

# Justice

One of the oldest works of art in the Capitol is the plaster relief *Justice* by Italian artist Carlo Franzoni. This allegorical group, located in the Old Supreme Court Chamber, is dominated by the figure of Justice dressed in classical attire, with scales upraised in her left hand and her right hand resting on an unsheathed sword. The sculpture displays Franzoni's thorough understanding of visual iconography and personification. Justice is the leader among the "cardinal" virtues (the others are Prudence, Fortitude, and Temperance), because she regulates the actions of citizens individually and in society. In Franzoni's relief, as is customary, she holds scales—signifying impartiality—and a sword, emblematic of her power.

The absence of a blindfold, which has become a ubiquitous element in western portrayals of Justice, makes this depiction distinctive. As early as the 16th century, Justice was portrayed blindfolded to reflect impartiality. In his 1789 treatise *Iconology*, George Richardson defined the meaning of this symbolism: "The white robes and bandage over her eyes, allude to incorrupt justice, disregarding every interested view, by distributing of justice with rectitude and purity of mind, and protecting the innocent."<sup>1</sup> Why Franzoni chose an unconventional approach is unknown. One American writer in the late 19th century, in discussing another unblindfolded image of Justice in the Capitol, surmised "that with us justice is clear-sighted respecting the rights of all."<sup>2</sup>

Franzoni's relief features two birds. The first is an owl, a principal attribute of the Roman goddess Minerva, signifying wisdom. (As a war goddess, Minerva was the defender of just causes.) In Renaissance art, the owl is often perched on a stack of books to symbolize learning. But here, the owl is carved on the front leg of Justice's chair while, instead, an American eagle perches on law books. The eagle's head turns back toward Justice, whose head turns toward a nude, winged

After the British burned the U.S. Capitol on August 24, 1814, architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe immediately oversaw reconstruction efforts. As part of this project, he engaged Italian sculptor Carlo Franzoni to create the only piece of permanent decoration in the new Supreme Court Chamber: a relief sculpture of Justice. The piece was to be mounted directly opposite the bench and the seats of the justices.

Two preliminary sketches exist for the figure of Justice, but it is unknown whether they date from before or after the damage to the building by the British. The sketches depict some of the same iconographic details seen in the *Justice* relief, although the final figure and composition are different. The drawings appear to be by either Giuseppe or Carlo Franzoni. Giuseppe, Carlo's older brother, had actually been engaged by Latrobe to model Justice for the pre-fire Capitol in 1809. It is not known if Giuseppe Franzoni's *Justice* was ever completed, because that version of the Supreme Court Chamber, along with the Senate and House Chambers, was destroyed. Giuseppe Franzoni died suddenly in 1815; the following year, Carlo arrived from Italy to work on the Capitol.

Carlo Franzoni apparently began executing the relief of *Justice* shortly after his arrival, because payments were made to various models,

beginning in 1816, for sitting for the sculpture. Mary Ann Warren and Eliza Wade each received a payment of \$25, while Prince Williams received \$10 "for my boy Henry sitting 10 times for Mr. Franzoni." It is unknown why Franzoni used three models, as only the figures of Justice and the Genius appear in the final composition. The plaster frieze was completed in 1817 and placed in a semicircular lunette on the west wall of the Supreme Court. The work has



**This 1819 painting of Carlo Franzoni was executed by Pietro Bonanni, an Italian painter working at the Capitol.**  
(Architect of the Capitol)

*Justice*

**Carlo Franzoni (1788-1819)**

Plaster, 1817

53 ¼ x 127 ¼ inches (135.3 x 323.2 cm)

Unsigned

Inscribed (under arm of chair, below seated Justice): 8 May 1817

Commissioned by the Commissioner of Public Buildings, ca. 1816

Acquisition undocumented

Cat. no. 25.00001





Genius. The guardian spirit of the new nation, the Genius holds and points to a tablet inscribed "The Constitution of the U.S." Behind the Genius's head is a sunburst, symbolizing Truth, whose light reveals all.

yet to be restored to its original appearance, although a preliminary physical investigation indicates the early presence of jade green and royal blue paint instead of the current azure background coloring.

Franzoni also produced the brilliantly imaginative and successful *Car of History* for the House of Representatives. The deserved fame of this work and its much more prominent location have unfortunately diminished the reputation of *Justice*. Charles E. Fairman, curator of the Capitol in the early 20th century, even insinuated that the relief might

not be by Franzoni. A comparison of the distinctive and confident modeling of the drapery in the two works, however, leaves little doubt that one artist is responsible for both. Carlo Franzoni died unexpectedly at the age of 30 on May 12, 1819, only three years after arriving in the United States. His remains, and those of his brother Giuseppe, are interred in Oak Hill Cemetery, in Washington, D.C.



**These preliminary sketches of the figure Justice were executed by either Giuseppe or Carlo Franzoni about 1809–1816.**

(Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, original drawings unlocated)







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