

THE TELFAIR ACADEMY:

From Historic Home to Art Museum



ATTIC FIRE

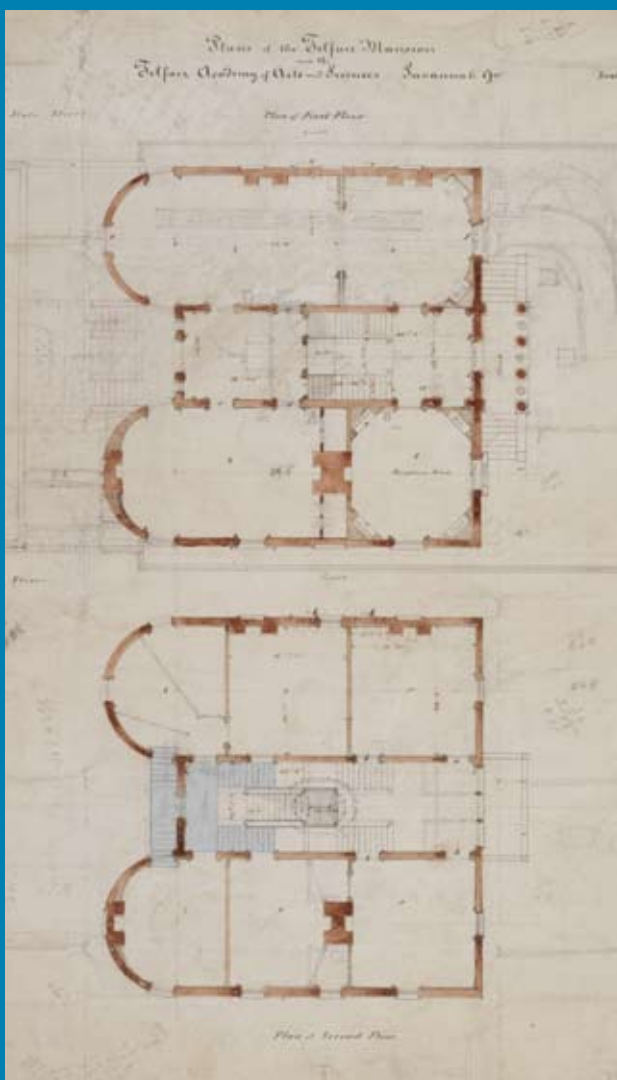
Welcome to Telfair Museums' first museum building, the Telfair Academy. The Telfair Academy's long history unfolded in several phases, which you will discover as you explore the building and its collections.

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TELFAIR HOUSE

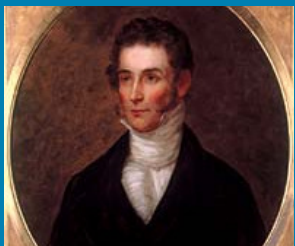
The building began as a stylish home designed in 1818 for Alexander Telfair, son of Revolutionary War patriot, plantation owner, and Georgia governor Edward Telfair. Following the deaths of his father and older brothers, Alexander became the head of the family at the age of twenty-nine, and the family's plantations and mercantile operations became his responsibility. He built his house, which was also to be home for his unmarried sisters and mother, on St. James Square (now Telfair Square)—previously the site of royal governor James Wright's home. The architect, William Jay, a native of the city of Bath in England, was one of the earliest architects in America to work in the style of the English Regency era, characterized by an adherence to symmetry, harmony, and balance, and an attention to decorative details inspired by classical antiquity.

*Floor plans and elevation of the Telfair House
by Detlef Lienau, Courtesy of the Avery
Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University*



The house was completed in 1819 and included a reception room, dining room, drawing room, bedrooms, kitchens, a wine cellar, and other service rooms on the basement level. On the exterior, Jay designed a symmetrical facade with a central porch supported by four columns with cast stone capitals. On the interior, the public rooms were placed on either side of the grand entrance hallway and staircase. Today, two interior rooms have been restored to reflect the era of Alexander Telfair.

WHO LIVED HERE?

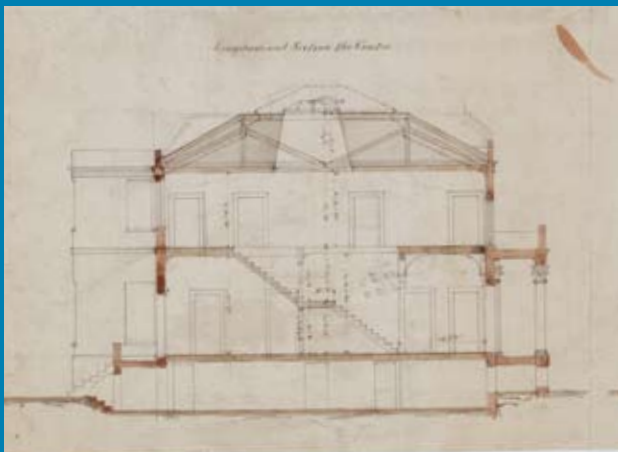


Portrait of *Alexander Telfair*, 1830, unknown artist



Portrait of *Mary Telfair*, 1842, Enrichetta Narducci

The Telfairs were members of a wealthy circle of urban Southerners who felt as much at home in the drawing rooms of New York City and Philadelphia as in the parlors of Savannah. Alexander Telfair and sisters Mary, Margaret, and Sarah lived in the house during the social season, leaving Savannah during the summers to stay in New York; Newport, Rhode Island; and elsewhere. Alexander died in 1832, leaving his sisters to manage the family holdings. The Telfair sisters made four trips abroad, the first in 1841. On one trip, Margaret Telfair met scholar and diplomat William Brown Hodgson, whom she married in 1842. Hodgson moved into the mansion with his wife and her sisters, Sarah and Mary. Sarah Telfair (1792-1845), Hodgson (1801-1871), and Margaret (1797-1874) died before Mary Telfair (1791-1875), who never married. In addition to the Telfairs, the site was also home to the family's enslaved servants, including the valet, Friday; Mary Telfair's cook, Judy; and George Gibbons, who remained in the house after emancipation.



ENTRANCE HALL

The museum's entrance hall bears little resemblance to the hall of the original Telfair house. A guest visiting the Telfairs would have entered through a small vestibule



with an illusory domed ceiling and doors leading to the Octagon Room on the left and the double parlor on the right. Continuing into the hall, the visitor would have seen a double staircase, a landing, and a single stair leading to the upper level.

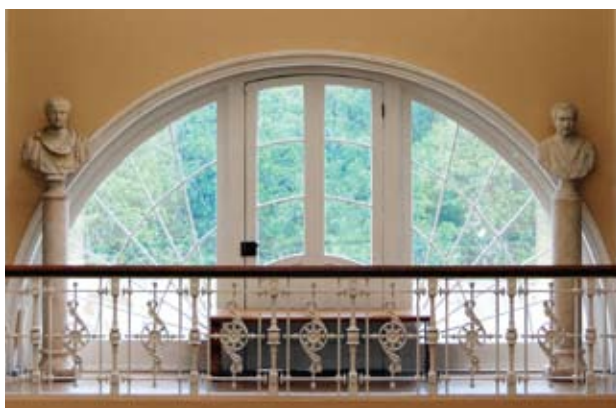
In the 1880s, the entrance hall was opened up to allow public groups to enter what was once a private home. The original staircase was removed, as was the original octagonal skylight.

Pine floors were covered in marble, and a marble staircase was installed at the end of the entrance hall, leading to the upstairs bedrooms (also altered) and the new addition. The upper part of the entrance hall was originally open in the center with walkways on either side leading into the Telfairs' bedrooms.

Recreation of entrance, skylight, and staircase, Telfair house



Telfair Academy entrance hall, 1886



OCTAGON ROOM



This octagonal reception room was used by Alexander Telfair for greeting friends and business acquaintances, and later by sisters Mary and Margaret Telfair as a sitting room. Although the Telfairs referred to this as the "Oak Room," the walls are actually made of plaster, which has been painted and grained with various tools to look like wood. The neoclassical decoration and furnishings reflect the tastes of both William Jay and the Telfairs. The British-made chandelier in the room is the only original lighting fixture in the house. Alexander's estate inventory listed a Brussels carpet and hearth rug in the room. Neoclassical elements include the Greek key design and acanthus leaf motif, found in the period reproduction carpet and the original plaster ceiling medallion. The gilt-wood curtain rod, carved to resemble acanthus leaves, was a furnishing of the Jay-designed Archibald Bulloch house (destroyed 1916). The Telfairs' suite of maple furniture, made in Philadelphia c. 1810, includes two Grecian couches, a round center table, and two of eighteen side chairs. The globes, one terrestrial (the earth) and one celestial (the heavens), belonged to Alexander Telfair. His portrait, probably created after a miniature, hangs above the mantle.



DINING ROOM



The Dining Room was located behind the original (now removed) staircase, directly above the kitchens. Original features include matching fireplaces of white Italian marble, window moldings, and the doorway by which the room is entered. Restoration

revealed that the Dining Room had originally featured two chandeliers, which would have been centered on plaster medallions. The recreated medallions were adapted from the surviving example in the Octagon Room. Paint evidence indicated that the plaster cove ornament near the ceiling was painted a chocolate-brown color, while the decorative relief was whitewashed. The ornaments were recreated as an anthemion pattern similar to that found in Jay's Owens-Thomas House. Because the Dining Room's original plaster walls had been removed, the museum installed a wallpaper appropriate to the period. This woodblock-printed paper, *The Monuments of Paris*, designed and created by Joseph DuFour in Paris during the early 1800s, was available in Savannah as early as 1817. Furnishings include a New York sideboard attributed to Duncan Phyfe and a dining table by Thomas Cook of Philadelphia.

DRAWING ROOM (DOUBLE PARLOR)

Originally, the Drawing Room was a double parlor used for entertaining, with pocket doors separating the front and back sections. Furniture would have been arranged symmetrically along the walls and drawn as needed. For example, small groupings could be created for ladies' tea, card games, or conversation. Large pieces such as tables and sofas were provided with casters for ease of movement over the floor, which was originally carpeted. The window between the two fireplaces is not original and marks the area where pocket doors separated



the room. Both mantles in the room were carved in the workshop of noted New York sculptor John Frazee. The mantle at the west end of the Drawing Room is carved with a pastoral scene inscribed



“The Shepherd Boy,” while the east mantle features a carving on the theme of the “peaceable kingdom.” Other works often on view include marble portrait medallions of Mary and Margaret Telfair. When the mansion became a public art museum in the 1880s, the partition and pocket doors were removed to create a larger gallery, which today is used for temporary exhibitions.

TELFAIR KITCHEN (LOWER LEVEL)

The only original service room of the Telfair house that is currently on view, the kitchen was restored and opened to the public in the 1920s. Dating back to 1819, this kitchen features the original hearth and double oven. Furnishings include a coiled rush market basket and a plain style cupboard with simple classical details.



UPPER LEVEL GALLERIES

Originally Telfair family bedrooms, these spaces were modified in the 1880s to serve as galleries. The original windows and fireplaces were covered by walls suitable for hanging paintings. Today, these galleries display work from the Telfair’s permanent collection and temporary exhibitions.



Telfair Academy c. 1885



FROM HOUSE TO MUSEUM

In her will of 1875, Mary Telfair left her house and belongings to the Georgia Historical Society with the charge to establish an "academy and library of arts and sciences." After eight years of litigation, Mary Telfair's will was carried out. The Society hired German-born artist Carl Brandt to create the new institution. Working with New York-based architect Detlef Lienau and Savannah-based architect Augustus Schwab, Brandt remodeled the old Telfair home and constructed an addition to house a new collection of art. The Museum opened to public in 1886, making it the oldest public art museum in the South.

Telfair Academy c. 1888





ROTUNDA GALLERY

The Rotunda Gallery reflects the vision and taste of three important figures in the museum's early history: the Telfair's first director, Carl Brandt (1831-1905); the architect of the space, German-born Detlef Lienau (1818-1887); and Gari Melchers (1860-1932), the museum's fine arts advisor from 1906-1916. The Rotunda Gallery is the result of an 1883-86 renovation that transformed the Telfair mansion into an art museum. The Rotunda and the Sculpture Gallery beneath form a rear addition to the original mansion. Brandt worked with Lienau to design the Rotunda, which evokes the grandeur of a nineteenth-century European salon. Brandt also created the four murals on view in the upper register of the gallery. These depict the great practitioners of the four primary art forms, according to Brandt: Apelles, painting (west); Iktinus, architecture (north); Praxiteles, sculpture (east); and Albrecht Dürer, printmaking (south). The fact that three of these artists are ancient Greeks reflects the late nineteenth-century reverence for classical art and culture.

Rotunda Gallery 2008





Carl Brandt was charged with building a permanent collection for the new museum. The works he collected testify to the nineteenth-century taste for narrative paintings—those that tell stories or impart lessons—as well as the privileged position of history paintings—works that present an edifying subject from the past. Both impulses are manifested in the monumental *The Black Prince at Crécy* by American artist Julian Story, which Brandt purchased privately from the Paris Universal Exposition in 1889 and later donated to the Telfair. Outside of his role as director, Brandt was a noted portrait artist. His portrait of the museum’s founder, Mary Telfair, was completed roughly twenty years after her death and installed in the northwest corner of the Rotunda.

Some of the paintings presented in the Rotunda reflect the dominant stylistic trend of the late nineteenth century: impressionism. These works portray leisurely scenes from everyday life, rendered in vivid colors with loose, painterly brushwork. Many of these impressionistic works were collected for the Telfair by Gari Melchers, an internationally respected American artist who served as the Telfair’s fine arts advisor during the early twentieth century. Melchers acquired over seventy works for the Telfair, which are still among the finest pieces in the museum’s collection. Typically on view in the Rotunda are two treasured works by Melchers himself: *Madonna of the Fields* and *The Unpretentious Garden*, reflecting the artist’s lifestyle in the rural Dutch village where he lived for decades.





SCULPTURE GALLERY

Part of the 1883-86 addition to the Telfair mansion, the Sculpture Gallery features classical architectural elements including four Ionic columns and clerestory windows punctuated by pilasters. Originally, a skylight placed in the center of the gallery's ceiling transmitted light from the Rotunda above. The initial decoration of the Sculpture Gallery featured murals created by Carl Brandt of important archaeological sites, which were installed in the panels between the windows.

The museum's collection of plaster casts, which lend the Sculpture Gallery its name, are copies of famous Greco-Roman sculptures. Brandt originally ordered over seventy of these casts from major museums in Europe. Presented on the same scale as the original works, the casts were important to early Telfair Academy art students, who sketched them as a critical step toward mastering life drawing. More importantly, the casts allowed the people of Savannah to appreciate the great works of Greco-Roman civilization without ever leaving home.

Today, the Sculpture Gallery primarily displays works from the Telfair's permanent collection, many of which were purchased by Gari Melchers. Highlights typically on view in this

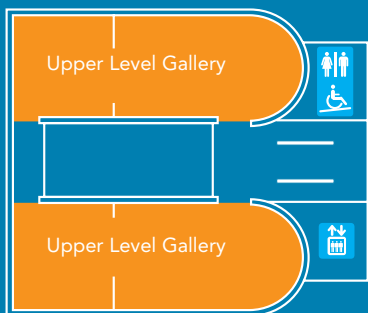


Snow-Capped River

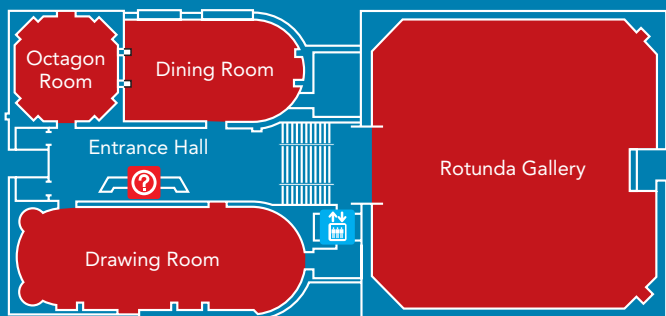
gallery include Childe Hassam's *Brooklyn Bridge in Winter*, Frederick Carl Frieseke's *The Hammock*, George Bellows' *Snow-Capped River*, and Robert Henri's *La Madrileña*. These works illustrate the primary strengths of the Telfair's permanent collection in American impressionism and Ashcan School works.



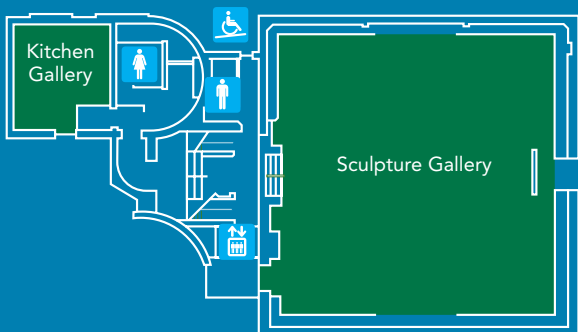
UPPER LEVEL



ENTRANCE LEVEL



LOWER LEVEL



125 YEARS



art + history + architecture

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