

# **MADE TO SCALE STAIRCASE MASTERPIECES**



**The Eugene & Clare Thaw Gift**

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For over thirty years, Eugene and Clare Thaw collected superb examples of historic staircase models, particularly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that demonstrate a stunning mastery of design, conceptual thinking, and construction skills. Staircases have been part of building design since about 6000 BC, initially as stone additions to exterior walls. Using as a guide the average length of the human foot, staircase design was both practical and military.

Changes in domestic architecture contributed to the development of central interior staircases. In the late fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, fortified castles gave way to a more welcoming and sociable residential architecture, and with it, more impressive interior staircases. Evolving social customs furthered their popularity: wide, graceful staircases allowed residents to make grand “entrances” to social events, and accorded their owners prestige by establishing their place in class hierarchies. As is evident in the Thaws’ collection, the sense of grandeur and elation associated with stairs has inspired beautiful results, including the invention of complex configurations such as single or double helixes, elliptical spirals, and cantilevered designs.

Models have served for centuries to test design theory and the practical elements of construction, as well as to display virtuosity. To achieve the three-dimensional realization of a design, the makers learned to perform wood- and metalwork on a miniature scale as well as develop fine conceptual skills. The resulting staircases were therefore archetypes of both architectural design and furniture craftsmanship.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE STAIRCASE COLLECTION

### Eugene V. Thaw

Excerpted from an interview with Eugene V. Thaw by Sarah D. Coffin, former curator and head, Product Design and Decorative Arts, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, June 22, 2006.



Photo: ©Thaw Charitable Trust

My wife Clare and I first came to collect staircase models after being introduced to them by Alice Kaplan (mother of Joan K. Davidson, Cooper Hewitt Trustee Emerita), a great friend whom we got to know during summers in East Hampton, Long Island. I got to know her also as an art dealer in the winter seasons, sold her some wonderful drawings, and we became pretty good friends. The first staircase model I ever saw was on a pedestal in Alice’s library, and I considered it a beautiful piece of sculpture, in the way of architectural models. I did not think of what it was for; it just looked handsome in a room. I then realized these models were avidly collected, that there were people, especially decorators and architects, who always had one or two of them around the house, on a shelf or a table. Clare and I began to look for them when we went to Europe, and we found a few antique dealers, especially Charles de Langlade at the Galerie Actéon on the rue de Beaune in Paris, who specialized in them. That is how it all started.

Since we did not go to Europe that often, we asked our friends to keep an eye out for them. In recent years, we also acquired models through the auctions of several estates in New York, such as Carter Burden and Bill Blass. We eventually acquired more than twenty models over a period of thirty years.

We had always liked the idea of models, and already owned a few examples of other types of fine architectural models; we also had one or two that were actually birdcages, shaped like a church. Whenever we saw anything of the sort, we tried to obtain it because they were decorative and intriguing. The first important staircase model we bought was a tall spiral staircase with the struts of a roof, which I bought from an antique shop on Jermyn Street in London. We learned much later about the history of staircase models—that they were *pièces de maîtrise*, or masterworks, which were made as part of becoming a master and being accepted into a guild.



**1** CURVED DOUBLE-REVOLUTION STAIRCASE MODEL WITH BUSTS OF FRANÇOIS-MARIE AROUET, CALLED VOLTAIRE (1694–1778), AND JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU (1712–1778) France, early 19th century Cut, joined, and inlaid mahogany, ebony, pear or sycamore, oak, molded biscuit porcelain (busts) H × W × D: 68 × 48.3 × 41 cm (26 ¾ × 19 × 16 ½ in.) Gift of Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw, 2007-45-12

These staircase models show careful craftsmanship, a mastery of geometric principles, and fine woodworking skills. However, I am less interested in the technical side of staircase models than in their aesthetics. I still look at these models as works of art: Are they pleasing to the eye? Do they possess a sweep, a kind of flair? They can be displayed as art, without need of any special skill or historical knowledge.

Clare and I came to the decision to donate our collection to Cooper Hewitt through Joan Davidson. It was she who suggested that Cooper Hewitt be their final resting place, and she introduced me to Paul Warwick Thompson, the museum's [former]

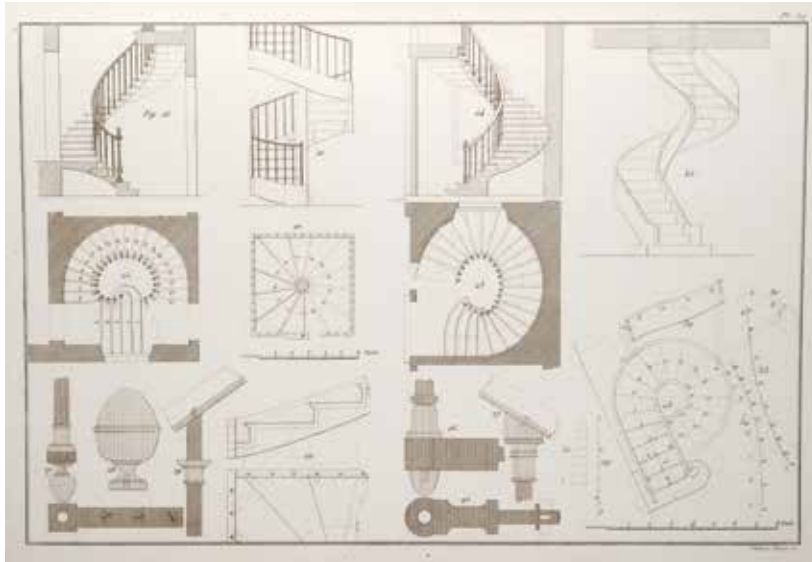
director. After talking with museum staff, I feel that Cooper Hewitt is clearly the right place for these models, and that they'll be very much at home here. I hope, eventually, that Cooper Hewitt will be able to create a room of models like the great room at Sir John Soane's Museum in London, where the idea that models of architecture are beautiful objects in themselves is reinforced. There is no such place either in New York or, as far as I know, in America. I think it would be extremely useful for designers, popular with the public, and serve the essential mandate of Cooper Hewitt as a museum of historic and contemporary design (fig. 1).

## HISTORY OF STAIRCASE MODELS

### Sarah D. Coffin

The staircase model reached its zenith as an art form in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France thanks to a formalized guild system known as *compagnonnage* (society, or guild, of companions) that existed in France, parts of Germany, and western Switzerland. With origins in the medieval era, the *compagnonnage* movement grew into a significant force in the seventeenth century. Its main purpose was to allow any man (women were barred from guilds) the independence of joining a guild and the privilege of learning specific crafts. This differentiated it from the traditional learning process, in which craft skills were only accorded to those receiving wealthy patronage or passed on from father to son within a single family. Prior to the *compagnonnage* movement





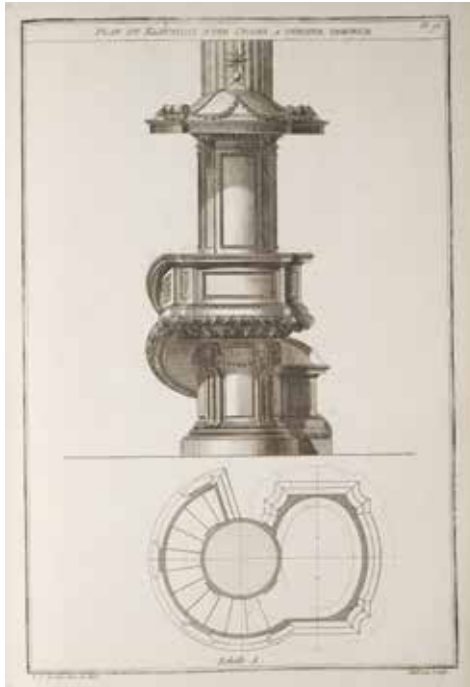
**2**  
 BOOK, *MODÈLES DE MENUISERIE*,  
 PLATE 69, 1825  
 Written by Jean-Baptiste-Marie  
 Bury (1808–1885)  
 Published by Blanc aîné (Paris, France)  
 Engraving, ink on paper  
 H x W: 44 x 29.3 cm (17 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 11 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.)  
 Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution  
 Libraries, TH5611 .M63 1825x folio

being established, particularly in the seventeenth century, apprentices often ran away from particularly difficult masters and had to hide to avoid police raids. Compagnonnage training was based on a meritocratic system open to young men who displayed talent and were able to pass the subsequent stages of exams in both design and execution.

Through this arrangement, apprentices in carpentry, cabinetmaking, and joinery honed their skills in the workshops of acknowledged masters during the day and took courses in the art of geometrical design drawing (*l'art du trait*) in the evenings. A number of books, along with masters' instructions on the art of design drawing, taught principles which had to be learned before any model could be attempted. In 1738, the Dutch author Tieleman van der Horst published a book entitled *The New Art of Building . . . the Art of Staircases, Their Elevations and Wreaths*, which was translated into German in 1763.<sup>1</sup> Another influential eighteenth-century book was André-Jacob Roubo's *L'art du menuisier (The Art of the Woodworker-joiner)* published in Paris in 1769–75. This book included designs for staircases, one of which was for a pulpit that was reached via a spiral staircase similar to the compagnonnage model in the Thaw collection. Jean-Baptiste-Marie Bury's 1825 book *Modèles de Menuiserie (Models of Woodworking-joinery)* also influenced staircase model design on both sides of the Atlantic (figs. 2–5).<sup>2</sup>



**3**  
 SPIRAL STAIRCASE MODEL WITH  
 TWO REVOLUTIONS  
 Probably France, late 18th century  
 Joined, planed, bent, and carved  
 pearwood, wrought brass wire,  
 turned bone  
 H x W x D: 75 x 67.3 x 67 cm (29 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>  
 x 26 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 26 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.)  
 Gift of Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw,  
 2007-45-11



**4**  
 BOOK, *L'ART DU MENUISIER*, VOL. 1,  
 PLATE 90, "PLAN ET ÉLEVATION D'UNE  
 CHAIRE À PRÊCHER IMMOBILE,"  
 1769–75  
 Written and designed by  
 André-Jacob Roubo (1739–1791)  
 Published by Académie Royale des  
 Sciences (Paris, France)  
 Engraving, ink on paper  
 H x W: 40.3 x 26.5 cm (15 7/8 x 10 3/16 in.)  
 Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution  
 Libraries, TH5605 .R85 1769 folio

In France, *compagnonnage* apprentices lived and ate meals in monastic-style boarding houses called *cayennes*. Once they learned the basic concepts of staircase design, they were taught the skills necessary to execute these designs in three-dimensional form as models, thereby displaying their proficiency. In order to prove himself worthy of being taken on as an apprentice in one of the guilds, a young man first produced an "acceptance work." If admitted, he then made a "tour de France," working and studying under different master designer-craftsmen in major French cities such as Tours, Marseille, and Lyon. In each studio, the apprentice had to prove his competence in both drawing and workmanship before he was able to go on to the next location. Two Adolph Bordeaux drawings from a suite of ten dating from 1883 to 1887, executed in various "tour de France" cities, illustrate the work of a *compagnonnage* member who was perfecting various design concepts with different masters. They demonstrate the training apprentices learned in drawing perspectives, elevations, cross sections, and the details of joinery.

At the end of a successful tour—which normally took four to seven years—the apprentice produced a "reception masterpiece" to demonstrate his



**5**  
 PULPIT MODEL WITH STAIRCASE  
 France, mid-19th century  
 Carved, inlaid, marquetryed, and  
 veneered walnut, pear, and oak  
 H x W x D: 70 x 46.6 x 33 cm  
 (27 3/8 x 16 x 13 in.)  
 Gift of Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw,  
 2007-45-13

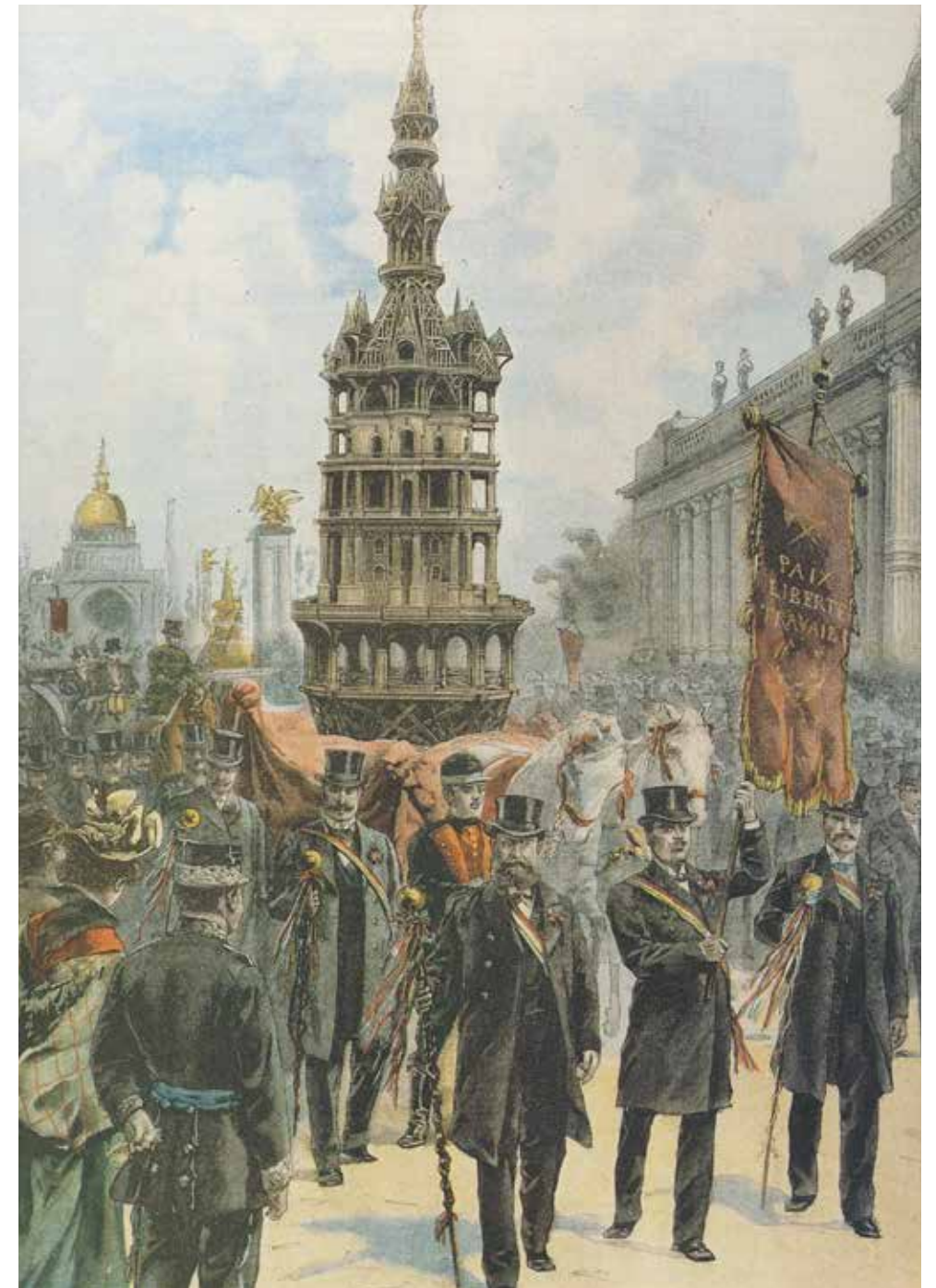


comprehension of, and dexterity in, the complicated designs and specialties he learned from multiple teachers. The last step in the *compagnonnage* process involved attaining the title of *compagnon fini*, or complete (finished) companion. To reach this level, the apprentice had to produce a *maîtrise*, or masterwork, exhibiting a level of design and craftsmanship beyond what was required for the reception masterpiece. These chefs d'oeuvre would often take years to complete. After formal acknowledgment as a master, several further honors could be earned by a companion. To attain the level of master in a specific city, for example, a member would create a particularly elaborate model as a form of competition with other area master workers. Sometimes these models, or special pieces made by a group of masters from the same city's guild, were carried in area parades on men's shoulders or on special supports (fig. 6).

New guild members often took on a symbolic name representing both an emblematic virtue or attribute and a place of origin, such as *Languedoc, la Clef des Coeurs* (Languedoc, the Key to Hearts) or *Blois, Ami du Trait* (Blois, Friend of Design Drawing). In the nineteenth century, the mystery associated with these symbolic names—sometimes used to avoid identification in moments of social unrest—and the secret rites often associated with *compagnonnage* guilds, including ceremonies involving the transfer of special walking sticks with symbols and the wearing of sashes, caused many people to regard them with suspicion.

In 1839, attempting to reinforce moral and professional standards for *compagnonnage* members, Agricol Perdiguier (1805–1875) wrote *Le livre du compagnonnage* (*The Book of Compagnonnage*) detailing the movement's customs and duties. In the fervor of social romanticism characteristic of the time, Perdiguier's book was enthusiastically received by the great French authors Alphonse de Lamartine and Victor Hugo. In 1841, the French writer George Sand further made Perdiguier and *compagnonnage* popular cultural icons through her book *Le compagnon du tour de France* (*The Companion of the Tour of France*). Perdiguier's talents as a true master, along with the fame brought on by Sand, drew attention to some of the great works being produced by *compagnonnage* members and resulted in a revival of interest in their work (fig. 7).

Following France's Revolution of 1848, the *compagnonnage* movement gradually weakened due to the general rise of organized labor, greater mechanization, and a decline in the demand for handcrafted work. However, the tradition of fine staircase model design has endured.



**6**  
F. MEAULLE  
The "Viannay" being transported  
from the *Exposition Universelle* to  
the chapterhouse on rue Mabillon,  
illustration from *Le Petit Parisien*  
Paris, France, 1900



**7**  
 SPIRAL STAIRCASE MODEL WITH  
 CURVED STRINGBOARD  
 France, ca. 1820–40  
 Planed, joined, and veneered  
 pearwood, walnut  
 H × W × D: 27 × 20 × 15.5 cm (10 7/8  
 × 7 7/8 × 6 1/8 in.)  
 Gift of Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw,  
 2007-45-21

This style was popularized by the  
 important master of  
 compagnonnage Agricol Perdiguer.

**8**  
 SPIRAL STAIRCASE MODEL  
 Paris, France, late 19th century  
 Planed, joined, and veneered  
 cherry, walnut  
 H × W × D: 31 × 13 × 17.2 cm (12 1/4  
 × 5 1/8 × 6 3/4 in.)  
 Gift of Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw,  
 2007-45-8



The Thaws' exceptional collection of sculptural models demonstrates the variety and ingenuity realized by many eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century craftsmen. Through their intricate, complex three-dimensional forms and joinery, these models represent true masterworks of design and technical virtuosity. This brochure celebrates Eugene and Clare Thaw's generous donation of their staircase model collection to Cooper Hewitt's permanent collection. As such, the staircases will remain testaments to high craftsmanship and design to be enjoyed by many future generations (figs. 8–30).

NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> This book was highly influential through the 1970s, when images from the book were used in a publication by Willibald Mannes to reintroduce eighteenth-century wood staircase-building techniques. These techniques are also visible in a marquetry wood example from the Thaw collection made by O. E. Hadwiger in the United States in 1964.

<sup>2</sup> The example of this book owned by Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Library is inscribed by American architect, treatise writer, and author on buildings Asher Benjamin. As it was then apparently owned by architects Ithiel Town and Alexander Jackson Davis before being acquired by Abram Hewitt, this volume likely served a key role in the history of American architectural use of staircases.





9

**CURVED STAIRCASE MODEL**  
Signed by Ugen  
France, late 19th century  
Planed, carved, veneered, and  
turned cherry  
H x W x D: 54 x 53.3 x 27.9 cm  
(21 ¼ x 21 x 11 in.)  
Gift of Eugene V. and Clare E.  
Thaw, 2007-45-14

This staircase model and number  
26 (p. 24) are similar to ones in  
a folio by E. Delbrel, published in  
Paris in the 1880s.



10

**ARCHITECTURAL STAIRCASE MODEL**  
Probably France, mid-19th century  
Carved, planed, joined, inlaid, and  
turned walnut and beechwood  
H x W x D: 61 x 67.3 x 47 cm (24 x  
26 ½ x 18 ½ in.)  
Gift of Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw,  
2014-11-3

This *maîtrise*, or masterpiece, in the  
seventeenth-century Italian style  
is one of the finest examples of the  
combination of architectural design  
and structure in staircase modeling.





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All models are Gift of Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw.

Unless otherwise noted, all dimensions are listed as H × W × D.

**11**  
BELL-TOWER MODEL WITH SPIRAL STAIRCASE  
France, ca. 1880  
Carved and turned pearwood  
121 × 41.9 × 41.9 cm (47 5/8 × 16 1/2 × 16 1/2 in.)  
2014-11-1

**12**  
HEXAGONAL PULPIT MODEL  
England, ca. 1850  
Stained oak  
30 × 30.5 × 29.5 cm (11 3/4 × 12 × 11 5/8 in.)  
2007-45-3

**13**  
STAIRCASE MODEL  
France, mid- to late 19th century  
Planed, joined, veneered walnut  
22 × 20.2 × 17.5 cm (8 1/4 × 7 15/16 × 6 7/8 in.)  
2007-45-6

**14**  
STAIRCASE MODEL  
France, 19th century  
Mahogany  
53.2 × 51 × 49.5 cm (20 15/16 × 20 1/8 × 19 1/2 in.)  
2007-45-2

**15**  
STAIRCASE MODEL  
France, mid- to late 19th century  
Fruitwood, probably pear, ash base  
35 × 38 × 23 cm (13 3/4 × 14 15/16 × 9 1/8 in.)  
2007-45-5

**16**  
CIRCULAR DOUBLE-REVOLUTION SPIRAL STAIRCASE MODEL  
France, late 20th century  
Cherry  
H × diam.: 106 × 57 cm (41 3/4 × 22 1/4 in.)  
2007-45-23

**17**  
STAIRCASE MODEL  
France, mid- to late 19th century  
Mahogany, oak  
91.8 × 59.8 × 47 cm (36 1/8 × 23 1/2 × 18 1/2 in.)  
2007-45-7

**18**  
STAIRCASE MODEL  
France, mid- to late 19th century  
Walnut, mahogany  
53 × 20.3 × 34.3 cm (20 7/8 × 8 × 13 1/2 in.)  
2007-45-1

**19**  
CIRCULAR SPIRAL STAIRCASE MODEL  
Made by O. E. Hadwiger  
Pueblo, Colorado, 1964  
Fir, walnut  
41 × 33.3 × 24.5 cm (16 1/8 × 13 1/8 × 9 5/8 in.)  
2007-45-17

**20**  
SPIRAL AND CIRCULAR-SECTION STAIRCASE MODEL  
Possibly France, mid-19th century  
Bent and painted wrought sheet and cast iron  
103 × 40.5 × 26.5 cm (40 5/8 × 15 15/16 × 10 3/8 in.)  
2007-45-19

**21**  
SPIRAL AND CIRCULAR-SECTION STAIRCASE MODEL  
Possibly France, late 19th to early 20th century  
Iron  
H × diam.: 53 × 19.1 cm (20 7/8 × 7 1/2 in.)  
2007-45-20

**22**  
STAIRCASE MODEL  
France, mid- to late 19th century  
Planed and carved walnut and fir  
41.8 × 25 × 24 cm (16 1/4 × 9 13/16 × 9 1/4 in.)  
2007-45-16

**23**  
SEMICIRCULAR STAIRCASE MODEL  
England, mid-19th century  
Mahogany  
101.5 × 71 × 39.5 cm (39 15/16 × 27 15/16 × 15 3/8 in.)  
2007-45-15

**24**  
DOUBLE STAIRCASE MODEL  
Toulouse region, France, third quarter of the 19th century  
Carved, planed, turned, and joined walnut, mahogany, and inlaid satinwood  
27.9 × 50.8 × 52.1 cm (11 × 20 × 20 1/2 in.)  
2007-45-18

**25**  
DOUBLE-REVOLUTION SUPERIMPOSED STAIRCASE MODEL  
Probably France, late 18th century  
Joined, planed, bent, and carved pear, wrought brass wire, turned bone  
75 × 67.3 × 67 cm (29 1/2 × 26 1/2 × 26 3/8 in.)  
2007-45-11

**26**  
STAIRCASE MODEL  
France, mid-late 19th century  
Carved, joined, turned, bent, and planed oak  
52 × 71 × 44 cm (20 1/2 × 27 15/16 × 17 5/16 in.)  
2007-45-10

**27**  
DOUBLE STAIRCASE MODEL WITH DOUBLE REVOLUTION  
Made by "R.B."  
France, second half of 19th century  
Cherry  
H × diam.: 48.6 × 33.5 cm (19 1/8 × 13 1/8 in.)  
2007-45-9

**28**  
CURVED STAIRCASE MODEL IN THE FRENCH STYLE  
France, ca. 1850  
Carved, planed, turned, and veneered walnut  
30 × 28 × 43.5 cm (11 15/16 × 11 × 17 1/8 in.)  
2014-11-2

**29**  
STAIRCASE MODEL  
France, mid- to late 19th century  
Walnut  
62.5 × 32 × 31.5 cm (24 5/8 × 12 5/8 × 12 3/8 in.)  
2007-45-22

**30**  
SPIRAL STAIRCASE MODEL  
France, 20th century  
Lead-coated iron  
Courtesy of Joan K. Davidson, lent to 2007 exhibition *Made to Scale*

James Hart: 3, 7-8, 12-23, 25-29  
Ali Elai: 1, 5, 9-11, 24

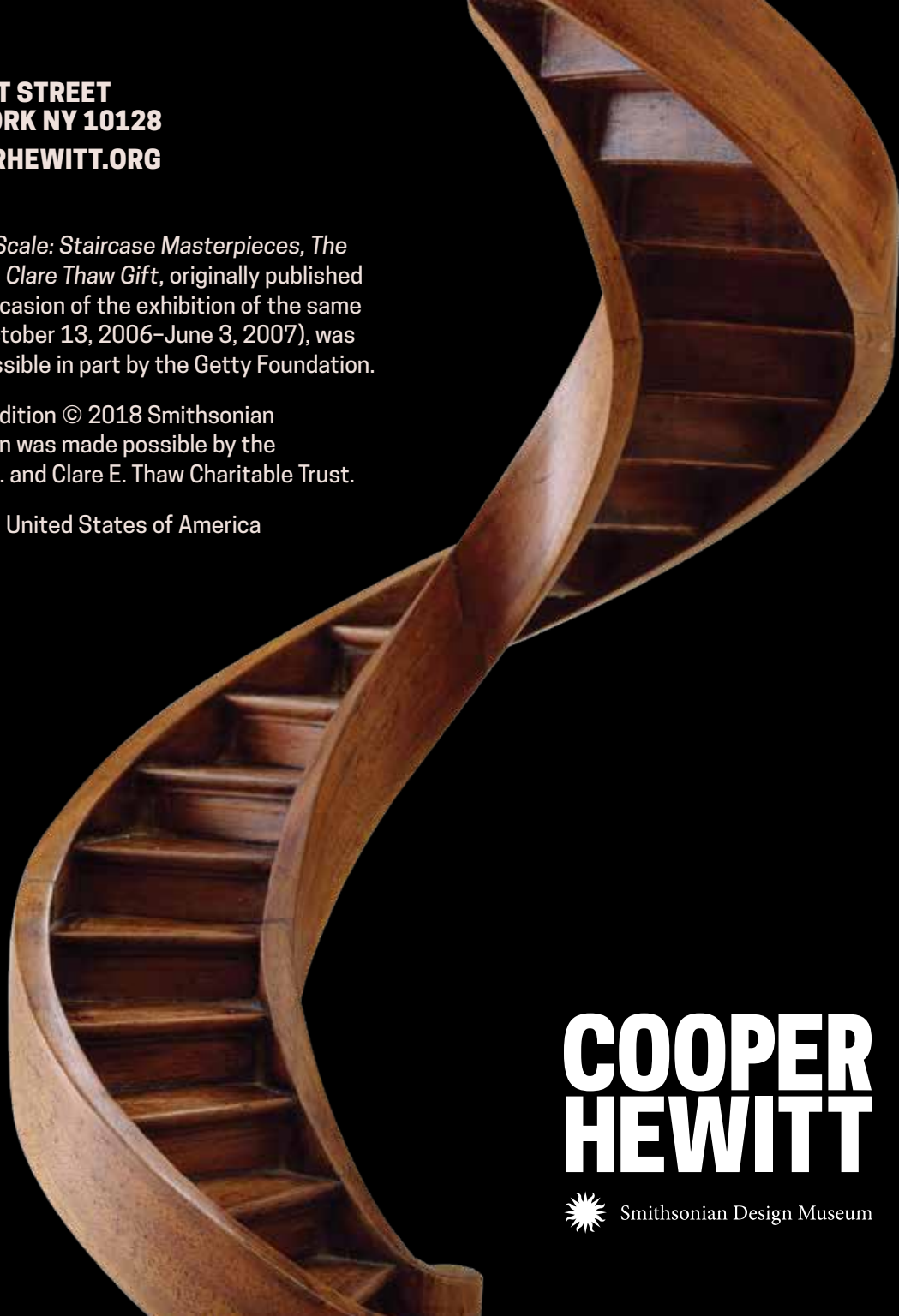


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