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Pride and Humility in the Woolworth Building and in Ourselves

By John Stern

The Woolworth Building rising proudly and gracefully on Broadway in Lower Manhattan has affected people since the day it opened 93 years ago, on April 24, 1913. It has stirred me since I first saw it in 1962—something about this building got hold of me, and I spent hours photographing it. It wasn't until I began studying Aesthetic Realism that I learned why this magnificent structure affects me so much. It exemplifies what is in this principle, stated by Eli Siegel: "All beauty," Mr. Siegel stated, "is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves." My life was revolutionized through studying this great principle.

Pride and Humility: Can Architecture Have Them More Friendly?

I once thought pride was showing how much better I was than other people, and how little I needed them. I learned that I was really curtailing my relation to the world, and that is what made me feel so often dull and half alive.

In an Aesthetic Realism class in 1970, Mr. Siegel explained:

To be proud is to feel you're adding to the beauty of the world in doing something. Also you feel your self represents reality at that moment and gives it more meaning. The chief thing in pride is the feeling "I represent reality well." When we feel we "represent reality well" we are proud and humble.

The Woolworth Building at 792 feet was the tallest building in the world from its completion in 1913 until the Chrysler Building opened in 1930. Its individuality is asserted through those thick vertical piers that rise powerfully from the sidewalk into the tower. But their rise is interrupted and tempered every five floors by horizontal bands. These bands give a sense of scale that makes it more friendly to a person, more humble. They extend outward toward the building's neighbors and join it to the rest of the city, even as the tower continues to rise to that ornate yet airy crown. Without those horizontals the building would look lonely and aloof.



In his book *Self and World* Mr. Siegel explains that the vertical and horizontal have a deep meaning for our lives:

The self is vertical and horizontal....The vertical line is a symbol to the unconscious of the self alone; the horizontal, of the self going out¹

We want to put these opposites together in ourselves, as every beautiful work of architecture does. We want to be individuals, and we want to have to do with everything. The way the Woolworth Building is both vertical and horizontal shows that we can be entirely ourselves, while we are also in an accurate relation to what is around us.

One of the largest questions every person has is, How will I be important and proud of myself: by hoping to respect the outside world, or by having contempt for it—feeling I'm above it? I used the fact that I had a university degree, knew a great many facts about geology and the New York metropolitan region, and that I was an expert in the esoteric field of trolley history to feel I was a superior person. I once felt I didn't have to look up to anything: people should look up to me, while I had the right to look down on everything. But the higher I rose by looking down, the flatter I felt. I was not proud. My contempt for other people made me feel ashamed and lonely.

¹ Eli Siegel, *Self and World* (New York: Definition Press, 1981), p. 118

As I learned what it means to respect the world through seeing how everything, from geology to people, buildings to literature has the same aesthetic structure, the oneness of opposites, a whole new world opened up for me—a world that was honestly friendly, and that I can respect with unlimited pleasure.

One of the things I love about the Woolworth Building is the way it seems to look up to something. Its architect, Cass Gilbert, used the Gothic style for this reason, as he explained:

A skyscraper by its height...is a monument whose masses must become more and more inspired the higher it rises. The Gothic style gave us the possibility of expressing the greatest degree of aspiration.²



As the Woolworth Building rises to the top, the richness of decoration increases—in the two canopies where the tower is set back, the small towers or tourelles at the top, and the crown with its pinnacle. There is drama in the way these features are also interpenetrated with space, so that they are at once prouder—in the rich decoration, and more humble—by welcoming the outside world as space into themselves. A person can feel his strength and glory is in being impervious, impenetrable. The Woolworth Building shows this is not true.

As you look at the building from the side, it has a feeling of surging toward Broadway, like a person striding with his head held high. But it is set back at three places, and there—about halfway up, and twice near the top of the tower—are carved terra-cotta canopies, and also green peaked roofs and pinnacles at the first setback. So there is something like a happy burst of enthusiasm, pride where the building becomes more slender and modestly recedes—like a person who, as Eli Siegel says, represents reality so well that he feels both proud and humble at once.



² Paul Goldberger, *The Skyscraper* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p. 44



In this photograph provided by the Woolworth Company, we can compare the setbacks of the Woolworth Building with those of its neighbors: which is prouder?

The Transportation Building, on the left, recedes dutifully and unimaginatively, with no drama except in the grouping of the setbacks and those modest roofs two-thirds of the way up. Number 250 Broadway on the right sets back with no differentiation at all.

I think the Woolworth Building shows that it takes modesty to change, and we can be proud in doing so. As the building recedes, it doesn't become a Uriah Heep, with hidden motives; it is more gracefully and honestly proud.

Heaviness and Lightness: True Seriousness Is Both

I once felt that seriousness is “heavy” and lightness comes from making fun of everything. I saw the world too much as a burden to be endured. I felt stolid and stuck. On the other hand, I mocked things, felt they didn't matter, gave them little weight or value, and the more I did this, the emptier I felt, and saw no answers. I am grateful to Aesthetic Realism for teaching me how to see the true value of anything—through seeing how accurately and richly it puts reality's opposites together.

In “Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?,” Eli Siegel asks:

Is there in all art, and quite clearly in sculpture, the presence of what makes for lightness, release, gaiety?—and is there the presence, too, of what makes for stability, solidity, seriousness?—is the state of mind making for art both heavier and lighter than that which is customary?³

³ Eli Siegel, “Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?” (New York: Definition Press, 1955)

The Woolworth Building is magnificently heavy and light. First of all, its 223,000 tons sit foursquare on foundations rooted in bedrock 110 feet below the street. Its steel skeleton, which gives the structure strength and flexibility, is given expression in its façade, in those powerful vertical piers, which soar free from the sidewalk and continue, uninterrupted, into the tower, and also in the horizontal bands



every few floors. The arch over the front entrance seems to support a weight of masonry above. And the entire building is faced in terra-cotta, fired clay that hardens to something like stone. The Woolworth Building is abundantly heavy.



But it is light, too. One of the reasons is in the use of that terra-cotta facing, near-white in color, whose glazed surface reflects the sunlight and gives the building such a feeling of lift. And each of the thousands of windows is set in from the surface, welcoming space and therefore lightness. The terra-cotta spandrel or panel under each window is almost lacy in its carved patterns, and those making up the horizontal bands are even richer, while the canopies at the three setbacks are positively exuberant.

This beautiful oneness of heaviness and lightness is what I was looking for. In an early class, Mr. Siegel described me so truly when he said:

John Stern is too stolid, too dignified. There is the need to be serious and also lively and mobile.

Mr. Siegel's imagination, his wonderful, his knowledge encouraged me to have honest exuberance, and I thank him for understanding and strengthening me always.

The Woolworth Building points the way to honest exuberance. See how the horizontal bands, as they follow the ins and outs of the piers and windows, almost seem to dance. As its central and four corner towers rise, their dignity is added to as, near the crown, matter becomes “lively and mobile.” And look at the vertical rows of windows: each group of rows ends at the top in something assertively delicate.



Reality's opposites are made one in this building, which we can see today as we walk down Broadway, showing us how we want to be!

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