

Robert Marion La Follette

(1855-1925)

A leader in the 20th-century Progressive movement, Robert Marion La Follette was a U.S. representative, governor, and U.S. senator from Wisconsin, and an unsuccessful candidate for the presidency. La Follette was born in the town of Primrose, Wisconsin, the son of settlers from Kentucky. Admitted to the bar in 1880, he entered the U.S. House of Representatives in 1885. After three terms in the House, he was elected governor of Wisconsin and served from 1901 to 1906. As governor, La Follette pushed for a direct primary system, tax reform legislation, railroad rate control, and other measures known as the “Wisconsin idea,” collectively aimed at weakening the control of party bosses and turning over public administration to popularly elected leaders.

Nicknamed “Fighting Bob,” La Follette continued to champion Progressive causes during a Senate career extending from 1906 until his death in 1925. He strongly supported the 17th Amendment, which provided for the direct election of senators, as well as domestic measures advocated by President Woodrow Wilson’s administration, including federal railroad regulation and laws protecting workers rights. La Follette worked to generate wider public accountability for the Senate. He advocated more frequent and better publicized roll call votes and the publication of information about campaign expenditures.

Early in his Senate career, the Wisconsin Republican broke with leaders of the Grand Old Party and rarely voted along party lines thereafter. In 1911 he helped found the National Progressive Republican League, whose members rallied around him as the logical candidate to wrest the Republican presidential nomination from President William Howard Taft. However, La Follette lost his bid when many supporters switched their allegiance to Theodore Roosevelt who, after failing to win the Republican nomination, ran unsuccessfully on the third-party Progressive, or Bull Moose, ticket in 1912.

In 1955, by resolution of the Senate, the Special Committee on the Senate Reception Room was established to select five outstanding persons who had served as members of the Senate. Their likenesses would be placed in the room’s medallion ovals that were left vacant in the mid-19th century by artist Constantino Brumidi. Chaired by Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, the committee sought the counsel of historians, political scientists, former senators, and other public figures in the selection process. The committee had little trouble selecting the first three senators—both the members and their historical advisory panel unanimously chose the “Great Triumvirate” of Henry Clay (p. 72), Daniel Webster (p. 418), and John C. Calhoun (p. 54). However, the committee had far greater trouble selecting the final two senators. The historians polled selected George Norris, a Nebraska Republican, but Norris was still too controversial a figure to meet the committee’s requirement for selection by unanimous vote. After much deliberation, the committee chose Robert M. La Follette, Sr., of Wisconsin and Robert A. Taft, Sr., of Ohio (p. 354) for the remaining paintings.

Artist Chester La Follette, son of William L. La Follette, the senator’s first cousin, actively sought the commission to paint the senator’s portrait for inclusion in the “Five Outstanding Senators” series. He based his representation on an earlier study he had made, which he described as a “free adaptation” of a photograph taken in 1922 by John A. Glander of Manitowoc, Wisconsin. In addition, according to a nephew writing in the Columbia, South Carolina, newspaper *The Columbia (SC) State* in 1996: “Uncle Chester remembered seeing his cousin speaking in Yankee Stadium and obtained a press photo that gave a direct frontal view, providing a different perspective from the [Glander] photo.”¹ The portrait was executed in the artist’s New York City studio and then applied to the wall of the Senate Reception Room at the same time as the four other portraits. Artist Allyn Cox supervised the project and final placement of the paintings in the fall of 1958. A formal unveiling ceremony was held on March 12, 1959.

Robert M. La Follette

Robert Chester La Follette (1897-1993)

Oil on canvas applied to wall, 1958

22 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches (oval) (57.5 x 49.5 cm)

Unsigned

Commissioned by the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, 1958

Accepted by the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, 1959

Cat. no. 32.00010



Robert Marion La Follette—*continued*

La Follette led a small but influential group of Progressives in the Senate. As a result of the close margin between the two major parties, the Progressives held power out of proportion to their small numbers. Also the leader of the pacifist block in the Senate, La Follette opposed American involvement in World War I. In 1924 he was nominated for president by the League for Progressive Political Action and polled five million votes. Exhausted by the rigors of the campaign, La Follette died the following year in Washington, D.C. His son, Robert M. La Follette, Jr., succeeded him in the Senate, thus carrying on the reform tradition.

Right:

Robert La Follette's portrait, far right, is displayed in the Senate Reception Room in one of the five oval medallions planned for portraits of "illustrious men."
(1999 photograph)



Artist Chester La Follette next to his painting of Senator Robert La Follette, copied from the portrait commissioned for the Senate Reception Room.

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