

James Schoolcraft Sherman

(1855-1912)

James Schoolcraft Sherman, 27th vice president of the United States and a U.S. representative from New York, was born near Utica. After receiving a law degree, he practiced in Utica and then became mayor of the city in 1884. He was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives as a Republican in 1886. With the exception of a single term, he served until 1909, while also managing a family canning company and staying active in the business affairs of his home state. Popular and hard-working in Congress, Sherman was known as “Sunny Jim” by his colleagues. He chaired the House Committee on Indian Affairs for 14 years, during which time he became well known to Native Americans, whose causes and concerns received his careful attention. House Speakers Tom Reed, David Henderson, and Joseph Cannon depended on the congressman’s sharp parliamentary skills, and he regularly took the gavel in their absence.

In 1908 Sherman was elected vice president on the Republican ticket with William Howard Taft. During the inaugural parade, Carrie Babcock Sherman rode with her husband to and from the ceremony at the U.S. Capitol, the first vice presidential wife to do so. As vice president, Sherman supported protective tariffs and sided with conservatives in an ongoing battle against Progressives for control of the Republican Party. He was renominated in 1912 but died before the election, in which President Taft lost to Woodrow Wilson.

Bessie Potter Vonnoh received a commission for the bust of James Sherman in 1910 and modeled him from life while the vice president was still in office. The result was a frontal bust, a conception that is both simple and straightforward. The symmetry of the high lapel coat and vest is broken only by the flap of the coat’s breast pocket and the slightly deeper undercutting of the proper right lapel and coat edge. This pose emphasizes the full, pudgy face but also reveals Sherman’s open, genial appearance, suggesting his judicial fairness while presiding over the Senate. (It does not reveal evidence of the illness—Bright’s disease—from which he had suffered since 1904.) His wide tie sports a cross-shaped decorative stud pinned to the knot.

Sherman always wore eyeglasses. In fact, during his long involvement as head of the House Committee on Indian Affairs, he was known to Native American leaders as Father Wau-be-ka-chuck (Four Eyes). Thus, any recognizable image of him would have included spectacles—and Vonnoh’s model did so. The *Washington, D.C. Evening Star* noted that the sculptor “endeavored to present his face as it is usually seen by visitors to the Senate.”¹ The glasses are the most interesting part of the sculpture, precisely because sculptors generally avoided them. (See page 320 for the essay on James Fraser’s bust of Theodore Roosevelt, which Vonnoh must have seen before she completed the model of her bust of Sherman.)

Sherman’s eyes are deeply set: the upper rims of his perfectly circular spectacles lie beneath his eyebrows and press into them. Vonnoh carved the outside top of the eye socket and the spectacle frames in a solid piece. Only the marble below the temple is pierced, for about an inch, with a half-inch opening created between the inside corner of the eye and the frames. The thin temple pieces of the frames are splayed out by Sherman’s broad head, merging with his hair before they reach his ears. The fusion of Sherman’s glasses and his face is subtle and effective, organic rather than additive.

A very white, crystalline marble was selected for the bust, but as work began on it, Vonnoh discovered an imperfection near the surface of the stone on what would become the proper right cheek. She raised her concern about its possible effect on the finished piece with the Joint Committee on the Library. In response, Chairman George Peabody Wetmore consulted architect Thomas Hastings of the firm of Carrère & Hastings (designers of the recently completed Senate Office Building). Hastings, along with sculptor James Earle Fraser, examined the problem area. Both

James S. Sherman

Bessie Onahotema Potter Vonnoh (1872-1955)

Marble, modeled 1910, carved 1911

33 x 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches (83.8 x 64.5 x 44.5 cm)

Unsigned

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1910

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1911

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agreed that the discoloration on one cheek of the bust was “microscopic” and of little concern. As the carving progressed, however, the dark blemish became more apparent. There was nothing that could be done to minimize it, and the portrait was completed using the flawed marble. The bust was delivered to the U.S. Capitol in December of 1911 and placed on exhibit in the Senate main corridor shortly thereafter.



James Sherman, whose eyeglasses made him immediately recognizable, was photographed by the New York studio of Pach Brothers, ca. 1909–1912.

(Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

Vonnoh was a St. Louis native who studied in Chicago with sculptor Lorado Taft from the age of 15. She later assisted Taft in works he created for the World’s Columbian Exposition and received a separate commission for an eight-foot figure, *Art*, for the Illinois State Building at the fair. At the age of 22, she opened her own studio in Chicago. Greatly influenced by the small bronzes of the Russian sculptor Paul Troubetzkoy, which she first saw at the exposition, Vonnoh developed her own themes in similar statuettes, especially intimate mother-and-child groups, dancing girls, and elegantly lolling ladies. The sculptor herself called these groups “Potterines.” Also noted for her portraiture, in 1899 Vonnoh created a commissioned bust of Major General S.W. Crawford for the Smith Memorial in Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park.

Vonnoh won numerous medals and prizes at national and international exhibitions. She exhibited more than 30 sculptures at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1910 during the time the Sherman bust was under way. She and her husband, the notable painter Robert Vonnoh, lived in New York City from 1901 and showed their work together there and across the country in a series of joint traveling exhibitions. Vonnoh, the first woman sculptor to become a permanent member of the National Academy of Design, produced works that today are found in the collections of many major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh.



Bessie Potter Vonnob was well known for her statuettes of women and children that she called "Potterines."

(Bessie Potter Vonnob papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution)