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Landmarks Preservation Commission  
November 17, 1987; Designation List 196  
LP-1330

EMBASSY I THEATER, first floor interior consisting of the lobby, the auditorium; and the fixtures and interior components of the spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, doors, and attached decorative elements; 1556-1560 Broadway, Manhattan. Built 1925; architect: Thomas Lamb.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 999, Lot 3 in part, consisting of the land beneath the described interior.

On June 14 and 15, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Embassy Theater, first floor interior consisting of the vestibule, the lobby, the auditorium; and the fixtures and interior components of the spaces, including but not limited to, wall, ceiling, and floor surfaces, doors, and attached decorative elements; and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 26). The hearing was continued to October 19, 1982. Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Seventy-nine witnesses spoke or had statements read into the record in favor of designation. Five witnesses spoke in opposition to designation. The owner of the theater was among those in opposition to designation. The Commission has received many letters and other expressions of support in favor of this designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The interior of the Embassy I Theater survives today as one of the historic theater interiors that symbolize the development of the motion picture theater in America generally and in New York in particular. It was among the smallest of the more than 300 theaters designed by Thomas Lamb, and considered by some to have been one of his best.<sup>1</sup> Executed in 1925 for the rapidly growing Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer corporation, it is located on the ground floor of a seventeen-story office building. With its unobtrusive facade, the Embassy is easily overlooked amid the bustle of Times Square. Inside, however, there exists a 598-seat motion picture house whose significance far exceeds its small size. Solely on aesthetic criteria, the Embassy is notable for the high quality of its French-inspired interior. It was executed in sumptuous materials by some of the finest creative talent available to early twentieth-century architecture, including murals by the New York muralist Arthur Crisp and decorative elements and lighting fixtures by the Rambusch Studio.

The cultural significance of the Embassy Theater is equally important. It opened in 1925 as a unique experiment. Not only was it intended as an exclusive high society motion picture house, but one with consciously feminist overtones. The theater was managed solely by women under the direction of Gloria (granddaughter of Jay) Gould. The Embassy enjoyed this unique distinction for four years before making history once more. On November 2, 1929 it became the first newsreel theater in America, blazing a

trail which was soon followed nationwide. After almost sixty years and a most colorful history, the Embassy survives with most of its original character intact.

(JA)

### Notes

1. "Embassy Theater Another Monument to Thomas Lamb," Exhibitor's Trade Review, August 29, 1925, pp. 37-38.

### Motion Pictures and the Embassy Theater

In 1924 plans were filed for a new seventeen-story building at 1556-58 Broadway. It included manufacturing and storage spaces, shops, offices and showrooms.<sup>1</sup> However, when the structure was completed in the following year it also housed the Embassy Theater. It had been installed "without rearranging the floor plan in any way whatever" in spaces originally allotted for a men's clothier.<sup>2</sup>

The substitution was most likely the result of swollen property values and concomitant rent increases. Since 1914 when the Criterion Theater emerged as New York's first motion picture show place, nearly a dozen other theaters had appeared on Broadway.<sup>3</sup> Together with the numerous legitimate playhouses in Times Square, they transformed the area into the city's entertainment center, simultaneously inflating its property values beyond the reach of all but the most prosperous tenants. The owner of a small men's shop might flinch at a weekly rent of \$1,000 or more.<sup>4</sup> This was less of a problem for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, a newly formed enterprise which was soon to dominate the thirty-year-old motion picture industry.

Pioneer attempts to photograph movement had been made in Europe and America long before there was any recognition of technical or commercial potential. In 1867 Edward Muybridge and J. D. Isaacs electronically released the shutters of a row of cameras to produce serial photographs of a galloping racehorse. The next step was taken in the 1880s by the French physician E. J. Marey who, while studying movement, produced the first motion picture filmed with a single camera. This was followed in 1889 by Thomas Edison's kinetograph (a camera using rolls of coated celluloid film) and his immensely successful kinoscope. The latter was marketed in 1893 as a device for viewing peep-shows, and soon became a standard feature in penny arcades. Scientifically, it launched an epoch of earnest experimentation. By 1896 research had advanced sufficiently to allow Edison and his associate Thomas Armat to screen the first successful motion picture before a paying American audience.<sup>5</sup>

Initially motion pictures were used to supplement vaudeville, but by 1902 a Los Angeles theater took the risk of featuring them alone. Success generated imitation and three years later the first movie theater, complete with lavish decorations and a piano, opened in McKeesport, Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup> Dubbed a "nickelodeon" because of its \$.05 admission, it presaged the countless nickelodeons which, during the next decade, would appear in virtually every American town.

The business and art of motion pictures developed hand-in-hand. At first uncritical audiences were thrilled by films of anything that moved. Especially popular was Robert Paul's footage of stormy seas breaking over a pier in Dover, England.<sup>7</sup> Nothing like it had never been seen indoors. Such early efforts were soon replaced by more sophisticated plot-centered films with scenes arranged artificially to tell a story. Advanced processing and film editing followed soon after, helping the director to produce as many as two films per week. By 1910 the motion picture industry required a growing legion of specialists, not the least of whom were its "stars." Actors like Mary Pickford, Gloria Swanson, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Rudolf Valentino signed exclusive contracts with production studios which sold, and later leased, their films to exhibitors.

During World War I America emerged as the dominant force in the motion picture industry, witnessing the formation of the giant Hollywood studios of MGM, RKO, Warner Bros., Universal and Twentieth-Century Fox. The spectacular growth of still silent movies was temporarily threatened by radio in the early 1920s, but was reinvigorated with such film extravaganzas as Cecil B. deMille's "Ten Commandments," James Cruze's "Covered Wagon" (the first epic western), and in 1925, "Ben Hur," the greatest worldwide success that the industry had ever produced. The real breakthrough, however, came in 1927 with "The Jazz Singer," starring Al Jolson. It was the first sound track movie to be released. The slightly later introduction of Technicolor catapulted motion pictures into their Golden Age. Sumptuous movie palaces were built and numerous legitimate theaters were converted for viewing of the more than 500 films produced annually in America. Flourishing throughout the Depression and war years, the two-decade reign of the motion picture industry faltered only in the early 1950s when it was undermined by increasingly popular television.

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#### Notes

1. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, New Building Permit 246-24.
2. "The New Embassy Theater, New York City," American Architect, 128 (October 5, 1925), 313.
3. The Criterion was followed by the Strand, Warner's, and the Colony on 42nd Street, as well as by the Capitol, Rivoli, State, New York, Rialto and Cameo motion picture theaters. See Adolph Zukor, "Influence of the Motion Picture," Broadway: The Grand Canyon of American Business (New York: The Broadway Association, 1926), pp. 109-110.
4. In 1929 the owners of the Embassy [Newsreel] Theater paid a weekly rent of \$1,615.38. "How the Newsreel Theater Operates," Motion Picture News, November 19, 1929.
5. Raymond Fielding, The American Newsreel, 1911-1967 (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), p. 4.

6. Charlotte Herzog, "The Nickelodeon Phase (1903-c.1917)," Marquee 13 (First Quarter, 1981), p. 7; "Fifty Years Ago...The First Movie Theatre," Box Office, June 4, 1955, pp. 20-21.
7. Fielding, p. 6.

The Clients: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Gloria Gould

When the Embassy opened on August 26, 1925 it became the newest addition to the more than one hundred theaters owned by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Formally established only two years prior, MGM already led the motion picture industry with profits totaling more than \$6 million in 1926.

The corporation was the result of Marcus Loew's decision in 1924 to merge the Metro and Goldwyn studios. He had bought the former in 1919, but never believed that its films would amount to much more than "chasers" for his vaudeville productions.<sup>1</sup> By the mid 1920s, however, Loew was forced to recognize the mounting popularity of film -- and the poor quality of the Metro Studio productions. Notwithstanding its impressive list of actors (including Rudolf Valentino), the studio failed from mismanagement. Loew decided to merge it with the prestigious, but nearly bankrupt, Goldwyn Studio, which likewise had a great inventory of acting talent.<sup>2</sup> Executive ability was the only element lacking and it was supplied on April 10, 1924, when a contract was signed with Louis B. Mayer.

A Jewish immigrant from Russia, young Mayer immigrated to New York with his family. After a stint in his father's successful salvage business he established his own scrap metal concern in Brooklyn, but was soon ruined by a recession. Mayer fled to Massachusetts where he had his first encounter with a nickelodeon. Within a few short years he became an exhibitor, distributor and then producer of motion pictures. By the time Mayer was appointed vice president and general manager of Metro-Goldwyn productions in 1924 (with a \$1,500 weekly salary), he personally owned a string of small theaters, a Hollywood studio and contracts with such stars as Hedda Hopper, Renee Adoree and Huntley Gordon. During the next 27 years this ambitious, and sometimes ruthless,<sup>3</sup> businessman labored to create and sustain a glamorous and successful MGM.<sup>3</sup>

Although there is no evidence of Mayer's personal involvement in the Embassy Theater, he might well have approved of its arrangements. With barely 600 seats, it was approximately the size of his first nickelodeon in Haverhill, Massachusetts.<sup>4</sup> More important, its management would have appealed to Mayer's love of showmanship: Major Edward Bowes, managing director of the Capitol Theater and vice president of MGM, put it under the control of Gloria Gould Bishop, the well-known granddaughter of industrialist Jay Gould. At age nineteen she was already a wife, mother, author and teacher of "esthetic dancing," as well as a leading personality in the new generation of New York's "400." Her appointment was a clever publicity maneuver at a time when each motion picture and legitimate theater vied for public attention.

Miss Gould's movie house was an immediate sensation. As a child she had learned the charm of a little theater from her actress mother, Edith

Kingdon.<sup>5</sup> She now attempted to recreate that intimacy in a motion picture house. To the delight of photographers she posed in overalls, paintbrush in hand, as she "supervised" the theater's decoration. However, unless she had worked out the details with Major Bowes prior to the announcement of her appointment in late July, it is unlikely that Miss Gould had much influence on the design. It was well on the way to completion in time for the August 26, 1925, opening night. Regardless, it is clear that the small theater was conceived in the grandest terms. It was designed by Thomas Lamb, one of the most prolific and accomplished theater architects in the country. He collaborated on its interior with the Rambusch Studio, the foremost decorating firm in New York. Under normal circumstances, Rambusch did all work in house, but in this case, it subcontracted the Embassy's murals to Arthur Crisp, a celebrated New York muralist and friendly competitor who was then between commissions.<sup>6</sup>

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#### Notes

1. Gary Carey, All the Stars in Heaven: Louis B. Mayer's MGM (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981), p. 61.
2. The Goldwyn studios had been formed in 1918 by Samuel Goldfish and stage producer Edgar Selwyn. The former liked his company's name (a merger of his own name with that of his partner) sufficiently to adopt it legally as his own. He was ousted, however, in 1922 and had virtually no part in the film success of the Goldwyn Studio. See Carey, p. 62.
3. John Douglas Eames, "Fade In," The MGM Story: The Complete History of Fifty Roaring Years (New York: Crown Publishers, 1975), n.p.
4. Carey, p. 13.
5. Miss Kingdon was a member of Daly's Theater Company before her marriage to Gloria's father. See "George Gould is Married," New York Times, September 15, 1886, p. 1.
6. Information supplied by Catha Rambusch.

#### Thomas Lamb

Thomas Lamb (1871-1942) was among the world's most prolific theater architects. During his years of active practice Lamb designed over three hundred theaters throughout the world. Many of these stood as prominent landmarks in their respective communities. Not only was Lamb responsible for an enormous number of theaters, but his designs exemplify the adaptation of the revival styles popular with the wealthy to buildings designed for use by the masses. The vast majority of Lamb's commissions were for movie theaters, many built with a scale and richness reminiscent of the great palaces of Europe.

Lamb was born in Dundee, Scotland; his family moved to the United States when Lamb was still a child. He studied at Cooper Union, graduating

in 1898 with a Bachelor of Science degree. The only architectural courses that Lamb took at Cooper Union were mechanical drawing and acoustics;<sup>1</sup> it remains unclear where he received more detailed training in architecture. His obituary in the New York Times notes that he "was for a time a civil service building inspector."<sup>2</sup> This may account for all or some of his training. Lamb was working as an architect as early as 1904 when he undertook alterations to the Gotham Theater at 165 East 125th Street,<sup>3</sup> but he does not seem to have opened an active practice until about 1908. Although his earliest commissions, as listed in the firm's account books, include work on the St. Nicholas Skating Rink at 157 West 66th Street, the Grand Central Depot, and factories, lofts, stables, and residences, many of his earliest commissions were for theaters.<sup>4</sup> These quickly became Lamb's specialty and account for well over ninety percent of his designs.

Lamb's most important early commission came in 1908 when Marcus Loew asked him to draw up specifications for movie theaters.<sup>5</sup> This coincided with the beginning of the Loew company's growth as a major motion picture theater chain. Lamb's association with the firm continued until his death and he designed most of Loew's major American theaters as well as theaters for the firm in Canada, England, Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Mexico, Columbia, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Trinidad, Honduras, Sweden, South Africa, and even in Tokyo, Bombay, and Shanghai. In addition he designed the firm's office headquarters, the Loew's State Building (1921) on Broadway and West 45th Street, which incorporates the Loew's State Theater.

Although he worked for Marcus Loew as early as 1908, many of Lamb's early theaters were legitimate playhouses, including two that survive in the Times Square area. The earlier of these is the Empire (1911-12, originally the Eltinge) on West 42nd Street, an extremely fine Beaux-Arts style structure with a facade of terra cotta. In 1912 Lamb worked on the Cort Theater, an elegant house on West 48th Street modeled on the Petit Trianon at Versailles. The styles chosen by Lamb for the exteriors of these theaters are similar to those used by contemporary theater architects such as Herts & Tallant at their Lyceum Theater (1903) and The Brooklyn Academy of Music (1908), and Carrere & Hastings, architects of the Lunt-Fontanne Theater (1909-10) and the Century Theater (1909, demolished).

Lamb is generally credited with having designed the first "deluxe" theater built exclusively for movies -- the Regent Theater, a Venetian Renaissance style structure built in 1913.<sup>6</sup> The building still stands on Seventh Avenue and West 116th Street, although it is now a church. The Regent was soon followed by several commissions for enormous theaters on Broadway including the Strand (1914, demolished), Rialto (1916, demolished), and Rivoli (1917), and culminating in the design for the 5,230-seat Capitol (1919, demolished) at Broadway and West 51st Street. This theater was described as being "the last word in perfection in equipment, comfort, and luxury."<sup>7</sup> These theaters coincide with and were followed by many others designed both for the leading theater chains of the day such as Loew's, Proctor's, Keith's, RKO, and Trans-Lux, and for smaller entrepreneurs. Lamb designed both monumental movie palaces and small neighborhood and showcase theaters. These are represented in the Times Square area by the interior of the Harris (originally the Candler) Theater, 1912, located within the Candler Building on West 42nd Street; the Embassy (now Embassy I) on Broadway at 48th Street, a small theater designed in

1925; and the Mark Hellinger Theater (originally the Hollywood, 1929) on West 51st Street, a large movie palace later converted to legitimate use.

Most of the theaters designed prior to 1930 have classically-inspired interiors based on 17th-century Baroque or 18th-century English (Adamesque) and French (Louis XVI) neo-classical style architecture. The Harris, Embassy, and Mark Hellinger have fine Baroque-inspired detail with heavy, boldly modeled plasterwork. The style most closely identified with Lamb is the Adamesque, based on the work of Lamb's fellow countryman, the Scots-born architect Robert Adam. The restrained elegance of the Adamesque is visible in at least two surviving New York City theaters -- the Victoria (1917) on West 125th Street, and the Jefferson (1921) on East 14th Street. The French influence is visible at the Cort, and at the Academy of Music (now the Palladium, 1926) on East 14th Street. All of Lamb's interiors were designed in conjunction with decorating firms such as the Rambusch Decorating Co. It is not known what type of relationship existed between theater architects and designers. Lamb was definitely responsible for the layout of each theater and for the exterior design. It seems probable that he established the style of design for the interiors and he may, in many cases, have actually designed the ornamental detail. The decorating firm most probably was responsible for small ornamental details, color choice, draperies, furnishings, and so forth.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Lamb's movie theater designs became extremely exotic. This stylistic development may have been in response to a desire on the part of theater owners to attract more customers through ever more bizarre designs. Among Lamb's more exotic theaters were the Loew's Triboro (1931, demolished) in Astoria with its Mayan facade and Hispano-Moresque interior; the Loew's Pitkin (1929, vacant) on Pitkin Avenue in Brooklyn, with its Moorish/Hindu exterior and Hispano-Moresque foyer and auditorium; and the Loew's 175th Street (1930, now the United Palace Church) which has an exterior similar to that at the Pitkin and an interior with a Southeast Asian flavor.

Unfortunately, many of Lamb's theaters in New York City have been demolished. Among his surviving theaters not already mentioned are the RKO Keith's Flushing (1928, now triplex), an atmospheric theater with a Spanish Baroque interior; the Brooklyn Strand (c.1918, vacant) on Fulton Street and Rockwell Place, a classical revival style house; and the 81st Street Theater (c.1913) on Broadway, a terra-cotta faced building.

Although best known for his theaters, Lamb occasionally accepted other commissions and his work includes loft buildings, factories, stables, hotels, religious structures, etc. In New York, the most notable among these buildings are the Paramount Hotel (1927-28) at 235-245 West 46th Street, a brick, terra-cotta, and marble-faced structure with elaborate ornament on its arcaded base and setback roofline; and the Pythian Temple (c.1926, now apartments) at 135 West 70th Street, a massive structure adorned with glazed terra-cotta and cast-stone forms of Egyptian and Assyrian derivation. Both of these buildings have a theatrical flare and it is not surprising that their architect specialized in the design of theaters. Lamb was also the architect of the second Madison Square Garden on Eighth Avenue, and in 1932 he received an honorable mention for his entry in the international competition to design the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow.

At his death in 1942 Lamb was still actively involved in the design of theaters. A comment in Architectural Forum written in 1925 sums up Lamb's career:

All of Mr. Lamb's work uniformly shows care and study, not only in the plans of his theaters, but also in their architectural treatment and decorative furnishings, in which he is preeminently successful.<sup>8</sup>

Lamb's death coincided with the end of an era in theater design, for after World War II the need for large theaters declined. Many of Lamb's finest theaters were demolished, others were subdivided, and others sold for new uses or simply abandoned. The few surviving Lamb theaters are relics of a past age and are reminders of an elegant period in theater design that has, sadly, passed.

(ASD)

#### Notes

1. Information on Lamb's years at Cooper Union courtesy of the Cooper Union Archives, New York.
2. Thomas Lamb, obituary, New York Times, February 27, 1942, p. 17.
3. Special thanks to Michael R. Miller of the Theater Historical Society for this information.
4. Lamb's job book and architectural drawings are in the collection of Avery Library, Columbia University, New York.
5. Thomas Lamb, obituary, New York Herald Tribune, February 27, 1942, p. 16.
6. David Naylor, American Picture Palaces (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981), pp. 40-41.
7. "The Work of Thomas W. Lamb, Architect," Architectural Forum, 42 (June 1925), 377.
8. Ibid.

#### Arthur Crisp

Arthur Crisp was born in Hamilton, Canada, in 1881. He immigrated to America where he played an active role in the development of mural and decorative arts. He was a member of the Art Students League and an Academician of the National Academy of Design. He was also affiliated with the American Watercolor Society, the Architectural League of New York and the National Society of Mural Painters.



Gifted with a refined sense of color and composition and naturally decorative inclinations, Crisp found a ready market for his award-winning work, much of which reveals a strong Far Eastern influence.<sup>1</sup> Especially popular were his "sumptuously ornamental" hangings (some executed in association with his wife, Mary Ellen Crisp) and his masterful silk batiks.<sup>2</sup> Crisp also executed easel paintings and pastels, but was particularly renowned for his innovative mural techniques. He received numerous commissions from individuals, schools, clubs, hotels, public buildings, and entertainment centers, including the Clover Garden dancing palace in New York.<sup>3</sup> Notable among Crisp's theater works were his 18 foot x 6 foot "Sport" mural for the Grand Lounge of the Roxy and the stairway decorations of the Belasco Theater.<sup>4</sup>

Crisp served for three years on the Municipal Art Commission of New York before retiring to Maine.<sup>5</sup> He was honored for years as a member emeritus of the National Society of Mural Painters. Although no longer active, Crisp could enjoy the fact that the popularity of his decorative and historical paintings survived: in 1966, at age 95, he witnessed the installation of a painting which he had executed a half century earlier.<sup>6</sup>

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#### Notes

1. Crisp won prizes from the Architectural League in 1914 and 1920, and a medal for his work at the Pan-American Exhibition in 1915. In 1916 he won the prestigious first prize of the National Academy of Design. See "Academy Exhibits its First Prize Paintings," New York Times, March 18, 1916, p. 9; and Who's Who in American Art, 1953, vol. 5, p. 95.
2. "Decorative Work Now on View in Galleries," New York Times, April 15, 1928, sec. 9, p. 15.
3. "Clover Gardens," American Architect, 122 (August 30, 1922), 191-194, 205.
4. "Mural Panel by Arthur Crisp," The Sun, October 25, 1932 and New York Times, October 25, 1932, p. 22. See also United States Mural Painters, Scrapbook, in Art and Architecture Division, New York Public Library.
5. "Two Join Art Commission," New York Times, December 21, 1948, p. 33.
6. "Newark Hangs a Painting Showing Purchase in 1666," New York Times, April 13, 1966, p. 40.

#### The Embassy Theater

The 598-seat Embassy was dwarfed by most motion picture theaters, most notably by the 5,230 seat Capitol which Thomas Lamb had built six years

prior just four blocks north on Broadway. Yet the Embassy was considered "one of the most distinctive [theaters] in the country"<sup>1</sup> and an example of Lamb's finest work. It was, according to an influential trade journal, "one of the most interesting,...most unusually beautiful and practical theaters in New York."<sup>2</sup>

The house was largely decorated in French styles with eclectic borrowings from Francois I (men's lavatory; remodeled), "Chinese Chippendale" (ladies' lavatory; remodeled), Louis XIV and Louis XV. The walls of the inner and outer lobbies, for instance, originally had framed mirrors (retained in part) which, in Rococo fashion, animated the small space while simultaneously increasing its apparent size. Lamb achieved a remarkable correspondence between the two rooms, essentially restating their basic design in different materials. Unlike the more public outer lobby, however, with its cool marble detailing, he gave the inner lobby a warmer, less formal ambience with richly paneled blonde wood walls. This intimate quality was especially apparent in 1925: when the Embassy opened, its inner lobby had floral carpeting, festooned drapes around the auditorium entrance and a full complement of Louis XV tables and chairs along its walls (all of which have been removed).

The French flavor of the lobbies is continued in the auditorium. Its walls are especially ornate, and were even more so when painted their original deep carmine with gold accents (currently a cream color with sparse gilded detail). The four piers on either side of the auditorium are decorated with floral reliefs and an oval insert, each in a different color and type of marble. Above the oval slabs are gilded vase-like lighting fixtures, supported on the backs of sinuous mermaids. Each pair is crowned by a gilded arch at the center of which is a grotesque head. Gilded hermes (recalling the torch bearers at Versailles) originally projected from several of the piers. The sides of each support were pierced with air vents to "insure a clean and comfortable atmosphere at all times." In short, the Embassy had the "latest and most effective heating and ventilation system" of its day.<sup>3</sup>

Between the piers are curvilinear wooden valences with floral and oyster shell ornaments. Painted a uniform cream color, their present bald appearance bears little relation to the original scheme where highly gilded details were offset by luxuriously draped silk damask curtains. These in turn were complemented by the auditorium's original tapestry-covered chairs with carmine lacquer arms and standards and backs of black lacquer and gold (replaced by unremarkable red seats). The curtains originally framed Arthur Crisp's murals in typically Baroque manner, imbuing each arcadian scene with a stage-set quality. The effect was emphasized by crystal lanterns suspended in front of each painting. In subsequent years the lanterns were replaced by dim side lights, leaving Crisp's murals almost unreadable. Painted on canvas and applied to the wall, they have crackled and discolored to a murky brown. Of the eight murals executed by Crisp, two have been removed from either side of the proscenium where they originally served as organ loft screens. Of the six murals extant, two are visually segmented (although not physically altered) by the modern installation of a sound wall and projection booth between the rear of the auditorium and the inner lobby.

The auditorium's low ceiling is crowned by a large flat dome with recessed illumination and eight small brass and rock crystal light fixtures. Although missing their original decorative fringes, these exquisite lamps are a fine example of the inventive and high quality work of the Rambusch Studio. Connecting the central dome and its satellite fixtures is filigree ceiling ornament, originally gilded but currently undistinguished from its light cream ground.

In front of the auditorium the proscenium arch was left as an unrelieved square frame for the motion picture screen. Although Miss Gould intended to showcase only feature films, the Embassy was provided with a small convex stage with stairs at either end. Approximately 4 feet at its greatest depth, the platform was still wide enough to leave one reporter anticipating a display of "the talented Gloria's terpsichorean stunts."<sup>4</sup> It was most likely used for brief appearances by the theater's female ushers. In front of and below the stage was the orchestra pit, all of which has been removed.

Every aspect of the Embassy was minutely attended by the finest designers using the most sumptuous materials in order to create, as Miss Gould said, "the most harmonious surroundings possible."<sup>5</sup> She intended to cultivate a new breed of motion picture viewer among those who previously considered it declassé. Contrary to the democratic and moderately priced admissions of other movie theaters, the "ultra smart" Embassy reveled in its exclusivity. Its costly \$2.20 reserved seat policy was intended to attract society people who would not stand in line, its lavish appointments, those accustomed to and willing to pay for comfort.<sup>6</sup> Upon the "best advices available," Miss Gould barred entry to "all beggars, vagrants, peddlers, boot leggers and blind persons."<sup>7</sup>

The Embassy's program included only two daily screenings. There were no comedy or vaudeville acts, prologues or other distractions. Newsreels were also barred, Miss Gould never suspecting that in four years' time they would be the exclusive attraction in her little theater. For the moment the Embassy was dedicated to top quality feature films, beginning in August 1925, with MGM's "Merry Widow." Starring Mae Murray and John Gilbert (with Clark Gable as an extra), the film ran for six months before being replaced by MGM's other silent block-busters "La Bohème" and "Ben Hur."<sup>8</sup>

Beyond her aristocratic ideas of motion picture presentation, Miss Gould (a name she preferred over "Mrs. Bishop"), emerged as a progressive, if idiosyncratic, feminist. She insisted that her theater be "manned" totally by women. The reason, she explained, was simply that they "were more efficient than men."<sup>9</sup> She entered the business world, laughing at the very idea of financial dependence upon one's husband.<sup>10</sup> It was a painless stand for the well endowed heiress. Yet despite her rather pampered brand of feminism, Gloria Gould played an important role in independence for women. She encouraged women, especially indolent socialites, to apply their energies creatively, and set a conspicuous example by her theater management.

The plan was implemented by the employment of female projectionists, ticket takers and musicians to sit in the pit. Ushers were selected in

competition. Eligibility demanded that the applicant be "17-20 years of age, blonde-- no peroxide -- with...blue eyes and bobbed hair." She was to be no taller than 5'4" with "straight, well-shaped limbs, small hands and feet, good shoulders...and a clean youthful complexion. Even white teeth -- no gold ones -- [were] also necessary" as were refinement, intelligence and "the ability to wear clothes with dignity."<sup>11</sup> Almost 400 women responded, including a "white haired widow" who wanted to be hostess in the "retiring room."<sup>12</sup> A group of ushers was finally chosen, but on opening night Miss Gould was assisted in greeting her guests by six debutante acquaintances. According to one bewildered reporter, it was like attending "a feminist wedding where friends of the bride show you to your seat."<sup>13</sup> The New York World thought it "unique to say the least."<sup>14</sup>

The premiere was a gala event. Nearly half of the theater was occupied by local and national celebrities, protected from a large and extremely curious street crowd by an extra police detail. Miss Gould furthered the Embassy's success with private entertainments at home. But after several weeks she complained that her \$1,000 monthly salary barely covered a quarter of her expenses, and determined to ask for a raise. By October, however, she had fled to Paris for "rest from [her] interesting theatrical work," and perhaps to initiate divorce proceedings against her over-shadowed husband, Harry Bishop, Jr.<sup>15</sup>

Miss Gould intended to return to the Embassy before Christmas, but the theater was already changing. Its novelty had worn off among the rich and new incentives were necessary to entice the middle class away from the larger and less expensive movie palaces. Daily matinees were introduced and admission dropped to \$.50 - \$1.00.<sup>16</sup> By 1929 the Embassy was devoted exclusively to the newsreels which the now-divorced Miss Gould had previously barred. Once again it made motion picture history, this time as the first newsreel theater in America.

(JA)

#### Notes

1. "The Screen," The World, August 26, 1925,
2. "Embassy Theater Another Monument to Thomas Lamb," Exhibitor's Trade Review (August 29, 1925), 37-38.
3. Ibid.
4. "Gloria Gould Bishop Stirrs Social Sets," Plain Dealer [Cleveland], August 1, 1925. A floor plan from Lamb's office (dated July 27, 1925; job No. 2266, Dwg. f-10) indicates the 4 foot stage. New York City, Department of Building, Manhattan, Block 999, Lot 3, Plans (at present the roller on which the plans are filed is marked only with the block number 999).
5. "The Screen."
6. "Society Stuff," Film Daily, July 30, 1925.

7. "Subtitles," Evening Post, August 27, 1925.
8. Daniel Blum, The Silent Screen (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1953), p. 281.
9. "Gloria Bares her Early Drama Move," Boston American, July 30, 1925.
10. "Gloria Gould's Movie to Have Girl Ushers in Ballet Dress," New York American, July 29, 1925.
11. "Gloria Seeks Beauties," New York Daily Mirror, August 1, 1925.
12. "Ushers at Movie Dress Scantily," The Sun, July 28, 1925.
13. Sunday Graphic, September 18, 1925. See also Exhibitor's World, August 27, 1925. Both in the Embassy Clippings File, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center Branch, New York Public Library.
14. "The Screen."
15. "Gloria Bishop Now in Paris," New York Times, October 11, 1925, p. 30. See also Exhibitor's Graphic, September 18, 1925.
16. See advertisement for "Ben Hur," New York Times, June 2, 1926, p.23.

#### Newsreels and the Embassy Theater

Barely four years after its opening, the exclusive Embassy was transformed into a more popular newsreel theater. Its facade was modified, but most of its lavish appointments remained intact.<sup>1</sup>

The American newsreel was a ten-minute potpourri of filmed news footage, released twice weekly to motion picture theaters nationwide. Introduced in 1911, it survived as a news medium until 1967 when the newsreel succumbed to its more popular offspring, television journalism.

Prior to 1911 noteworthy events were recorded on separate news films of varying length. They followed no fixed schedule but were issued as new events and their cinematic coverage allowed. Unlike the richly diversified newsreel, each news film was an individual motion picture devoted to a single topic. The first was released in America in 1894, several years after debuts in France and England. A grainy prize-fight, it initiated the still strong alliance between American news films and professional sports. Uncritical audiences were also thrilled by catastrophes like the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and by grim battle scenes from the Spanish American and other contemporaneous wars, despite the fact that much of the footage was fraudulent. Typical of early news films was Thomas Edison's coverage of the Boer War which was filmed entirely before a backdrop in Orange, New Jersey.<sup>2</sup>

The appeal of fictionalized news declined proportionately to the rise of dramatic feature films. Once again France led the way, introducing the world's first newsreel in 1909. Producer Charles Pathe quickly expanded operations and on August 8, 1911, his French company released America's

first newsreel, approximately 60% of which was devoted to United States (mostly New York) news. Numerous producers emerged in the following years, including the newsreel giants at Hearst, Universal, Fox and later, Paramount studios.

Despite Fox's tardy appearance in 1919, it soon dominated the newsreel market. During its first year alone, Fox's bi-weekly releases reached an estimated audience of thirty million people. By 1922 the studio claimed over a thousand cameramen stationed from New York to Tokyo, Melbourne to Siberia.<sup>3</sup> Four years later it established the Fox Movietone Corporation in order to exploit the revolutionary sound-on-film system which Theodore Case had recently developed. This led on January 21, 1927, to Fox's presentation of the first sound newsreel at the Sam Harris Theater on 42nd Street in Manhattan.<sup>4</sup> Accompanied by a piano score and commentary by Lowell Thomas, the sound newsreel netted Fox approximately \$100,000 per week. Such staggering profits doubtless prompted Fox to transform the Embassy Theater from Gloria Gould's now-struggling high society motion picture house into the first theater in America devoted exclusively to newsreels.

The daring scheme was launched by a clever promotion which invited thousands of New Yorkers to attend opening week. On each invitation the viewer's \$.25 admission was affixed, compliments of the (renamed) Embassy Newsreel Theater.<sup>5</sup> Projection began on November 2, 1929, with an hour long program featuring, among others, such diverse topics as "the Crown Prince Escapes Assassination," the New York mayoral debate, Madame Currie receiving her degree, an attack on Prohibition, and some reassuring remarks about the disastrous condition of Wall Street, winding up with the latest Princeton-Navy game.<sup>6</sup> The format was borrowed from newspapers where the lead story preceded unrelated and progressively less important subject matter, followed by a sports and comic section.

According to a leading trade journal, the new Embassy would "fill...a long-felt want" for the many people who found "the newsreel the best part of the program."<sup>7</sup> It was "the real thing... the best show in town."<sup>8</sup> The Embassy's thundering success was encouraged by its location. The fourteen hourly shows screened between 10:00 a.m. and midnight demanded a place where large crowds made possible a constantly changing audience. What's more, the theater's proximity to Fox's 61st Street studio assured speedy processing of spot news specials, and thus made the Embassy's newsreels competitive with the newspapers they mimicked.<sup>9</sup> Its success prompted Fox to establish an Embassy newsreel chain with theaters at 72nd Street, Rockefeller Center, and at Park Avenue and 42nd Street, as well as in Newark, New Jersey.<sup>10</sup> Other production companies followed suit.

The Embassy's popularity continued throughout the 1930s, aided by gruesome footage of the Chinese-Japanese War and spectacular events like the Lindbergh baby kidnapping (1932), Bruno Hauptmann's arrest and trial, the assassination of Alexander I of Yugoslavia (1934), and in 1937, the most sensational of all, the Hindenberg explosion. Lease complications, however, forced the Embassy to close temporarily in early 1934. It reopened several weeks later, Mayor LaGuardia in attendance, under the new name and management of the "Embassy Pathe News Theater." More than 9,000 people visited the small theater within the first four days of its reopening.<sup>11</sup>

Yet even while the new Embassy thrived, the broader newsreel market had changed radically. The novelty of sound had worn off and newsreel production costs continued to rise precipitously. In an attempt to cut expenses studios began to rely upon footage exchanges, but this resulted in a deadly sameness in coverage and only hastened the newsreel's decline. Other companies simply withdrew from production, lessening competition but also the competitive edge. In addition, more critical assessments of "soft news" found fault (and sometimes libel) in the newsreel's blend of fact and dramatic fiction. There was also a growing dissatisfaction with its disjointed newspaper format which arranged stories anticlimactically in degrees of lessening significance and of lesser audience interest.

It was the television, however, which finally toppled the newsreel. Available as early as 1939, television helped bring the end of the Embassy Newsreel Theater on November 18, 1949. Twenty years to the week and an estimated eleven million admissions had passed since the Embassy had screened its first newsreel in 1929.<sup>12</sup> Gloria Gould's feature film policy was revived, and the Embassy became Times Square's newest first run movie house.

Newsreels survived only a short time longer in the Embassy chain theaters on 72nd and 50th Streets. But in late December 1967, the era closed with the production of the last newsreel by Universal Studios. Significantly, it consisted largely of television footage.<sup>13</sup>

(JA)

#### Notes

1. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Alteration Permit 2212-29. The Embassy's current vestibule is the result of at least three subsequent alterations (Building Notice 2435-41, Building Notice 3302-42, Building Notice 2830-49). Originally it held a central advertising kiosk of richly carved circassian walnut and marble. The modern wood and glass ticket booth (now fronting on Broadway) replaced the original booth, which, contrary to standard practice, had been located in the lobby.
2. Raymond Fielding, The American Newsreel, 1911 - 1967 (New York: Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), p. 41. Much of this section on newsreels depends on Fielding's work.
3. Ibid., p. 106-07.
4. "Movietone News Reel," New York Times, April 30, 1927.
5. Fielding, p. 201.
6. "All News Program has Auspicious Preview," Exhibitors' Daily Review, November 2, 1929.
7. "The Newsreel Theatre," Exhibitor's Daily Review, November 1, 1929.

8. "Broadway," Exhibitor's Herald World, November 21, 1929.
9. "Embassy for Shorts," Motion Picture News, November 21, 1929. See also "Sound News Theaters Present Many Problems," Exhibitor's Daily Review, December 18, 1929 and Fielding, pp. 106, 130.
10. "Embassy Newsreel Changes its Policy," New Leader, November 19, 1949.
11. "Embassy," New York Herald, February 18, 1934. See also "Shows Newsreels Again," New York Times, February 12, 1934, p. 19.
12. Fielding, p. 307. See also "Embassy Newsreel Changes its Policy."
13. "The Movie Newsreel Flickers its Last and Dies," New York Times, December 22, 1967, p. 37.

### Description<sup>1</sup>

The lobby is divided into two spaces, an outer lobby and an inner lobby.

#### Outer Lobby:

The outer lobby is a narrow space, 40 feet long, which leads from the vestibule to the inner lobby. The ceiling is coved.

1) Ornament: Decorative ornament includes but is not limited to the following:

The long walls have veined marble wainscoting and wall frames, containing illuminated placard displays, of the same marble. An ornamental plasterwork entablature surmounts each wall frame. The floor is of black tile within a white marble grid. The coved ceiling rises from a plasterwork frieze with alternating swags and medallions. The ceiling is outlined by moldings.

2) Attached Fixtures: The outer lobby leads in from two pairs of brass-framed double doors, each door with 20 glass panes, set below a multi-light transom, at the vestibule. Two sets of double doors like those at the vestibule lead to the inner lobby. Two original brass and crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling.

3) Known alterations: Air conditioning vents have been added to the ceiling.

#### The Inner Lobby:

The inner lobby is a long narrow space, connecting the outer lobby to the auditorium. It is similar in its basic design details to the outer lobby.



1) Decorative ornament: Decorative ornament includes but is not limited to the following:

The walls are paneled with blond wood, punctuated by square mirrors (see below, under fixtures) and, on the right wall, entrances to the lavatories. The mirrors surmounted by an entablature with a burlled walnut frieze. Above each is a gilded bas-relief showing two swag-laden putti flanking a central vase. On either side of the large mirrors a paneled pier projects from the wall. Each contains a circular mirror (see below, under fixtures) framed by a carved wooden wreath. The ceiling is outlined by an ornate gilded coved plasterwork frieze; a chandelier (see below, under fixtures) is suspended from a gilded plasterwork medallion.

2) Fixtures: The square mirrors on the walls are framed in finely-crafted wood. There are circular mirrors on the paneled piers of the side wall. A brass and crystal chandelier is suspended from the ceiling.

3) Known alterations: Two of the circular mirrors are modern replacements. A modern concession stand and air conditioning ducts have been installed near the auditorium entrance.

#### Auditorium:

1) Configuration: The configuration of the auditorium consists of a long, relatively narrow space, with a gently sloped floor, a ceiling, and a rectangular opening framing the motion picture screen. A shallow platform is set behind the opening. The auditorium is all on one level without boxes or balconies. It is entered from the rear.

Ceiling: the ceiling has a large shallow dome.

Floor: the floor is gently sloped.

2) Ornament: The decorative ornament is integrated into the surfaces which define the configuration of the auditorium. Decorative ornament includes, but is not limited to, the following:

Orchestra: The main decorative focus is on the ornate side walls. On either side of the auditorium are four piers, the inner faces of which are decorated with floral relief patterns surrounding an oval marble inset. Above the oval slabs on the piers are lighting fixtures (see below, under fixtures), supported on the backs of two sinuous mermaids. Each pier is crowned by a gilded arch at the center of which is a grotesque head. Between the piers are curvilinear wooden valences with floral motifs at either end and a dropped oyster shell at the center.

Ceiling: The low flat ceiling rises from a paneled and bracketed plasterwork cornice. Dominating the ceiling is a large shallow dome with recessed illumination. The remainder of the ceiling is covered in filigree ornament in low relief.

3) Attached fixtures:

Murals: The piers on the auditorium walls flank irreplaceable murals by Arthur Crisp. They are painted on canvas and applied to the wall; there are six in all.

Light fixtures: The Rambusch-designed lighting fixtures are irreplaceable. Above the oval slabs on the piers are gilded vase-like lighting fixtures. Surrounding the large shallow dome of the ceiling are eight small light fixtures of brass and rock crystal panels.

4) Known alterations: Air conditioning grilles have been installed in the ceiling cornice, and loudspeakers have been placed on the valences. At the rear of the auditorium a modern sound wall and projection booth have been installed. This wall visually, but not physically, segments two of the Crisp murals.

(MP)

Notes

1. This description identifies the spaces that are included in this designation. Specific elements are listed and architecturally significant features are underlined as explained in the "Guidelines for Treatment of Theater Interiors" as adopted by the Landmarks Preservation Commission on December 10, 1985.

Conclusion

The Embassy Theater Interior survives today as a largely intact historic motion picture theater which is important not only for its splendid architecture and decorative detail, but also for its cultural significance. One of more than 300 theaters designed by Thomas Lamb, it rates among his finest. Its French-inspired interior includes fine lighting fixtures and ornamental details by the Rambusch Studio and murals by Arthur Crisp. A small house with fewer than 600 seats, it was originally used by Gloria Gould as a vehicle to foster ideas about independence for women. It was later transformed into the first newsreel theater in America. Built in 1925, it has for a half century, contributed to the unique character of Times Square as the center of New York's entertainment district and the largest and most famous concentration of legitimate stage and motion picture theaters in the world.

Report prepared by Janet Adams,  
Research Staff.

The preparation of this report includes  
a section on Thomas Lamb by Andrew S.

Dolkart (ASD). The report was edited by Anthony W. Robins, Deputy Director of Research and Marjorie Pearson (MP), Director of Research, who also wrote the description. Other Research Department staff who contributed to the report include Gale Harris, Marion Cleaver, and Jay Shockley.

The New York Landmarks Preservation Commission gratefully acknowledges the assistance rendered by many concerned citizens in studying the Broadway theaters. Special thanks are due the New York City Planning Commission; Community Planning Board 5, Manhattan; the New York Landmarks Conservancy; the Actors Equity Committee to Save the Theaters; and the individual theater owners.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this Interior, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Embassy I Theater, first floor interior consisting of the lobby, the auditorium; and the fixtures and interior components of the spaces, including but not limited to, wall, and ceiling surfaces, doors, and attached decorative elements; has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City, and the Interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more, and that the Interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public, and to which the public is customarily invited.

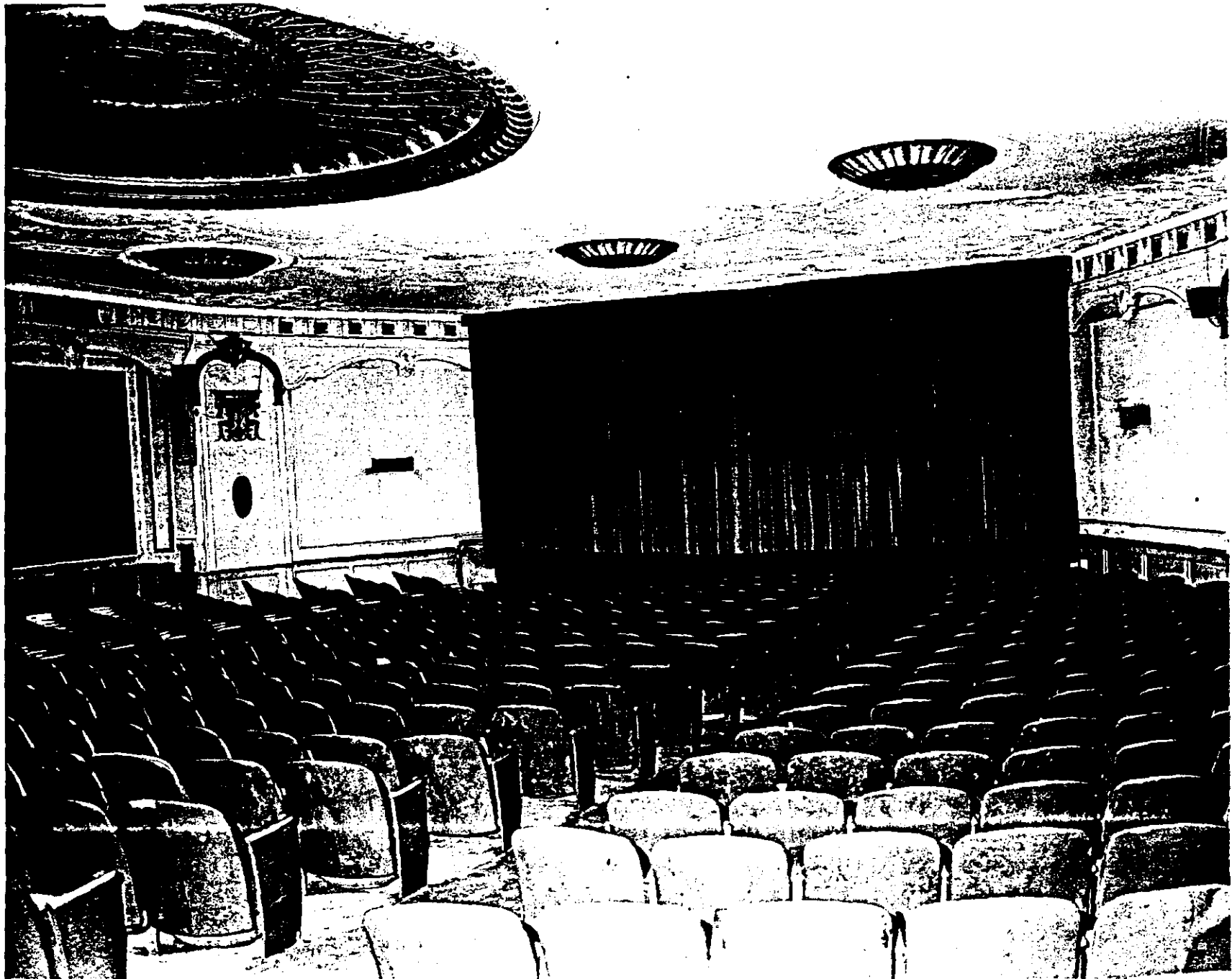
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Embassy Theater Interior was one of more than 300 theaters designed by Thomas Lamb and is considered among his finest; that its French-inspired interior is an unusually handsome design which includes decorative features and lighting fixtures by the Rambusch Studio and murals by the New York muralist Arthur Crisp; that the Embassy is culturally significant as a theater which fostered ideas about independence for women, and as the first newsreel theater in America; and that for more than a half century the Embassy has contributed to the unique character of Times Square as the entertainment center of New York and the largest and most famous concentration of legitimate stage and motion picture theaters in the world.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 an Interior Landmark the Embassy I Theater, first floor interior consisting of the lobby, the auditorium; and the fixtures and interior components of the spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, doors, and attached decorative elements; 1556-1560 Broadway, Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 999, Lot 3 in part, consisting of the land beneath the described interior as its Landmark Site.

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Embassy I Theater Interior  
1556-1560 Broadway  
Manhattan

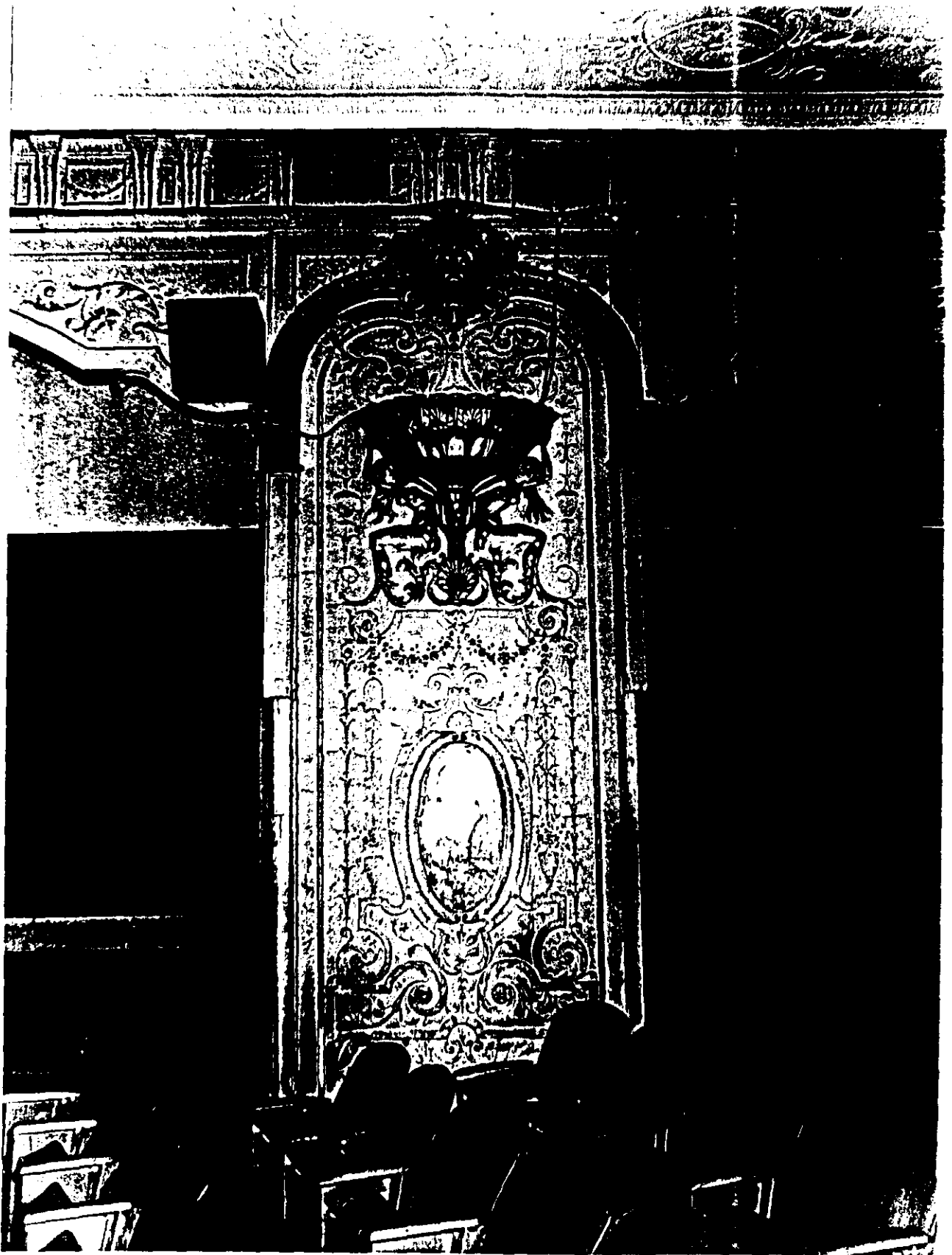
Built: 1925  
Architect: Thomas Lamb

Photo: Forster, LPC

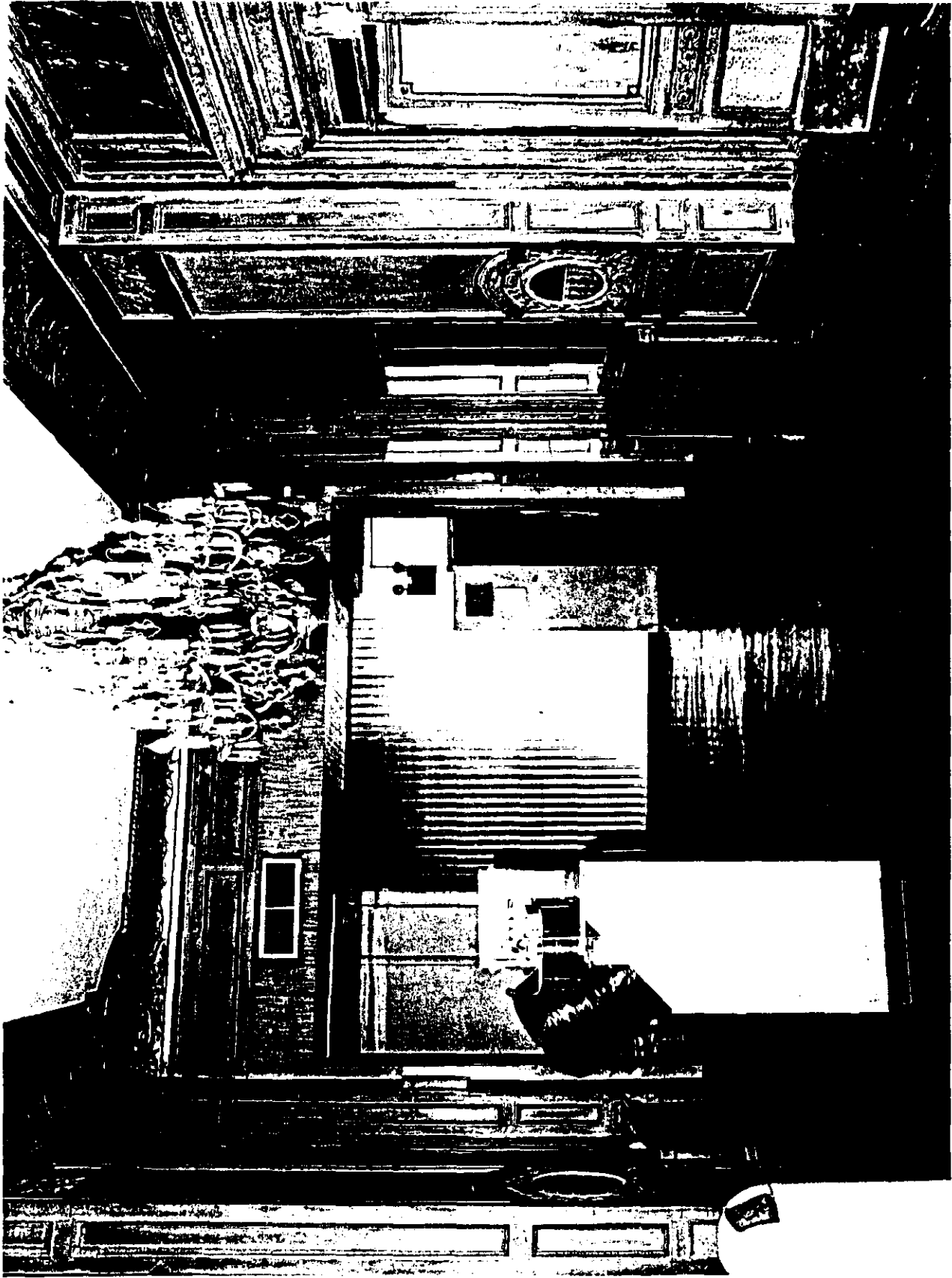


Embassy I Theater Interior





Embassy I Theater Interior  
Detail



Embassy I Theater Interior  
Inner Lobby