

Where History Meets Aesthetics: Reflections on the Art in the United States Senate

by William Kloss

The art in the U.S. Senate was acquired principally for its public, patriotic, and commemorative characteristics. Not conceived as a conventional art collection, the Senate's art instead was intended to serve a grander purpose. It was to commit to posterity the persons and events of our national history, centered upon the institution of the Senate and on the founding of the Republic. Not surprisingly, portraits are a prominent feature of the collection.

Precisely because the Senate's art collection was formed for set purposes of state, of honoring individuals, and decorating the most important government building, it may be seen as a paradigm of public art in the United States. Although the collection has many 20th-century works—some quite modern in character—it is overwhelmingly a 19th-century collection. As such, it reflects the political and artistic values of the century during which the American legislature defined itself and began to redefine America's place in the world.

A Review of the Collection

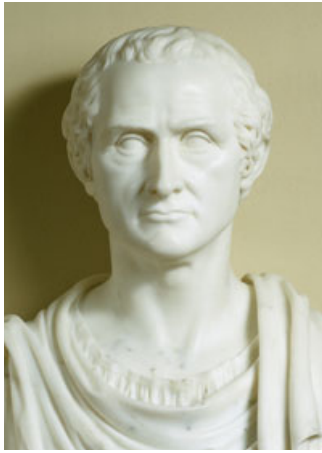
Today, the visitor to the Capitol finds an impressive array of art within the building. Ceremonial rooms, private offices, hallways, and the legislative chambers are filled with a diverse collection of paintings and sculptures. A tour of the Senate wing might begin with the Old Supreme Court Chamber, the first significant room to be completed. The space originally served as the Senate Chamber from 1800 to 1808. Architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe proposed extensive modifications to the area in 1807, which included moving the Senate to the second floor and constructing a chamber for the Supreme Court on the ground floor. It is one of the finest examples of Latrobe's extant work in the Capitol, small but imposing in its *gravitas*, in its evocation through classical architectural language of the fundamental activity of the Court: weighing legislation against the Constitution's precepts to create an authoritative foundation for the body of law.

Sculpture

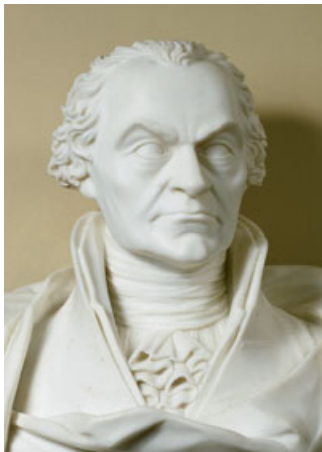
In the Old Supreme Court Chamber, *Justice* (1817) by Carlo Franzoni is one of the earliest works of permanent decoration. The neoclassical style was still dominant in Europe and the young Italian artist brought it with him to America, where it met with wide acceptance. With the



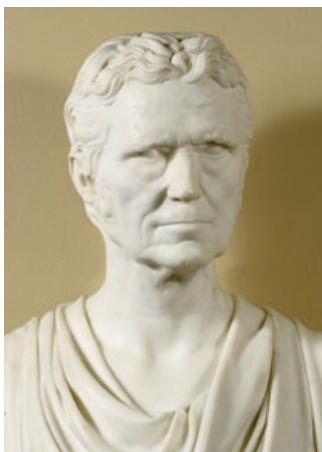
Justice



John Jay



Oliver Ellsworth



John Marshall

style came the iconographic system of allegory and symbol so well suited to it and so well understood by educated Americans of the time. With expository directness, Franzoni's figures and their attributes leave little doubt about their essential meaning—Justice—even for the modern viewer unaccustomed to the language of symbol. Franzoni died shortly afterward, and no native American sculptor had yet appeared. However, around 1820, a young stonecutter named John Frazee, recently arrived in New York City, saw a cast from an ancient classical sculpture in the American Academy of Fine Arts. Applying to John Trumbull, president of the Academy, for instruction in sculpture, Frazee was told that “there would be little or nothing wanted in this branch of art, and no encouragement given to it in this country, for yet a hundred years!”¹ Undeterred and with only limited guidance, Frazee became the young nation's first sculptor in marble, and one of his finest works—a bust of Supreme Court Chief Justice John Jay—soon appeared beside Franzoni's *Justice*.

In this venerable room, mounted on marble brackets placed against piers, are busts of the three men confirmed as the earliest chief justices of the Court. These busts are also the three earliest portrait sculptures in the Senate, which may be evidence of the meteoric rise of the prestige of the Supreme Court under Chief Justice John Marshall. The busts, presenting three contrasting styles in American sculpture in the 1830s, are John Frazee's *John Jay* (1831), Hezekiah Augur's *Oliver Ellsworth* (ca. 1837), and Hiram Powers's *John Marshall* (1839). The prominence of portrait sculpture in public civic centers typifies the western tradition since Greco-Roman times. In America, it is certainly a manifestation of the continual reference to the Roman Republic as the prototype of the American Republic. Because the significant personages of ancient Rome were usually carved in marble, and because Roman sculptural decoration was often an integral part of public architecture, portraits in sculpture must have seemed, instinctively, to have been the proper medium for the principal building of the American Republic.

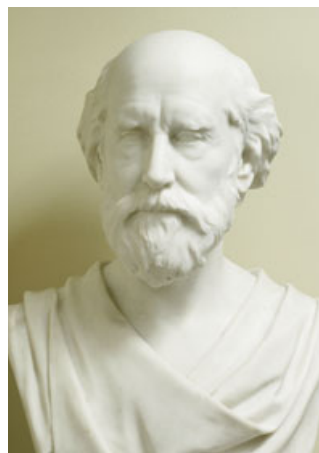
Frazee's excellent bust of John Jay is resolutely neoclassical, both in style and conception, fusing the distinctive Roman formal traits to an equally Roman projection of intellectual and moral character. The little-known Augur is one of those unique American artists whose lack of formal training seems to have liberated them in their manner of interpretation. His likeness of Oliver Ellsworth exhibits an exaggerated but memorable naturalism—he looks like a provincial Laurence Olivier—

combined with a harsh stylization, which might be called New England neoclassicism. Powers, the last of the trio, succeeded admirably in one of his first important commissions. He modeled a movingly naturalistic head of Marshall in the last year of his 34-year tenure as chief justice, carving it in stone in Italy. Powers placed the head on a bust draped simply and symmetrically in the neoclassical manner. The combination of modes is similar to Augur's but far more sophisticated, and it ranks very high in American portrait sculpture. All of these works thoroughly embody the dignity of the office they represent; they were an auspicious beginning for the Senate's art collection.

Three portrait busts from the 1870s present a very similar range of choices. The portraits are Charles Calverley's *Lafayette Foster* (1879), Martin Milmore's *Charles Sumner* (1875), and Augustus Saint-Gaudens's *Roger B. Taney* (1876–77). The most surprising is Calverley's remarkable neo-classical bust of the acting vice president after Lincoln's assassination. Though carved long after the heyday of neoclassicism, the style is not reactionary, because in Calverley's hands, it is so perfectly suited to the character of the sitter as perceived by the artist. There is not an ounce of interpretative or stylistic rhetoric in this work, nor is it an arid stylistic exercise. It is an utterly authentic sculpture by an artist who may deserve greater appreciation than he has received.

In his bust of Charles Sumner, Milmore (like Powers) perched a naturalistic head atop neoclassically draped shoulders, but the combination is unpersuasive. The head, however, is so expressive of the passionate nature of the antislavery senator that it triumphs over the toga. The bust of Taney by Saint-Gaudens (based on a likeness by William Henry Rinehart) may also be compared to Powers's *Marshall* in its naturalism and in its frontal symmetry, but Saint-Gaudens has exchanged neoclassical drapery for modern dress and blank eyeballs for drilled pupils that accentuate the realism of the head. More significantly, Saint-Gaudens imbues Taney's features with an introspective, emotional character, approaching the intense pathos of the painted portraits by Thomas Eakins in the last decades of the century. The Taney and Marshall busts can be easily compared by visitors to the Capitol since they are both located in the Old Supreme Court Chamber.

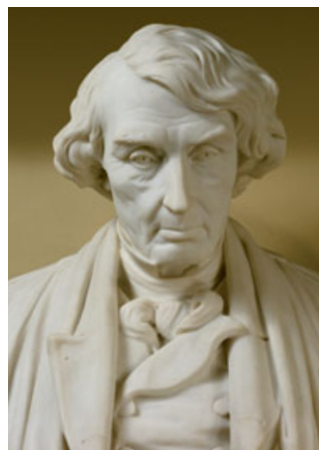
Among the best-known American sculptures of politicians is a pair of small, full-length bronzes of Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, the two great "persuaders" of the Senate during the second quarter of the 19th



Lafayette Foster



Charles Sumner



Roger B. Taney

century. Modeled by Thomas Ball in 1853 and 1858 respectively, they are located in the second floor corridor leading from the Old Senate Chamber toward the new Chamber. No senators have been more written about or more deservedly so. Their oratorical powers fascinated public and politicians alike. So, apparently, did their cranial characteristics, due to the public's fascination with phrenology—the then-popular study of the conformation of the skull as indicative of mental faculties and character. Oliver Dyer, in his 1889 recollections of great senators he had known, wrote of Clay:

The effect of Clay's oratory was much enhanced by the peculiar conformation of his forehead and that portion of his head which lay above it. His perceptive organs projected far out, the crown of his head was unusually high, and a grand curvilinear



Henry Clay



Daniel Webster

line swept from the frontal sinus between his eyes to the apex of his head. This peculiar conformation gave him a commanding, eagle-like, soaring expression which, in combination with his glowing features, his blazing eyes and his fiery eloquence, sometimes excited the beholder's imagination until he seemed to be rising in the air with the orator.²

The massive head of Webster never ceased to fascinate the public. And Dyer, writing of this “last and greatest personage of whom I have to treat,” expounded fully upon it:

Webster's head was phenomenal in size, and beauty of outline, and grandeur of appearance. . . . His brow was so protuberant that his eyes, though unusually large, seemed sunken, and were likened unto “great burning lamps set deep in the mouths of caves.” But large as his Perceptive organs were, his Reflectives bulged out over them. His causality was massively developed; and his organ of comparison, which was larger even than his causality, protruded as though nature, in building Webster's head, having distributed her superabundant material as well as she could,

found at the last that she had such a lot of brain matter left on hand, that, in despair, she dabbed it on in front and let it take its chance of sticking; and it stuck. The head, the face, the whole presence of Webster, was kingly, majestic, godlike.³

After completing *Webster* and before commencing *Clay*, Ball traveled to Italy to further his knowledge of sculpture. Coincidentally, just at that time (1855–56), the Italian sculptor Francis Vincenti was engaged on decorative work in the Capitol extension. Given the significant opportunity to model and then carve the portrait busts of two venerable visiting American Indian chiefs, Be sheekee (or Buffalo) and Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay (or Flat Mouth), he proved himself a sculptor of high ability. Although Vincenti today remains a tantalizingly obscure figure, his two busts rank with the finest 19th-century portraits of Native Americans. Forceful in their characterizations and skillfully elaborate in their detailed headdresses, they are among the exceedingly rare portrait sculptures of the first Americans.



Be sheekee, or Buffalo

By the time Hiram Powers finished his full-length statue of Benjamin Franklin in 1862, a quarter of a century after his bust of John Marshall, he was at the height of his fame—and his \$10,000 fee reflected his success. The statue is important because it shows Franklin in contemporary rather than classical Roman clothing. Only in his less frequent full-length figures did Powers abandon the neoclassical drapery with which he always clothed his marble busts, whether of ideal or real subjects. The large format and contemporary costume allowed Powers to infuse the portrait with a complex and humanized personality.

After the Senate had settled into the new Chamber in the north extension of the Capitol, after the Civil War had ended and the upheaval of Reconstruction had passed, after the Centennial celebration in Philadelphia, the senators at last turned their attention to the empty niches on the upper walls of the large room and to the commissioning of sculptures of past vice presidents to fill them. The earliest of these subjects, of course, had to be modeled and carved posthumously, like Powers's *Franklin*. Always a problematic project for an artist, the first two vice presidents received unequal treatment. The bust of the second vice president, Thomas Jefferson (1888), carved in Rome by Moses Ezekiel, is very successful technically and is conceived in large forms that project well in the Chamber. On the other hand, although Ezekiel's model for the likeness, whether a sculpture or a painting, has not been surely established, it seems clear



Benjamin Franklin



Thomas Jefferson



John Adams



Henry Laurens

that the absence of a live sitter resulted in a slightly awkward portrait that does not look quite like any other Jefferson.

However, the comparison of this bust with that of the nation's first vice president, John Adams (1890) by Daniel Chester French, makes clearer French's achievement. The bust conveys the intelligence and resolution of the man who presided over the Senate in New York and Philadelphia, and whose deciding vote against a 1794 bill to suspend commerce with Great Britain helped to prevent war. If French's Adams (in a niche above the vice president's chair) looks rather more genial and animated than Adams customarily did, it may perhaps be due to his model: Gilbert Stuart's portrait of Adams as president, begun in 1798 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.).

Paintings

Although the paintings in the U.S. Senate are less prominently displayed in the public spaces than the sculptures, they include some of the oldest and most significant pieces in the collection. One painting worthy of close attention is the somber portrait of Henry Laurens (1781 or 1784), painted when he was a prisoner in the Tower of London by the English artist Lemuel Francis Abbott. The eventful life of Laurens exemplifies the powerful conflicts felt by loyal British subjects in America at the time of the Revolution. He had seen his Charleston, South Carolina, home ransacked during protests against the Stamp Act (he was wrongly suspected of possessing stamped paper). Then he had served in the Continental Congress, becoming its second president. Laurens sailed for Holland to negotiate a treaty with the first European nation to recognize the sovereignty of the United States, but his ship was taken by the British, and he was imprisoned as a traitor to England. While in captivity, he issued two pro-British petitions yet also commissioned this portrait in which he proclaimed (in the letter he holds) his determination "in the last event to stand or fall with my country [America]." Knowledge of this personal history lends resonance to Abbott's strong portrait, sparking our appreciation for a time when soaring hopes were dogged by uncertain dangers and patriotism was not a simple reflex but a dauntingly complex decision.

It was George Washington, as president of the fledgling government in Philadelphia, who in effect selected the first architect of the projected Capitol building in the new capital of Washington, D.C., and

it was he who laid the cornerstone. Although Washington was to die before the Capitol came into use, he would be prominently commemorated in the building. Ultimately, he would soar over the entire structure in Constantino Brumidi's huge painting of Washington's *Apotheosis* that fills the great dome of the Rotunda.

But other paintings of the Father of His Country would enter the Capitol during the 19th century, and two of Gilbert Stuart's replicas of his canonical "Athenaeum" head of Washington—the life portrait painted in April 1796 in Philadelphia—were among them. These fine examples are known as the Chesnut and the Pennington portraits. The two Stuarts in the Senate's collection exhibit considerable differences, showing how Stuart could vary his formula in the replicas, perhaps trying to inject them with conjured life in the absence of the sitter.

Stuart lamented that he had been unable to get the president to unbend, even to smile, on this occasion. He is said to have tried "to awaken the heroic spirit in [Washington] by talking of battles." He had even recklessly remarked: "Now, sir, you must let me forget that you are General Washington and that I am Stuart the Painter," which elicited the response, "Mr. Stuart need never feel the need of forgetting who he is, or who General Washington is."⁴ Stuart—whose conversation delighted many sitters, John Adams among them—failed utterly to engage the first president. Nonetheless, the occasion resulted in the most famous portrait in American art history, one that Stuart replicated dozens of times in the remaining 30 years of his life, since it was a proven moneymaker and Stuart was chronically in debt.

It has been asserted ad nauseam that the president's impassive reserve in this portrait was the result of a new pair of false teeth. Although the uncomfortable teeth explained the rather puffy appearance of Washington's jaw, there was a far more significant motive behind Washington's studied aloofness. The necessity of beginning the new nation in as nonpartisan an atmosphere as possible had inevitably led to the near-unanimous selection of Washington as first president. A very young guide in a historical museum was once heard to say: "They needed heroes in those days." Well, they had them, and none more adulated than George Washington. But the general longed to retire to his beloved Mount Vernon. He acquiesced in a first term, and even more reluctantly in a second, but he chafed under its constraints. When partisan attacks upon him finally did occur,



***The Apotheosis of Washington* by Constantino Brumidi, 1865.**
(Architect of the Capitol)

he sometimes exploded—in private. In public, he was invariably impassive, above the political fray, a pose that must have taken a considerable emotional toll upon him. He knew perfectly how to assume the role that the situation demanded of him and to appear unmoved by petty or inconsequential matters.

Another Washington portrait, a remarkable work by Charles Willson Peale, *George Washington at Princeton* (1779), currently hangs in a constricted location at the top of the west staircase of the north wing where it is seen (or passed) by the legislators daily but noticed by relatively few visitors to the Senate. Unfortunately, except for the Capitol Rotunda and the walls above the staircase landings in each wing, public spaces for displaying paintings in the Capitol are less suitable for proper viewing than are the spaces for sculpture.

One of the finest paintings in the Capitol, *George Washington at Princeton* is the principal portrait of the hero as a military leader. The artist had served with the general at the battle so recently fought, and had known its uncertain ebb and flow. Yet Peale poses the general imperterbably beside a captured Hessian cannon; hat in hand; horse, groom, and battle standard behind him. The self-possession of the pose is matched by an expression of benevolence, not braggadocio. This replica (perhaps the first) by Peale of his most popular painting was almost certainly purchased for Louis XVI, king of France, whose financial aid was invaluable to the American cause. Taken to France by the returning French ambassador, the painting passed into private hands after the king's execution during the French Revolution. In time, the work returned to



George Washington at Princeton

America. Exactly a century after it was painted, the Senate resolved to purchase the painting, which had been on display at the Smithsonian Institution, and in 1882 the work was moved to the Capitol. From the colony to the king to the Capitol, the painting has had an unpredictable but thoroughly appropriate history. This supremely confident image of the commander-in-chief after a critical victory in the War for Independence is one of the finest of the numerous replicas Peale painted

of the life portrait originally commissioned for the Pennsylvania Statehouse (now, Independence Hall).

The most venerable among the images in the U.S. Senate of George Washington is Rembrandt Peale's *Patriæ Pater*, a posthumous portrait in which the great man is imagined as a godlike figure poised in an indeterminate ethereal space behind an illusionistic stone window, beyond time, enshrined in memory. Although Rembrandt, eldest son of Charles Willson Peale, had painted the president from life in 1795, the Senate's portrait and its replica and variants were the conscious result of synthesizing the finest extant likenesses of Washington into an ideal that would rise above any of them. It was greeted with enthusiasm, and seemed destined to hang in the Capitol building. It is the earliest painting of Washington to enter the collection; the work was purchased in 1832 to preside over the original Senate Chamber. The painting had already been briefly displayed at the Capitol immediately after it was painted, in early 1824. Although Washington's head is just about life-size, the monumental canvas (6 x 4½ feet) produces a tremendous effect. The strong relief of the idealized head carries clearly from the gallery above the presiding officer's dais to the viewers on the Chamber floor. Although the portrait was removed from the site when the Supreme Court moved there in 1860, and never hung in the new Senate hall, it was permanently returned to its original location in 1976 when the Old Senate Chamber became a museum room, no longer regularly used for official business.

Rembrandt Peale had adopted elements of French neoclassicism during his stay in Paris (1808–10), and his ideal image of Washington might be dubbed "heroic neoclassicism," but that style was not the recurring force in American painting that it was in sculpture. The reason: There were no available painted ancient classical models in portraiture as there were classical sculptures, which dictated the preference for neoclassical sculpture. Of the better known American painters who adopted neoclassicism, John Trumbull and Gilbert Stuart came to it naturally, being of the same generation as Jacques-Louis David, the principal French neoclassicist. John Vanderlyn and Rembrandt Peale were a generation younger and encountered neoclassicism as students in Paris. All practiced the style only briefly, while it was still fresh in Europe. Although it was a style that could never prevail over the American realistic tradition in painting, it could blend with it.



George Washington (Patriæ Pater)



Joseph Gales

The portrait of Joseph Gales (ca. 1844) by George P.A. Healy, painted while Hiram Powers's neoclassicism reigned in American sculpture, is a case in point. Healy was then employed by King Louis Philippe of France, where the late neoclassicism of J.A.D. Ingres was still popular. Healy's penetrating likeness of one of the most fascinating and influential men in Washington, D.C., is faithful to the descriptive realism of American portrait painting, yet it has similarities to the male portraits of Ingres of the preceding decade. It marks a meeting point of these two styles, where the realism of one could meld almost imperceptibly with the idealism of the other.

Joseph Gales (together with his colleague, William Seaton) edited the *National Intelligencer* for half a century. It was the leading political newspaper in the country, one which spoke for many administrations while also publishing the congressional debates. In this latter role, Gales was a prominent figure in the Senate and the House for decades. Joseph Gales certainly had strong political opinions but high standards. Carefully balanced reporting kept the paper going, even during hostile administrations, though not without some serious fights. In the long run, the integrity of the publisher was reflected in the integrity of the publication. Gales had a striking head: large and broad, crowned with thick hair and accented by keen black eyes. He was gracious, polite, and easygoing in manner, but also a shrewd man of strong convictions, as evidenced by one of his late editorials (ca. 1857) that addresses topics that still preoccupy us today—violent street crime and handguns:

The moral causes of this cheap contempt in which human life is held among us . . . are seen in the extravagant notions of personal rights and personal independence which are fostered . . . by the perversion of our political doctrines, [and] by the laxity of parental discipline. . . . And out of this . . . has grown an equally extravagant notion respecting the rights of self-defense, which turns every man into an avenger, . . . [and] renders him swift to shed blood in the very apprehension of danger or insult. As partly the cause and partly the effect of this indifference to human life, *the practice of going armed with concealed and deadly weapons*, has well nigh become one of our social habitudes. The only conceivable object of course, in thus carrying these instruments of death, is *to kill*: the violent, that they may perpetrate their misdeeds with impunity; the peaceful, under the plea that the habit . . . has become a dire necessity under the reign of license and disorder. . . . But, whatever the motive and whatever the excuse for this dangerous custom, it is one that should not be tolerated in any community

which has emerged from the condition of savages, and professes allegiance to law and order.⁵

The physical, personal, and intellectual aspects of Joseph Gales are convincingly caught by George P.A. Healy, whose style a 19th-century critic characterized as “rugged” and “forcible,” vigorous and emphatic, and well attuned to a sitter’s personality.⁶



The necessary emphasis on portraits in the Senate greatly limits the inclusion of other subjects. This is most apparent in the near-total absence of landscape paintings. Landscape painting is sometimes regarded as 19th-century America’s most significant artistic contribution. But the only example of pure landscape in the Senate is François Régis Gignoux’s *Niagara, The Table Rock—Winter* (ca. 1847). As such, it comes as a welcome respite in the steady parade of portraits. The French painter worked for 30 years in America, and in this grand picture of the grandest of American natural wonders, he recorded his own humility in the face of nature. Gignoux included an artist with portfolio at the bottom of the scene. Although the painting has no narrative content, the artist has added symbolic commentary—an American eagle and a fantastic cathedral of ice rising toward the crest of the falls. To discover the divine presence in the unspoiled American landscape was second nature to poets and painters, and Niagara Falls in particular was seen as a national symbol, as proof of divine favor toward America. Imagine listening, for instance, to the Reverend Edward T. Taylor’s speech in Buffalo in 1860:

After you have said Niagara, all that you may say is but the echo. It remains Niagara, and will roll and tumble and foam and play and sport till the last trumpet shall sound. . . . So with this country. It is the greatest God ever gave to man. . . . It is our own. God reserved it for us, and there is not the shadow of it in all the world besides.⁷

The series of Army posts painted by Seth Eastman in the early 1870s were conceived of as a historical record of the post-Civil War period. Although not pure landscape, they are all situated convincingly in their particular settings. Those settings were sometimes known firsthand by the artist through his prior military postings, but there is no evidence that any of Eastman’s forts were painted on site. However,



Niagara, The Table Rock—Winter

Eastman was a skillful artist, and there is nothing perfunctory about the landscapes. They are of particular interest because they cover a wide geographical range of the United States, from the southwest to the Canadian border to the Florida Keys, and thereby reflect the post-war sense of an expanded and unified nation. Modest and understated, they yield more information—and more artistic pleasure—than might be expected from a cursory glance.

The Place of the Modern

It has been stressed that the Senate’s art collection, in its most important and characteristic works, is a collection of 19th-century art. That it also contains sculptures and paintings of quality—occasionally of the highest quality—from the 20th century is obvious. Nonetheless, the style that had been so well suited to the largely commemorative needs of the Senate was still preferred and fostered by the now-conservative taste that often guided commissions. Of course, the dichotomy between an institutional adherence to 19th-century stylistic traditions and the radical stylistic innovations of the 20th century mirrored the situation found elsewhere in the world of art. Museums and corporations, dealers, collectors, and artists, were all confronted with a seemingly stark, threatening choice between the old and the new, and there was no shortage of excellent conservative artists who disliked rupture and opted for the continuity of a familiar tradition.

In the early 1980s, California Governor Jerry Brown created a stir by having his official portrait for the capitol at Sacramento painted by Don Bachardy in a “modern” style. An online guide to the California State Capitol posted by the *Sacramento Bee* described the effect:

Former Gov. Jerry Brown chose to have his mug mapped onto an abstract oil painting. Between calm and conservative portraits of his peers, Brown’s face peers out of gray bars and drips of red paint.⁸

Of course, the portrait is not “abstract” (nor cubist nor expressionistic, as other critics have declared). Those are merely code words for “modern”—indicating not what Brown’s portrait is, but what it is not. It is not a classic, formal portrait.

It was to avoid such stylistic clashes that the Joint Committee on the Library commissioned 20th-century art that reflected the tradition of the 19th century. Similarly, the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration and the Senate Commission on Art, which later assumed the



Hubert H. Humphrey, Jr.



Charles G. Dawes

responsibility of acquisitions of art, continued this pattern. Thus, the collection became increasingly divorced from the mainstream of recent American art. The public at large endorsed the conservative tradition, and the popular press often encouraged a humorous or condescending attitude toward modern art. Despite such attitudes, there are instances in the collection where an artist has quietly made a bow in the direction of 20th-century styles. And, rarely, an indisputably modern artist will have achieved the rank of a modern old master whose works are deemed worthy of official patronage. As cases in point, three strongly contrasting works from the final quarter of the 20th century indicate the divergent strengths to be found in recent additions to the collection.

To the casual glance, the estimable marble portrait of Hubert H. Humphrey, Jr. (1982), by Walker Hancock is thoroughly traditional. Yet there is a spare, clean quality to the lines and surfaces of the bust that does not stem from past neoclassicism but arguably from the reductionism of some early modernist sculptors after World War I. Hancock was a traditionalist but receptive to modernism. His moving *Pennsylvania Railroad War Memorial* (1950) in Philadelphia's Thirtieth Street Station, for example, is indebted to Jacob Epstein and what has been called his "bearable modernism."⁹ The simplicity of the Humphrey bust has parallels in many modern sculptures. Specifically, it may be compared to Jo Davidson's works, including the Senate's portrait of Charles G. Dawes.

Aaron Shikler's large painting of Mike Mansfield (1978) stands out as a delightful anomaly among the Senate portraits. Neither the standard bust nor the formal frontal full-length, it is a three-quarter-length portrait with the subject posed in profile, at once more imposing in size and more accessible in personality than many of its fellows. Cropping Senator Mansfield at the knees brings him closer, while having him look away from the artist and the viewer (with a friendly smile) eliminates much of the egocentric self-consciousness inherent in the posing process. This is not so much a matter of artistic style as contemporary casualness, suggesting comparisons to an artist of wide popularity: Norman Rockwell. The Shikler work has the aura of a magazine cover—affable, yet dignified.



Mike Mansfield



Mountains and Clouds

Alexander Calder's *Mountains and Clouds* (1986) has no true parallel in the Senate's art collection. It is the most unabashedly modern work in the collection, by a major artist whose abstraction has always proved acceptable to a wide spectrum of the population, and whose choice for the commission therefore met with little resistance. It dominates the Hart Senate Office Building's great atrium. An immense presence, it has felt overbearing to some. However, anyone who saw the atrium before the much-delayed installation of the sculpture can hardly think that it looked better empty. Not merely vacant, but vacuous, the original space took on meaning with the arrival of Calder's last work. It is composed of a "stable"—the mountains—and a mechanized "mobile"—the clouds, and it is entirely black, in contrast to the white marble interior. Every other sculpture in the Senate is conceived as a decorative, often symbolic, adornment to the architecture. This piece is conceived as its equal, in a monumental balancing act between the architecture and the art. Although it represents neither "justice" nor any other abstract concept, its elemental natural forms are just as appropriate to a building dedicated to the formulation of a democratic

nation's laws as any classical symbol. In its soaring stability capped by swirling infinity, it reflects the heroic imagination of Calder. Perhaps equal to the greatest of the traditional works in the collection, it speaks an utterly different stylistic language. The Calder could not easily coexist with the works within the U.S. Capitol building itself, but the modern and the traditional are grand complementaries in the collection of the U.S. Senate as it stands at the beginning of the 21st century.

