

## HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

### SUMMARY

The Birks Building (formerly the Rosenthal Building) was built in 1910-11 by C.E. Deakin, a Montreal contractor, to the designs of Weekes and Keefer, Ottawa architects. It was Recognized because it is a very good example of the development of the community and for its very good functional design.

### HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

This building is one of 19 buildings located on the north side of Sparks Street between Elgin and Bank streets, an area which has been, since the 1880s at least, the core of Ottawa's central business district. The Birks Building was constructed for A. Rosenthal and sons who operated a prestige jewellery store on Sparks Street from the 1890s. In 1910 the firm commissioned the construction of an elaborate new store and office building. Shortly after its completion, the building was sold to Henry Birks and sons of Montreal. Henry Birks was born in England and entered the jewellery trade by joining the Montreal firm of George Savage and Company. Birks opened his own shop in 1879. In 1911, Birks began a continent-wide expansion, starting with the opening of a store in Ottawa. In 1982 the company moved to quarters in the newly opened Rideau Centre and the retail space has been subdivided without the loss of any of the original architectural detailing.

### ARCHITECTURE

The facade of the Birks Building consists of the traditional tripartite division of base storey, an intervening tier of five storeys and a capping storey divided by a row of balconies. Flanked by blocks of four and five storeys, it required large areas of glazing on the five-bay front and rear elevations for interior lightening; the facade therefore consists of thin piers separating large windows. The public spaces within continued the exterior's rich decorative treatment: French Bresche Violet marble sheathed the concrete columns, while eight-foot high panels of Missisquoi marble lined the vestibule. Marble and mahogany interior fixtures matched the marble mosaic floors. With its use of thin piers and extensive glazing, the exterior clearly reflected its modern structural system, while the Ionic columns flanking the entrance, the renaissance-inspired balconies and the balustrade reflect the architects' desire to include modest stylistic references to then-current styles, the Beaux-Arts and Baroque. The Birks Building is constructed of reinforced concrete on the Kahn system: steel members encased in concrete. The ground floor was sheathed in Philipsburg marble, while English glazed terra cotta from the Doulton potteries covered the facade above iron. In 1930, for reasons unknown, the cast iron ornamentation and cornice were removed, and replaced by insignificant detailing of classical derivation. The marquee and front show

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windows were changed in 1945. The original facade cladding has been removed, so that the sheathing is now of brick. When the windows were replaced, aluminum spandrels replaced the much more ornamental originals.

### ENVIRONMENT

Birks has been one of Ottawa's most prominent jewellery stores. Though not located on a corner lot, the highrise building is a structure familiar to many residents, largely because of its distinctive marquee and its longtime use as Birks' main downtown outlet.

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