Symbols of Law

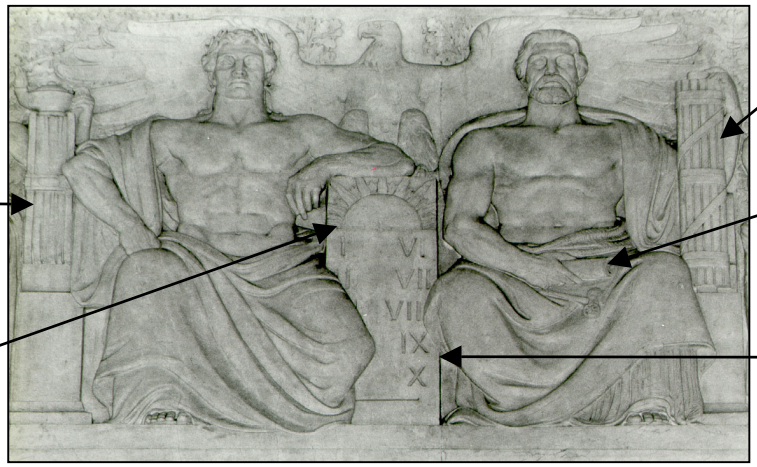
INFORMATION SHEET

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 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, scales are held by *Equity*, in the South frieze, and *Divine Inspiration*, in the West frieze. The *Youth's* shield in the East frieze is marked with them. In the West Pediment, *Liberty* has the scales in her lap. On the front plaza, the small blindfolded statue of *Justice* that *Contemplation of Justice* holds, clutches them to her body. Beside the plaza steps, the figures of *Justice* on the two lampposts hold the scales and a small figure on the flagpole base holds them as well. The scales are incorporated in the design of the bronze elevator doorframes (above); as a part of a repeating relief on the building's exterior (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 many contexts in the detail of the Supreme Court Building, representing learning, written knowledge and judgments. 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," including *Confucius* (East Pediment) and *Muhammad*, *Hugo Grotius* and *John Marshall* (South Courtroom frieze). A figure usually interpreted as a judge or lawyer holds a book in the East Courtroom frieze (left) near the *Majesty of Law* who rests his arm on one. The "lex" book relief (left) is found on the bronze elevator doorframes. *Research Present* (West Pediment) studies a book while the statue of *Contemplation of Justice* (front plaza) has a book under her arm. A small, open book is at the centerpoint of the door head above the Bronze Doors entrance.

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. Tablets signify the permanence of the law when "written in stone." Locations: In three spots, as part of larger sculptural groups, Moses is depicted with tablets: in the North Courtroom frieze, in the East Pediment and in one of the Great Hall metopes. Other 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 held by the figure representing "Law" in the Library woodwork. A single tablet inscribed with "LEX" is held by James Earle Fraser's *Authority of Law*, located to the right of the front steps (above right). Also, a single tablet is centrally located in the East Courtroom frieze, entitled *The Defense of Human Rights and the Safeguard of the Liberties and Rights of the People*. This single "pylon" with ten Roman numerals represents the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution (below).



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 "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 friezes, scrolls are depicted with the sculptures of *Lycurgus*, *King John* and *Justinian* (left).