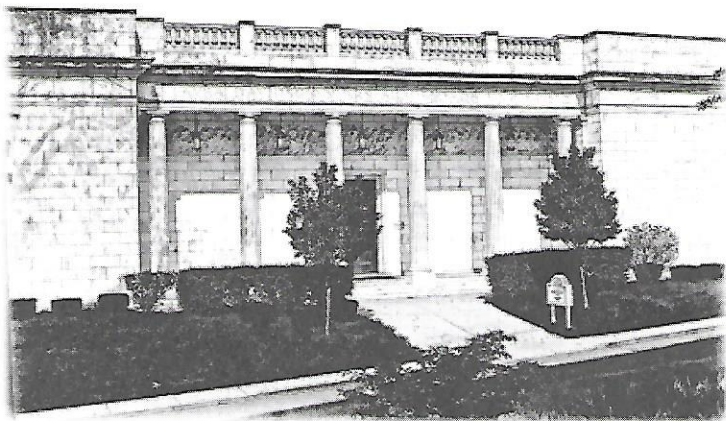


THE LAURA DAVIDSON SEARS GALLERY



Built 1924

One of Elgin's most distinctive historic buildings, the Sears Art Gallery, also known as the Laura Davidson Sears Academy of Fine Arts, was completed in 1924. It houses an extensive art collection, much of which was donated by the family of Judge Nathaniel Sears (no relation to Sears, Roebuck and Co.) and his wife, Laura Davidson Sears, an 1872 graduate of Elgin Academy. The family donated \$150,000 for the building and art worth more than \$200,000 to be used, in perpetuity, to educate Elgin Academy students and the public. It became a center for art and drama not only for the school, but also for the wider community.

Built of Georgia marble and brick, with doric columns, the building was designed by the architect Fred B. Schmidt. Construction was done by the Illinois Hydraulic Stone and Construction Co. (now known as IHC Construction Companies, LLC), an Elgin firm founded in 1906. At the building's dedication in 1924, addresses were delivered by Lorado Taft, a noted sculptor, and Albert Rosenthal, an artist and critic.

Originally all six display rooms, including the Octagon Foyer, had skylights for natural lighting. The entire main floor housed the fine art collection, which was considered one of the finest in the Midwest. Up to the completion of the school's Rider Center in 2008, Sears Gallery

housed the main theatre of Elgin Academy, a preschool-12th grade independent school. Today, the old theatre serves as a rehearsal and event space and the Washington Room serves as an art gallery, housing a significant proportion of the Academy's permanent collection.

The frieze on the portico of the Sears Gallery is a replica of the Parthenon frieze in Athens, Greece. The Parthenon was constructed atop the Acropolis from 448 to 432 B.C. In the early 1800s, parts of that frieze, known as the Elgin Marbles, were removed from the Parthenon for display at the British Museum in London. The frieze is carved in low relief and depicts the procession of the *Great Panathenaia*, the most ancient and important festival of Athenians, honoring their patron goddess, Athena. In front marched the priests and their attendants; then came the sacrificial animals, followed by the matrons and maidens bearing baskets with sacrificial objects. Next were the old men, holding olive branches — a symbol of intelligence, ability, and valor — followed by armed warriors. Then came youth with arms, the cavalry, the victors of the Panathenaic contest, men of the various embassies and alien residents of Athens. Finally there followed men and women carrying sacrificial cakes, water pots, stools, etc.

In its heyday, the Sears Gallery held a priceless collection of sculptures, paintings and drawings that were used by students to study art, history and culture. Judge Sears, whose parents had served as Principal (Headmaster) and Dean of Women at Elgin Academy in the 1870s and 1880s, stipulated that the general public be given once-a-week free admission to the gallery. The collection included pieces by Frederic Remington, Charles Willson Peale, Winslow Homer, Albert Bierstadt, Benjamin West, Anna Hyatt Huntington and George Edwin Bissell. During the 1930s, several outstanding paintings were added from artists sponsored by the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA). Over the years, portions of the collection were sold to maintain the financial viability of the Academy, but a significant number of major works remain and are displayed throughout the campus in each of the school's seven major buildings.