The Mansion
Self-Guided Tour

The Rahr-West Art Museum is unique as it is a department of the City of Manitowoc, which means that the building and all the art in the collection belongs to the people of Manitowoc. The Vilas-Rahr Mansion is the heart of the Rahr-West Art Museum; it is where we began as an institution. Built in the 1890s, it transitioned from being a private residence to a civic center in the 1950s and then an art museum in the 1970s.

Woodwork
Throughout the house you will see carved and applied wood details, most of which is original. Originally the house had hardwood floors with parquet borders. The quality of the wood changes depending on which floor one is on. More expensive woods, like oak, were used on the main floor (in the more public rooms), then mid-range wood, such as birch, on the second floor, and pine on the third floor.
The Vilas Family

Joseph Vilas was born in New York in 1832. In 1852, Vilas came to Manitowoc to visit his sister and decided to stay. On July 4, 1857, Vilas married Mary Platt. They had one son, Joseph Stillwell Vilas, born in 1858.

The senior Vilas became a partner in Platt & Vilas, a company engaged in mercantile trade, lumber, shipping, woolen goods and flour. Vilas also was the driving force behind the Milwaukee, Lake Shore & Western Railroad line from Milwaukee to Appleton through Manitowoc in the 1870s.

In addition, Vilas was active in politics. During the Civil War, he was Draft Commissioner, and elected to the Wisconsin Senate in 1863 and 1864. In 1865 he was elected president of the Village of Manitowoc. In 1893, he was elected Mayor of Manitowoc.

In the late 1880s, Vilas built a home on the corner of North 8th and Park Streets in Manitowoc, which he moved his family into in 1893.

On the morning of January 9, 1901, Vilas returned from business in Chicago to learn his wife, Mary, had died from heart trouble. On January 6, 1905, in deteriorating health and confined to his bed, he committed suicide with a 32-caliber pistol shot to the head.
The Rahr Family

Reinhardt Rahr’s father Wilhelm moved to Manitowoc in 1847 from Germany with his wife, Henriette Caroline Natalie. Wilhelm soon after established a brewery. They had six children: Natalie, William, Maxmilian, Reinhardt, Blanche, and Adolf. William, Mac, and Reinhardt formed William Rahr Sons Company.

The house was empty until Reinhardt Rahr bought it in 1910. Electricity and city water were installed. The Rahr Family included had three children during their occupancy of the house: Guido, Blanca Elizabeth, and Margaret.

Reinhardt Rahr was a successful partner in his family brewing business and later was the president of Cereal Products Company. Reinhardt Rahr was elected Mayor of Manitowoc and its approximately 7,000 residents in 1886, when he was only 26 years old.

Reinhardt Rahr died in 1921. His widow, Clara, donated the house to the city in 1941 to be used for educational and civic purposes as a museum and civic center. Because of their generous gift of the house to the city, the Rahr family name remains on the Museum.
The house was designed by Milwaukee-based architecture firm Ferry & Clas, run by George Bowman Ferry and Alfred Charles Clas. Ferry & Clas designed many prominent buildings and homes in Wisconsin, including the Pabst Mansion in Milwaukee and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison.

The Joseph Vilas Jr. House was designed in the Queen Anne Revival or Neo-Jacobean style, very popular in Wisconsin in the 1880s. This style features irregularity of planning, a variety of textures and wall projections, an open gable end, and the frequent use of bay windows.
Port Cochère

Once an open carriageway, the “coach port” was enclosed in 1975, during construction of the exhibition wing. It originally functioned as a covered porch-like structure that carriages and vehicles could drive into. This protected passengers from the elements as they exited the vehicle and went into the house. Today it provides a transition between the old and new areas of the museum, maintaining the brick arches and architectural detail original to the Victorian mansion.

Carriage House

The Carriage House, also designed by Ferry & Clas, is located just north of the mansion and can be seen from the windows in the Porte Cochère. The structure is now owned by The Masquers Inc.

The lower floor was used for stabling horses, hay storage, and the storage of three carriages, which were later replaced by automobiles. During the Vilas years the second floor was used as living quarters for the stable master and his family.

From top to bottom: The Port Cochère during the Rahr residency; the façade with port cochère circa 1965; and, the enclosed structure today.
The photos above are from the Rahr occupancy of the house. The photos below show the parlor after the house was given to the city in the 1940s but before it was renovated in the 1950s.

The Parlor

This room was the formal parlor of the house during its occupancy by the Vilas and Rahr families. It was restored to its 1910 appearance in 1977 through a gift from Mrs. John (Margaret Rahr) Hamilton, daughter of Reinhardt Rahr.

- In 1910, the walls of this room were covered with a silk damask fabric.
- Electrical fixtures were added in 1910 and the ceiling was painted gold with a stencil flowered border.
- The bronze bust was sculpted by Reinhardt Rahr.
- The fireplace is one of three remaining from the original six in the house. The fireplace was originally done by August Zentner of Manitowoc in 1891. He wrote to his nephew that a month’s work of finishing went into the mantel.
- The parquet wood floor, made of seven kinds of wood, is original.
- The chandelier dates to the Rahr period but was moved from one of the tasting rooms at the Rahr Malting Company.
Upstairs Rooms

The rooms on the second floor of the house were used as bedrooms during the Rahr family’s occupancy. Today, these rooms are used to showcase some of the more unique collections of the Museum.

These rooms were wallpapered during the Rahr period. All rooms were trimmed with a narrow picture molding at ceiling level and a second molding about 24” below. All woodwork on the second floor is light toned birch, except the main hall, which is oak. Doors and windows were trimmed with beading. These rooms had a butler annunciator system.

The third floor of the house is not currently open to the public. Its rooms were used as servant quarters and guest rooms. Today this area is used for storage.

The third floor contains a linen room with original cupboards and drawers, a trunk closet next to a cleaning closet with original tin sink and fixtures. All the floors, trim, doors and windows are pine.

The top photograph shows the Doll Room as it is today. The lower two images show the Doll Room (middle) and Library (bottom) as they were after the house was used as a civic center and used primarily by the Historical Society for exhibits. You can see (pas all of the objects) the original trim, wall coverings, and wood floors before the building was renovated in the 1950s.
Sputnik Crash Site

On September 5, 1962, a piece of the Sputnik IV satellite reentered the earth’s atmosphere and crashed on North 8th Street just outside the Museum’s front door. This was the first time any man-made object that had orbited the earth returned and was somewhat recoverable. It left a hole in the street and attracted international attention to Manitowoc. There is a brass ring in the street marking the spot where the chunk of satellite landed and a replica of the recovered piece is proudly on display in the Museum.

John and Ruth West

John and Ruth West lived in Manitowoc and owned the Manitowoc Company. John and Ruth were extremely interested in art and purchased over 400 works for the Museum. In 1975, with donations from John D. and Ruth West and the Rahr Foundation, an exhibition wing was added. This was augmented in 1986, with the construction of another wing with additional exhibition space and storage for the museum’s permanent collection.