

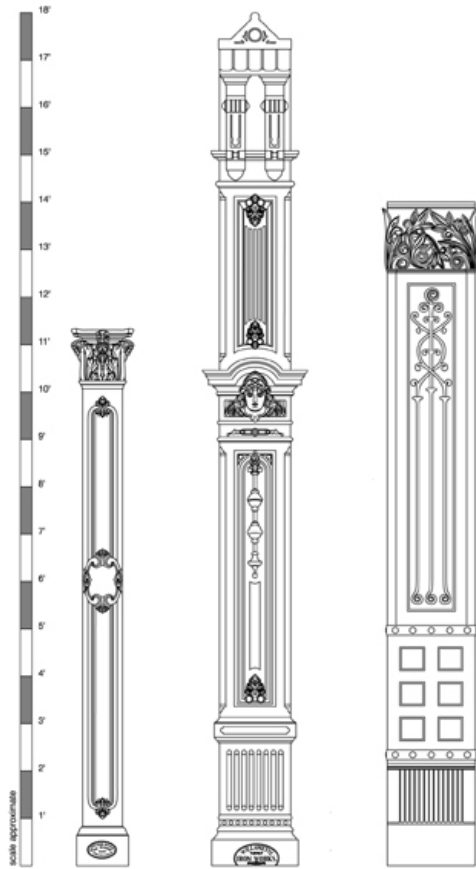
The Design Evolution of Cast-Iron Pilasters

By Bernadette Niederer, from "Cast Iron Storefronts of Oregon"

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Despite a fragmentary record of remaining buildings, some general trends can be observed in the design of cast-iron storefronts. The earliest fronts featured pilasters that were narrower and shorter than later examples. The trend toward increased height and width continued until about 1890, when sizes began to diminish, although the pilasters remained somewhat taller and wider than their 1850s counterparts. The degree of ornamental complexity resembles the developments in scale, with the earliest fronts exhibiting modest ornamentation, followed by a rapid explosion of complexity and a slow process of simplification, to a degree that the last cast iron fronts resembled abstractions of the earliest designs.

The method of ornamentation varied between earlier and later examples as well. From the 1850s until the late 1880s, ornament was often cast separately and applied to the cast-iron pilasters with bolts. By the 1890s, all ornament was cast directly into the pilasters, a technique that encouraged simplification of style and more geometric patterns. The pilasters also became more rectilinear, limiting their modeling and projections to their depth dimension and maintaining a continuous width throughout their height. Portland's cast-iron storefronts were in the vanguard stylistically, while smaller Oregon towns lagged behind, in some cases by as much as ten years. As a result, though cast-iron fronts ceased to be erected in Portland by 1890, they continued to be produced until 1906 in other Oregon towns.



- 1) Baldwin Saloon, The Dalles, circa 1876.
- 2) Merchants' Hotel, Portland, 1880
- 3) Glisan's Building, Portland, 1889

The Baldwin Saloon (1) pilaster is typical of the early phase (circa 1850-1870), but a very late example. The only in-situ examples of this type can be found in The Dalles. There were several examples in Portland, especially along Front Street (SW Naito Parkway), but they were all demolished, mostly in the 1940s. The Merchants' Hotel (2) belongs to the middle or high period of the cast-iron era (circa 1865-1890) and shows increased scale and ornamental complexity. Cast-iron architecture's late phase (circa 1890-1910) is represented by the pilaster from Glisan's Building (3). It is of continuous width and features only raised or incised designs, rather than separately attached individual ornaments like the previous two pilasters. It also reflects emerging architectural trends with its Art Nouveau influenced decoration.