



Symbols of Law

INFORMATION SHEET

The architect and artists who designed the Supreme Court Building and its sculptural elements were students of the Beaux-Arts tradition, a movement developed in France in the 19th century that stressed the use of historic design elements. One principle of the Beaux-Arts philosophy is that the function of a building should be recognizable in its architecture and decorative detail. Several traditional legal symbols are therefore found in the architecture of the Supreme Court Building. The four examples that follow are the most prevalent.

The Scales of Justice

Perhaps the most ancient symbol associated with the law is also one of the most familiar, the Scales of Justice. Symbolizing the impartial deliberation, or “weighing,” of two sides in a legal dispute, the scales are found throughout the building.

Locations: In the Courtroom Frieze, scales are held by *Equity* in the north panel, *Divine Inspiration* in the west panel, and are on the shield held by *Youth* in the east panel. The West Pediment includes a figure of *Liberty* with the scales in her lap. On the front plaza, the small blindfolded statue within *Contemplation of Justice* clutches them to her body, the figure of *Justice* on the two lampposts hold them, and a small figure on the flagpole base has them, too. The scales are incorporated in the design of the bronze elevator doorframes (*above right*), as a part of a repeating relief on the building’s exterior (*below right*), as one of the metopes in the Great Hall, and as a decorative motif on the ceiling of the Special Library.



The Book of Judgment or Law

Books appear as a symbol in the detail of the Supreme Court Building, representing learning, written knowledge, and judgment. In a few instances, the Latin word “LEX” (law) is carved into the book, making the symbol for a “law book.”

Locations: Books are held by several lawgivers in the East Pediment, including *Confucius*. In the West Pediment, *Research Present* studies a book. The statue of *Contemplation of Justice* to the left of the main steps has a book under her arm, and a small open book is at the centerpoint of the doorframe above the main entrance. In the Courtroom, *Muhammad*, *Hugo Grotius*, and *John Marshall* are depicted in the frieze holding books, as is the figure of a judge in the east panel (*left*). In the east panel, the *Majesty of Law* rests his arm on a book. One of the reliefs on the bronze elevator doorframes incorporates an open book inscribed with “LEX” (*left*).



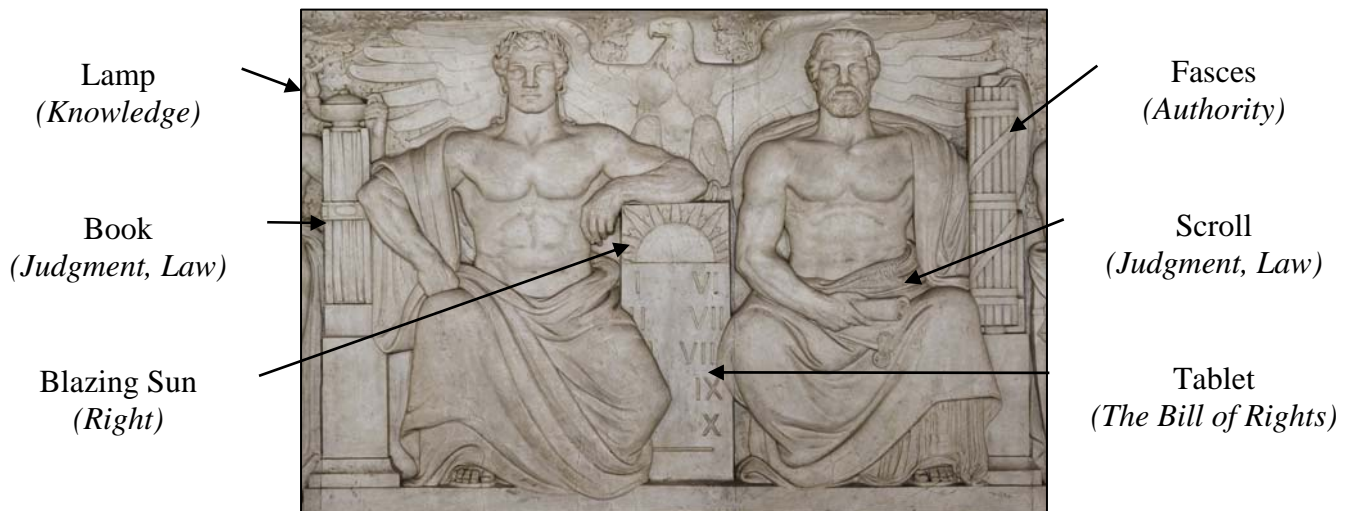
Tablets of the Law

Throughout the history of western art, tablets have been used to signify the Law. This tradition is closely associated with Moses, the Hebrew lawgiver, who, according to the Book of Exodus, descended from Mount Sinai with two stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. Over time, the use of two tablets has become a symbol for the commandments, and more generally, ancient laws.



Locations: As part of larger sculptural groups, Moses is depicted with two tablets in three places: in the south panel of the Courtroom Frieze, in the East Pediment, and in one of the Great Hall metopes. Two tablets with the Roman numerals I–X appear on the support frame of the Courtroom’s bronze gates (*left*), on the lower interior panels of the Courtroom doors, and in the hands of the figure representing “Law” carved in the Library woodwork. A single tablet inscribed “LEX” is held by James Earle Fraser’s *Authority of Law*, located to the right of the front steps (*above right*). A single block with the Roman numerals I–X is centrally located in the east panel of the Courtroom Frieze between the

Majesty of Law and the *Power of Government* (*below*). Adolph Weinman, the sculptor of the frieze, referred to this symbol as representing the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution. The surrounding iconography includes a blazing sun and a bald eagle with spreading wings, a symbol of America.



Scrolls of Law

Another symbol that recalls the ancient nature of written law is the scroll. Several figures are depicted in the building’s architecture with scrolls in hand.

Locations: In the East Pediment, *Solon* holds a scroll and in the West Pediment, *Research Past* reads an open scroll alongside an urn filled with what the artist called “Roman scrolls.” In the panel of the Bronze Doors titled *Westminster Statute*, one of the figures reads from a scroll. One of the metopes in the Great Hall depicts an owl, symbol of wisdom, in front of an open scroll. In the Courtroom Frieze, scrolls are depicted with the figures of *Lycurgus*, *King John*, and *Justinian* (*left*).