

Hubert Horatio Humphrey, Jr.

(1911-1978)

Hubert Horatio Humphrey, Jr., a U.S. senator from Minnesota and the 38th vice president of the United States, was born in Wallace, South Dakota. After working briefly as a pharmacist, he taught at Macalester College, and was elected mayor of Minneapolis, Minnesota. He first came to national attention as an advocate of a strong civil rights plank in the Democratic presidential platform of 1948. That same year, Humphrey was elected to the U.S. Senate. Although well known for his oratory skills and impressive legislative record, Hubert Humphrey was perhaps best loved as the “Happy Warrior” for his generosity, irrepressible spirit, and lack of ruthlessness. A passionate reformer, he supported nuclear disarmament, social welfare programs, and the interests of farmers and small businesses.

Humphrey served in the Senate until 1964, when he was elected vice president on the Democratic ticket with Lyndon Baines Johnson. In 1968 he ran as the Democratic nominee for president, losing narrowly to Richard Nixon in a campaign complicated by the nation’s polarization over the Vietnam War. Humphrey returned to the Senate in 1971. The Senate later created the post of deputy president pro tempore for him, and when he grew gravely ill in 1977, both the Senate and the House held unprecedented sessions in his honor. After Humphrey’s death in 1978, his body lay in state in the Capitol Rotunda.

Muriel Humphrey, wife of Hubert Humphrey, selected the noted sculptor Walker Hancock to execute the bust of her late husband for the Senate’s Vice Presidential Bust Collection after visiting the artist at his Massachusetts studio in October 1979. The contract was delayed for more than a year, however, because Hancock’s fee was higher than the amount initially approved for the bust. In the end, the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration agreed to pay Hancock’s requested commission. Muriel Humphrey first reviewed photographs of the clay bust, which subsequently was approved with minor adjustments.

Like other makers of portraits for the Senate, Hancock was working at a disadvantage: His subject was deceased. Hancock said in a 1998 letter that “it was necessary to work entirely from photographs with the help of criticisms from members of his [Humphrey’s] family and others who knew him.” Despite the available photos and films, Hancock failed to achieve the animation—not to mention the ebullience—that characterized Humphrey in his halcyon days. Such criticism may be unfair, though, because by the end of his life Humphrey had suffered many political and personal disappointments. The likeness is nonetheless strong and sympathetic, and the artist seems intent on showing a man of deep reflection, not the impassioned orator and advocate.

Hancock chose a nearly frontal pose with the head very slightly tilted upward to the left, and the gaze of the complexly drilled and incised eyes is remote, even visionary. Elsewhere, naturalistic detail is suppressed in the simple planes of the clothes and even in the carefully observed face. The artist seems to have selected the eyes as the locus of the irrepressible essence of Humphrey’s character, with all else subordinated to that choice.

The bust was carved by the firm of Cav. Ferdinando Palla Scultore in Pietrasanta, Italy, under Hancock’s supervision. It was formally unveiled in the Capitol in 1984 at ceremonies attended by Humphrey family members. The bust of Vice President Humphrey was the first commission the Senate awarded to the sculptor. He later completed busts of George H.W. Bush (p. 52) and Gerald Ford (p. 126) for the Vice Presidential Bust Collection. Hancock, born in 1901 in St. Louis, studied and taught at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he headed the sculpture department for nearly 40 years. He received many honors during a long and illustrious career, including the National Medal of Arts.

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Walker Kirtland Hancock (1901-1998)

Marble, modeled and carved 1982

24⁷/₁₆ x 22³/₄ x 13³/₄ inches (62.1 x 57.8 x 34.9 cm)

Signed and dated (on subject's truncated left arm): WALKER MANCOCK [sic] 1982

Commissioned by the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, 1980

Accepted by the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, 1984

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