papers:

Crowds at the opening of Saks & Company's new store in Fifth Avenue...were so great yesterday that young women stenographers were taken from their desks and pressed into service as saleswomen. It was the largest throng of shoppers ever seen in this city, according to the management.

The store opened at 9 o'clock and long before that hour hundreds of persons had arrived. They spent their time 'window shopping' until the doors were unlocked. Then the crowd, largely made up of women, surged into the store....

The first package to be shipped out of the store was a silk hat in a leather hat box and it was sent to President Coolidge at the White House. Mayor Hylan and Jack Dempsey,

who appeared shortly before noon, were luncheon guests of Horrace A. Saks, Vice President of the Company.... There was a stampede to the men's shop on the sixth floor when a report spread through the store that the Prince of Wales was there. He was not, but denials of his presence failed to stop the rush of women.... The only basis for the rumor of the Prince's presence, apparently, was the fact that an English leather bag was shipped to him from the store.²³

Starrett & Van Vleck, and the Design of Saks Fifth Avenue

For architects of the new Fifth Avenue store, Saks chose a firm that specialized in the design of luxury department stores: Starrett & Van Vleck. The firm was founded in 1907 by Goldwin Starrett (1867-1918) and Ernest Alan Van Vleck (1875-1956). Van Vleck had studied at Cornell University and in Europe. Starrett was one of the five Starrett brothers, owners of major construction companies in New York and Chicago in the years following World War I; he had apprenticed as an architect in the office of Daniel Burnham.²⁴ The firm became a respected designer of public buildings, schools, luxury apartment houses, and office buildings. Their commissions included work for such prestigious clients as the Downtown Athletic Club and the Curb (now American Stock) Exchange. The string of famous department stores designed by Starrett & Van Vleck included Saks, Lord & Taylor (1914), and Franklin Simon & Company, all on Fifth Avenue, as well as large extensions to Bloomingdale's (1929) and Abraham & Straus (1930). Stylistically, Starrett & Van Vleck followed the architectural trends of the day, designing in conservative classically-inspired styles during the 1920s, but shifting to the modernistic Art Deco in the 1930s.

Designing a department store for Fifth Avenue involved special considerations because of the nature of the street. The Fifth Avenue Association watched all design activity carefully, and when commercial buildings began invading the avenue, efforts were made to have them conform in style to the surrounding residential buildings. B. Altman & Company's 34th Street store (Trowbridge & Livingston, 1905-13) was carefully designed with the avenue's residential style in mind. Starrett & Van Vleck themselves moved somewhat away from this notion in 1914 with their design for Lord & Taylor at 38th Street: "The Avenue now had a building that was frankly commercial as well as dignified."²⁵ Nevertheless, the ideal was for buildings which harmonized with the general character of the avenue:

While the development of Fifth Avenue--which has made it the outstanding retail shopping thoroughfare of the city--has been very rapid and surprisingly successful, it has not been haphazard, due very largely to the activities of the Fifth Avenue Association, which has done much to insist on a certain uniformity in one way or another, and has been particularly active in protecting the thoroughfare and in beautifying it. The street is sometimes referred to as the "street with a government," because of the activities of this association.²⁶

At the same time, Starrett & Van Vleck's design had to conform to the setback provisions in the city's new zoning resolution, which required that floors above a certain level had to be set back progressively from the lot line. Saks was the first Fifth Avenue department store building designed to comply with these requirements.²⁷

The resulting design for Saks was a handsome building in a classically-derived style, faced in traditional stone and brick; the setback stories above the main portion of each facade were reserved for administrative offices. The building's style was characterized as "of the later English Renaissance," and was said to have been "inspired by several of the lesser-known eighteenth-century London buildings."²⁸ The design of Saks harmonized well enough with the character of Fifth Avenue for the Fifth Avenue Association to award the store its annual Gold Medal for the best new building of the year in the Fifth Avenue area. The judgment, made, appropriately, by the "Committee on Architectural Harmony," cited Saks as "an excelleng example of the architectural effects possible" under the new setback requirements.²⁹ According to the New York Times:

The architects--Starrett & Van Vleck--are credited with producing a structure of the greatest possible utility, considering the purpose for which it was erected and at the same time conforming to the general architectural development of Fifth Avenue.³⁰

Description

Saks is a ten-story building, with three primary facades faced in Indiana limestone, brick and cast-stone. Its design is a sedate, graceful version of the classically-inspired styles popular in the 1920s, adapted for the needs of a large department store.

Fifth Avenue facade:

The ground floor level is a rusticated granite base into which are set twin entrances flanked by large display-windows. This level reads as one-and-a-half stories tall, and corresponds to the store's first floor within. The twin entrances, as opposed to the more usual grand central entrance of other department stores, emphasize the broadness or length of the building along its full-block Fifth Avenue frontage. Each entrance is set in a rectangular frame, embellished with carved spiral moldings and topped by a plain cornice. (The planters that have been placed on top of the cornices are not original.) Each entrance-way includes a doorway (in its original configuration) in the lower half and windows set behind elegantly detailed metal grilles in the upper half. Running the full length of the facade, interrupted only by the twin entrances, are the famous Saks display-windows. These are enormous sheets of plate glass, set in bronze frames of slender Corinthian piers set on elongated tapering pedestals. Between each window is a narrow section of marble wall. Running along the top of the windows and wall sections is a continuous bronze grille composed of panels of four quatrefoils; the grille is supported as an entablature by the slender Corinthian piers framing the windows. The bronze grille entablature is capped by a freestanding frieze of alternating urns and floral motifs. Canvas canopies over the windows roll down from a housing set between the grille and the free-standing frieze. Set into the rusticated limestone facing above the display-windows are small paired square-headed windows with ornamental metal grilles.

Above the entrance and the display-window level rises the main element of the facade's design: a 14-bay wide, double-story order of fluted pilasters supporting an architrave, in Indiana limestone. The treatment is flat and re-

strained, but the capitals and architrave frieze are adorned with inventive ornament. The divisions between the second- and third-story windows, bracketed within the double-height pilasters, are marked by an architrave with a balustrade, supported on single-story engaged piers flanking the second-story windows.

The fourth- through sixth-story levels of the facade form the next portion, set between the architrave at the third story and a sill molding below the seventh. Here the facade is faced in brick, with rectangular windows. Only the windows at the fourth-story level have cast-stone surrounds; they are also topped by plain cast-stone panels flanked by flat volutes.

The windows in the second- through sixth-story levels are each composed of a pair of two-over-two double-hung sash, each with a transom above, separated by a heavy center mullion; the transom is a casement with two lights.

The seventh-story level is the last before a series of setbacks begins, and acts as a crown to the facade. Also faced in brick, it has windows with cast-stone surrounds and cornices; alternating with the windows are simple stone roundels with ornamental carving at their top and bottom. The seventh-story windows are similar in configuration to those below, but narrower. This level is capped by a cornice with a balustrade above.

The eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-story levels are progressively set back from Fifth Avenue and also from the side-streets. The eighth-story level is brick-faced; its windows comprise two-over-two double-hung sash topped by a blind lunette. A five-bay wide addition on the north projects almost to the seventh-story balustrade. At the ninth-story level, the single-window bays of the lower stories are replaced by bays consisting of paired narrow windows, with double-hung two-over-two sash, separated by a slender colonnette. The pairs of windows are in turn separated by cast-stone rectangular panels. This level is topped by a heavy stone cornice supporting a plain brick parapet, whose bays are marked by simple squat brick piers. The tenth story, the final level, is brick-faced, with simple paired window openings having double-hung, two-over-two sash; it is topped by a cast-stone cornice and a final stone balustrade. The successive setbacks, with their cornices and balustrades at the eighth- through tenth-story levels, act as the visual termination of the seven-story facade below.

Forty-ninth and Fiftieth St Street facades:

These are identical in design to the Fifth Avenue facade, with the following exceptions. The 49th-Street facade has only one entranceway, set in the eighth bay from the west; its design is identical to that of the twin entrances on Fifth Avenue, but it also has an original metal canopy hung from the wall above the entrance. On either side of the canopy are raised letters spelling "SAKS & COMPANY," set between squares with quatrefoil designs; it is topped by a bronze frieze of urns and floral motifs. The lighting system on the canopy's underside is not original. At the ground level of the thirteenth bay is a loading bay, topped by an ornamental bronze cornice with anthemion. The fourteenth bay is narrower than the rest, marking the termination of this facade. It has windows half the width of their neighbors, with double-hung two-over-two sash; in the fourth through seventh stories there are shallow projecting horizontal brick bands. Many window panes have been replaced by metal

grilles within the following bays and stories: second bay--third and fifth stories; fourth bay--second and fourth stories; fifth bay--fourth, fifth and sixth stories; eighth bay--fourth story; twelfth bay--second through sixth stories; thirteenth bay--second through sixth stories. Above the eleventh through thirteenth bays, on top of the tenth-story level, rises a three-story brick-faced tower; the visible face has three blind arches containing small square-headed windows, three small windows above, and a shallow cornice.

The 50th-Street facade also has only one entranceway, with a canopy, identical to that on 49th Street. In addition, it has a loading bay in the thirteenth and fourteenth bays at the east end of the facade, in place of display-windows; the loading bay has a large metal canopy topped by a row of anthemia. The windows above the loading area in the fourteenth bay are open, looking onto a shaft; this bay is otherwise identical to its counterpart on 49th Street. Panes have been replaced by grilles within the following bays and stories: second bay--seventh story; third bay--seventh story; fifth bay--third through seventh stories; eighth bay--second and third stories (this last for an air conditioner); ninth bay--third and fifth stories; eleventh bay--seventh story; twelfth bay--second through sixth story. On the roof, several one- and two-story service towers are visible; they are brick-faced, with shallow cornices, and windows with double-hung two-over-two sash.

An interesting aspect of the design of Saks is the handling of the corners, where the Fifth Avenue facade turns into the side-streets. Each is a chamfered bay, continuing the basic motifs of the facades but in a plainer, adjusted version. Adjustments to detail include the replacement of the balustrades between the second- and third-story windows with plain stone; the elimination of stone surrounds on the fourth- and seventh-story windows; the addition of slightly projecting horizontal brick bands evenly spaced up the entire chamfered facade; the replacement, in the corner display-windows, of slender piers with slender colonnettes; the addition in the bronze grille over the corner display-windows of the lettering "SAKS FIFTH AVENUE"; and the replacement in the second- through seventh-story windows of the paired double-hung sash with a single, three-over-three double-hung sash.

The chamfered corners, which moderate the transition of the Fifth Avenue facade to the side-street facades; the eighth- through tenth-story setbacks, which moderate the termination of the facades; and the twin entrances, which de-emphasize what traditionally would have been a major central entrance; all combine to create the effect of a broad, quiet, respectably classical front along Fifth Avenue.

Conclusion

Saks survives today as one of the premier grand flagship department store buildings on Fifth Avenue. While much of the avenue has changed over the years, Saks has remained largely intact, in its physical structure as well as in its reputation. Its handsome architectural treatment, answering the requirements both of Fifth Avenue's nineteenth-century genteel image and of its twentieth-century commercial redevelopment, still lends grace and dignity to the city's most famous avenue. As part of the central monumental grouping of Fifth Avenue, with St. Patrick's Cathedral and Rockefeller Center, Saks today plays a pivotal role in defining the visual character of the avenue, and is an important part of the cultural and visual character of one of New York's most famous and visited places.

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FOOTNOTES

1. "SFA's First Fifty Years," Saks Fifth Avenue News, Volume 29, No. 5, 1974, p.10. The information in the rest of this paragraph was taken from this source.
2. Studio Report for Christine Boyer at Columbia University, Ladies' Mile: The History of the Retail Shopping District of Manhattan in the 19th Century. (New York: unpublished typescript, Spring 1981), unpaginated.
3. Ibid.
4. See Charles Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).
5. "SFA/60," Special Supplement to Focus on Saks Fifth Avenue. (New York: February/March 1984), p.10.
6. Fifty Years on Fifth, Fifth Avenue Association, ed. (New York: International Press, 1957), p.55.
7. "Saks Fifth Avenue," The Gimbelite. (Milwaukee: Gimbels Midwest, 1973), part IX, unpaginated.
8. Ibid.
9. New York Times, 4 March 1923, p.14:3.
10. "SFA/60," p.11.
11. New York Times, 27 April 1923, p.9:2.
12. New York Times, 25 April 1923, p.1:1.
13. New York Times, 27 April 1923, p.9:2.
14. New York Times, 22 April 1924, p.37:1.
15. Fifty Years on Fifth, p.68.

16. American Guide Series: New York City Guide. (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), p.217-18.
17. New York Times, 9 July 1924, p.1:4.
18. Ibid.
19. American Guide Series: New York City Guide, p.219.
20. New York Times, 13 April 1924, IX, p.1:7.
21. New York Times, 7 September 1924, II, p.2:2.
22. Robert Hendrickson, The Grand Emporiums: The Illustrated History of America's Great Department Stores. (New York: Stein & Day, 1979), p.174-5
23. New York Times, 16 September 1924, p.17:2.
24. New York Times, May 10, 1918, p.11 (obit.); Aug. 9, 1956 (obit.).
Dictionary of American Biography, vol. 9, p.536.
25. American Guide Series: New York City Guide, p. 216.
26. New York Times, 7 September 1924, II, p.2:2.
27. "Prizes Awarded for the Best Recent Buildings in the Fifth Avenue Section, New York," Architecture, LI, no.1, January 1925, p.23.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. New York Times, 7 September 1924, p.2:2.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Saks Fifth Avenue has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Saks Fifth Avenue is one of the grand flagship department store buildings that identify Fifth Avenue as the city's and country's best-known shopping street; that Saks's move from Herald Square to Fifth Avenue at 50th Street opened a new stretch of the avenue to commercial redevelopment; that Saks's design by Starrett & Van Vleck, department store building specialists, was a handsome, restrained version of a neo-Renaissance palazzo; that this design so harmonized with its surroundings that it was awarded the Fifth Avenue Association's Gold Medal, and yet was able to meet the needs of a modern, luxury department store; that Saks was, in addition,

the first department store building designed to conform to the setback requirements of the New York zoning ordinance; and that Saks today, situated in the middle of the famous stretch of Fifth Avenue between 42nd and 59th Streets, forms with neighboring Rockefeller Center and St. Patrick's Cathedral the visual and symbolic heart of Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark Saks Fifth Avenue, 611 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1285, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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SAKS FIFTH AVENUE
611 Fifth Avenue
Manhattan

Built: 1921-1924
Architects: Starrett & Van Vleck

Photo: Landmarks Preservation
Commission