

# *Toward an Iconography of a State Capitol: The Art and Architecture of the Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg*

Preeminently, a state capitol must symbolize the majesty of the government. It must be expressive of the stability and dignity of the state, and it must typify in its architecture the enduring place it holds in the federal government.

—JOSEPH H. FREEDLANDER, 1927<sup>1</sup>

THE MYRIAD WAYS in which people inscribe buildings with meaning can nowhere be more visible, more public, or more pregnant with possibility than at a state capitol. The building as a symbol, the architecture as iconography, and the art as a messenger to the people become loaded metaphors of encyclopedic complexity as both patron and practitioner attempt to epitomize in a single structure the history and importance of several millions of people over several centuries of time. How a state chooses to represent itself, artistically and architecturally, speaks volumes about how its citizenry wishes to perceive itself at the particular moment of a capitol building's creation. The array of monumental architecture, sculpture, mural painting, and other embellishment is especially rich at the Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg. There, the ghosts of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Rodin mingle with the architecture of Joseph H. Huston, the sculpture of George Grey Barnard, and the mural paintings of Edwin Austin Abbey and Violet Oakley.

Built between 1901 and 1906, during the final years of that exuberant period referred to alternately as the Gilded Age or the American Renaissance, the Pennsylvania State Capitol is an example of the culmination of

<sup>1</sup> "Designing Capitol Buildings," *Architectural Forum* 46 (1927), 504.

America's quest to amass in a single prolific burst of creative activity the kinds of artistic treasures that European cultural centers had accumulated over centuries. Looking to Europe, perhaps for the last time, for models of the finest in cultural monuments, the artists and patrons of this period sought to recreate European ideals of collaborative effort and to decorate their Beaux-Arts classical buildings in the grand tradition of monuments from Chartres to Versailles. Seeking to articulate an ideal of artistic harmony—itsself certainly an ideal created after the fact—one contemporary author proclaimed that Joseph Huston, the architect of the Pennsylvania State Capitol, “strove to revive the old relation between the master-builder and his coworkers, a relation which one may imagine to have existed in the golden days of mediæval craftsmanship—a comradeship in zeal and proud endeavor.” Then, in the same paragraph, the author attempted to transform this religious, monarchical, even feudal image into a contemporary, secular, and distinctively American notion, by proclaiming that such a collaborative effort would be “in the finest sense democratic and bound to be productive of the best that is in any man.”<sup>2</sup>

This attempt to transform the ideas and imagery of pre-Renaissance and Renaissance Europe into a modern American idiom informs the imagery contained in the Pennsylvania State Capitol. How successful this transformation was, of course, would be re-addressed by each succeeding generation of architects and artists; but for early twentieth-century Pennsylvanians, the capitol was a triumph, providing a visual language with its grammar and structure rooted in Europe but its dialect aimed exclusively at native—even regional—“speakers.”

The Pennsylvania State Capitol that stands today in Harrisburg is the third such structure built in Pennsylvania for the express purpose of housing the official functions of the state government. The first—and far more widely known—was the Pennsylvania State House erected in Philadelphia in 1731–36 (and later) following the general plans of Andrew Hamilton, a lawyer and speaker of the assembly. A relatively modest structure of brick with detailing influenced by the architecture of Christopher Wren, it is now appreciated as a typical example of American colonial architecture. Its fame as the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence provided its current name, Independence Hall. The Old State House remained the seat

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Caffin, “The New Capitol of Pennsylvania,” *World's Work* 13 (Nov. 1906), 8196.

of Pennsylvania's government after the Revolution until 1799, when the state capitol was moved for a thirteen-year period to Lancaster, where it occupied an already existing courthouse.

Then, in 1812, the capitol moved to its present location in Harrisburg, where a building was erected (1819–22) to the designs of Harrisburg architect Stephen Hills. This Federal-style building had a modest colonnaded dome and an elliptical portico reminiscent of the White House in Washington, and was important in establishing an architectural prototype for American statehouses nationwide. Hills's plan articulated what would become a standard formula for capitol buildings: a grand entrance facade with formal stairs and an architecturally significant colonnaded portico, a central rotunda space capped by a dome, and two equally balanced wings on either side to contain the House and Senate. Although this general arrangement was not highly original in itself, its use for a state government building was a new and significant step.<sup>3</sup>

Hills's Pennsylvania State Capitol was, of course, based in its general arrangement on the national Capitol in Washington, D.C., a design of manifest importance to a century's worth of American statehouses. The first design for the United States Capitol building, submitted in competition by William Thornton in 1792, responded to the call for an architecture for the new nation. It gave architectural form, even in its germ, to the most powerful ideas of the new democracy: namely, the balance of powers achieved in part through the creation of a bicameral legislature. Dominated from the first by a dome at the center and balanced by long wings that housed the Senate to one side and the House of Representatives to the other, the original plan might almost be an architectural translation of *e pluribus unum*: each wing, a separate entity, yet irrevocably joined by the single harmonious element of the dome. It has the additional virtue of being eminently "legible"; it is possible to "read" the exterior as a visual exposition of what it contains inside.

Certainly the new nation was in search of an architectural language that could effectively communicate the radical new ideals of its democracy, and although Benjamin Latrobe's later and very famous tobacco-leaf capitals

<sup>3</sup> Henry-Russell Hitchcock and William Seale, *Temples of Democracy: The State Capitols of the U.S.A.* (New York, 1976), 63. Published in the bicentennial year, this work is the only book to consider architecturally all of the American statehouses in one volume. It should be noted that while the earlier Massachusetts Statehouse (1795–98) by Charles Bulfinch resembles this general model on the exterior, the disposition of the interior spaces does not match the formula.

are a marvelous decorative example of that search for a new language, it is the overall balance of the plan and the silhouette of the building, with its historical succession of domes, that would provide a lasting influence on the many statehouses that were eventually to follow. The first plan by Thornton proposed a low saucer dome based on the Pantheon in Rome, but the dome that was completed in 1824 under the direction of Charles Bulfinch had, at the insistence of President James Monroe, a higher profile to make it more prominent and visible. The dome more closely resembled Bulfinch's own, earlier, Massachusetts Statehouse dome (1795-98), but was criticized as inelegant—too high for its width. Bulfinch's dome would, in turn, be supplanted by the instantly recognizable, international symbol of American government and democracy, Thomas Ustick Walter's cast-iron dome of 1851-65. Walter, having made the architectural grand tour of Europe, based his design upon such famous domes as the Renaissance and Baroque domes of St. Peter's in Rome and St. Paul's in London and the neoclassical Panthéon (or Ste.-Geneviève) in Paris. Walter's dome is daring in its use of new materials as well as exuberant in its grand vertical gesture, nearly overpowering the old, original central portion of the Capitol, but achieving unity with the newly expanded wings to either side. The bold design of the new dome served as a symbol of unity not only for the House and Senate wings but also for the scarred and healing nation during the period of Reconstruction after the Civil War.

The symbolism of the dome as an architectural form is rich and historic. Since the great domes of the Pantheon in Rome and the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, the dome has been one of mankind's greatest architectural achievements. It is a symbol of the human ability to defy the limits of gravity, to create space in a manner rivaling God's own creation. Yet domes have also symbolized reverence toward God and his empyrean. They have long been understood as a metaphor for heaven itself, and the revival of the form in the Renaissance, notably at Florence's *Duomo* and at St. Peter's, resonated with both humanistic and religious impulses. It is remarkable that Americans would co-opt the dome as a symbol not of religion, but of a self-governing people, the first in the world to divorce religion entirely from matters of government. American domes replaced a dominating God with a self-governing free will, and it is no accident that even in the eighteenth century American writers understood the framers of the Constitution as "architects" and the Constitution itself as a "heaven-descended

DOME."<sup>4</sup> Metaphor met architecture as this primarily religious symbol descended from heaven and alit on the profoundly earthly and temporal business of governing a multifaceted democracy.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the triune plan and domed silhouette of the American statehouse was well established. Stephen Hills's original Pennsylvania Statehouse formula spawned many variations by the time it burned to the ground in 1897. By this time, the coal, steel, and railroad industries had made Pennsylvania one of the richest states in the union, eager to demonstrate in no uncertain terms its cultural sophistication and economic wherewithal. The original competition for a new state capitol in 1897 was won by Henry Ives Cobb, architect of the Richardsonian Romanesque Fisheries Building at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Of Cobb's Harrisburg design, only a shell of brick was erected, due to cost restrictions imposed by the General Assembly.<sup>5</sup> The resultant "plain brick building, devoid of all ornamentation" proved unsatisfactory to all involved, and a second competition was held in 1901.<sup>6</sup> This competition permitted only Pennsylvania architects to enter, and was won by Joseph Miller Huston (1866–1940), a primarily residential architect with offices in Philadelphia.

Huston assumed the somewhat inglorious task of designing a new capitol building around Cobb's already-built shell, so his building necessarily followed the general outlines of his predecessor. With a far more generous budget (four million dollars) and more artistic autonomy, Huston was able to realize his vision for a statehouse of unrivaled magnificence and grandeur, mining the art and architecture of the past for suitable iconography (fig. 1).

Interestingly, Cobb's plan did not balance the bicameral legislative body in the usual symmetrical fashion but rather placed the smaller Senate

<sup>4</sup> R. L. Alexander, "The Grand Federal Edifice," *Documentary Editing* 9, no. 2 (June 1987), 13, as quoted in William C. Allen, *The Dome of the United States Capitol: An Architectural History* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 2. See also Pamela Scott, *Temple of Liberty: Building the Capitol for a New Nation* (New York, 1995), esp. 99–100, "Capitol Dome and Statue of Freedom."

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Hitchcock and Seale, *Temples of Democracy*, 238–40. The competition has also been extensively researched in an unpublished Master's thesis, Dan Grove Deibler, "An Architectural Competition: A Capitol Offense," (M.A. thesis, University of Virginia, 1974); and in the monumental study produced by the Capitol Preservation Committee, *The Pennsylvania Capitol: A Documentary History* (2 vols., Harrisburg, Pa., 1987), 1:59–65.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Ives Cobb to the Capitol Building Commission, March 30, 1898, as quoted in *The Pennsylvania Capitol: A Documentary History*, 1:68.



Fig. 1. Pennsylvania State Capitol Building, Harrisburg (1901–06), Joseph Miller Huston, Architect. All illustrations in this article appear courtesy of the Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee.

Chamber in front of the rotunda area and the larger House Chamber behind it. Huston's plan (fig. 2) realigned these spaces to correspond to the familiar arrangement symbolizing the equal political and power balance between the houses. He even symbolically addressed the judicial branch within his plan, placing it in the back, behind the rotunda area, centrally located between the two legislative bodies, and at right angles to them. Connecting and unifying these three parts of the government is the great dome, emblematic of the ideal of a sum greater than its parts, as well as the single, heroic, unifying will of the chief executive, the governor.

The dome of the Pennsylvania State Capitol was given much consideration by both architects. As the most architecturally significant feature of the exterior, as well as the costliest, the dome came under scrutiny during the extensive investigations later made into the prodigious expenses of the building (of which more below). During the hearings of the Capitol Investigation Committee, Cobb discussed the importance of the dome as a symbol or marker of a building as important as the statehouse:

You take the one item of the dome. A dome for a county court house might be forty or fifty feet in diameter and a hundred feet in height [*sic*], but, if you build

PENNSYLVANIA CAPITOL COMPETITION

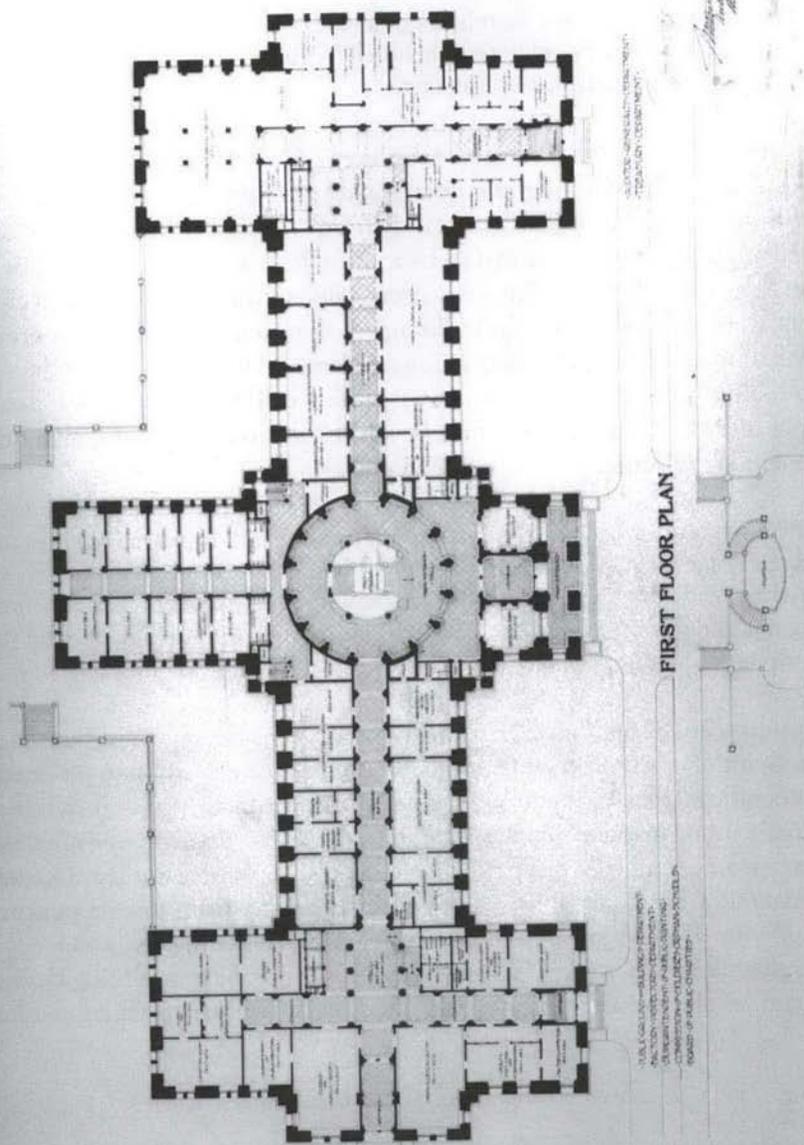


Fig. 2. Joseph Miller Huston's Plan of the 1901-06 Pennsylvania State Capitol Building

a building like that it will look like a county court house, and not like a state house. In order to build a state house you have got to build a building grand enough to imply what its character is as quick as you look at it. You do not want to wonder whether it is a court house or a state house. I figure that the dome, on that site, has got to be at least two hundred feet high, and it ought not to be less than eighty or ninety feet in diameter.<sup>7</sup>

In the most straightforward language, Cobb set forth the long-acknowledged equation: grand dome *equals* statehouse.

Huston's dome differed significantly from Cobb's. He lowered its excessively high profile, and made it stylistically a deliberate and faithful copy of the dome of St. Peter's. This derivation is one of the most frequently cited facts, then and now, about the building's design, and provides an important key to understanding Huston's vision and method for creating what he saw as *his* building as well as an icon for the State of Pennsylvania. In a newspaper interview, Huston explained how he came to choose St. Peter's as the model for his dome:

Pennsylvania owes that to the illness of my brother . . . My brother was seriously ill in Rome, and I was obliged to remain there a long time with him. My repeated visits to St. Peter's overwhelmed me with the grandeur of that cathedral's dome, and so, when I came to the Pennsylvania State Capitol, I duplicated that inspiration in concrete form.<sup>8</sup>

It might seem at first blush that the use of the most recognizable architectural symbol of the Roman Catholic Church as the exclamation point to a democratic statement is curiously at odds with the history of Pennsylvania, perhaps more so than in any other state. Founded upon the principle of religious freedom, the state's heritage is, of course, Protestant and Quaker.

Although Huston publicly ascribed his design choice to this personal experience of the Vatican, a more complex and revealing reason emerges from his diary. There, in 1907, he relates his vision of himself as a kind of artistic conductor, orchestrating all the arts in concert to create a final,

<sup>7</sup> Henry Ives Cobb to the Capitol Investigation Committee, Exhibits, 1897-1907, Pennsylvania State Archives.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph M. Huston, in an interview with an unidentified journalist, unidentified newspaper clipping, Joseph M. Huston composition book [professional scrapbook], Joseph M. Huston Architectural Papers, Pennsylvania State Archives (microfilm).

harmonious symphony of architectural symbolism, à la Phidias or Michelangelo:

I told him [sculptor George Grey Barnard, in 1902] with much enthusiasm of my dream of painting and sculpture which was about like this—I was now Architect of the Capitol and intended if possible to carry out my college daydream which is roughly outlined in a Junior Oration entitled "Literature in Stone" to tell the story and philosophy of the state—in Architecture, painting and sculpture—to house and organize all of the departments of the state [in] their proper relation one to the other and to do as Greenough the old American Sculptor said the Greeks did—He believed that the Greeks had wrought in schools or fraternities—the Genius of the master imparting his design to his friends and inflaming them with it.<sup>9</sup>

If Huston saw himself as the "master" in this paradigm, then his use of Renaissance classicism in the architectural style of the building, and, more importantly, his direct quotation of the Michelangelo/della Porta dome of St. Peter's, all conspire to represent Huston himself as a latter-day, American Michelangelo. The symbolism thus engaged is not, therefore, the architecture of religion, or the mother church of Roman Catholicism. The dome's interior inscription quite pointedly quotes the lines of Penn's famous statement on a government free of religious dictates:

There may be room there for such a holy experiment. For the nations want a precedent, and my God will make it the seed of a nation. That an example may be set up to the nations. That we may do the thing that is truly wise and just.

The inscription of Penn's "holy experiment," which was indeed to secularize government, also serves to secularize and "Americanize" the meaning of the dome's design. By extension, one might even argue that here the Renaissance aesthetic itself has been Americanized and secularized.

If the Capitol's architectural style and symbolism suggest a Renaissance reinterpreted through the American "master" Huston, then surely the decorating of such a large and important structure would also carry great iconographical significance. The very notion of employing a prominent sculptor for large figurative groups, as well as mural painters to cover great expanses of the interiors, bespeaks an ambition worthy of the Renaissance

<sup>9</sup> Joseph M. Huston, "Notes on Barnard, Sept. 21, 1907," Joseph M. Huston Architectural Papers, Pennsylvania State Archives, Capitol Preservation Committee Records (microfilm).

pacapy. Huston had an almost entirely free hand to select artists to decorate the interiors of the Pennsylvania Capitol, and he did so mindful of the "dream" he described in his diary in 1907. Continuing the passage quoted above, Huston expounded upon his vision for the decorative scheme:

My theme or design was to have as nearly as possible one great idea permeate the whole decorative scheme in architecture, painting and sculpture and to tell the story of the Romance of the founding of the state. The philosophy of Penn, his life. The origin, development and destiny of the state in sculpture to have great allegorical groups at the entrance—a quadriga representing the power of the people. The Anglo-Saxon mythology in a great fountain. The native animals of the State. The different constituent racial elements Swedes, English, Scots, Irish, Germans, etc. . . . Various sects of religions—Dunkards, Quaker, Mormon, Presbyterian, Baptist, etc.<sup>10</sup>

Huston related his great idea quite frequently to the press, and it is there that he elaborated his notion of a great convergence of artistic talent. He felt, according to the interviews he gave, that unity was of great importance and that therefore there should be one single sculptor (George Barnard) in charge of sculptural ornamentation, and, similarly, one painter (initially, Edwin Abbey) in charge of the mural decoration. He stressed the value of having the most important sculptural group at ground level, for maximal impact. As one newspaper quoted him, "This latter condition was that chiefly sought by the great sculptors and architects of Greek antiquity and was obtained also by Michelangelo and other Renaissance sculptors."<sup>11</sup>

As with the architecture, Huston emphasized the American quality of the decoration both with the exclusively regional and historical subject matter, and with what he categorized as a distinctively American approach:

I have tried to get away as far as possible from the "Il Penseroso," "L'Autumn" style of decoration. . . . I want this building to recall not the hot sun and glaring marbles of old Greece, but the virile and strenuous life of America. It must typify those things that have made this country great, and recall the history of this great State of Pennsylvania.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> *New York Mail and Express*, July 12, 1902, newspaper clipping scrapbooks, 1901-06, Joseph M. Huston Collection, Manuscript Group 75, Pennsylvania State Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping, July 13, 1902, *ibid.*

By using those evocative Italian and French words, Huston was likely making an oblique reference to the recently completed mural decorations of the Boston Public Library, particularly those by French muralist Puvis des Chavannes, which had been criticized as effete and inappropriately un-American. He may also have been referring to the mural paintings of the Library of Congress, which were preponderantly allegorical and also criticized as being too removed from American subjects. Another newspaper article saved by Huston noted that "the National Library at Washington has a number of historical, allegorical and mythological schemes in its decorations, but in the new Capitol there will be but one scheme and it will relate entirely to the State of Pennsylvania."<sup>13</sup> Great importance appears to have been attached from the beginning, and on every side, to the nativist construction of the heavily Renaissance-inspired artistic conception.

Heroic sculptural groups figured in Huston's plans for the Capitol building from the beginning. While much of his original program never saw the light of day, including a quadriga (recalling the famed gilt-bronze quadriga at St. Mark's in Venice) representing the "Power of the People," he did accomplish the hiring of George Grey Barnard to execute twin groups flanking the main entrance to the building. Like all the other artists involved in the Capitol building—as well as the subjects they depicted—Barnard was a Pennsylvania native and resident. He had trained, however, in Paris at the *École des Beaux-Arts* and was strongly influenced by Rodin, whom he knew. Originally a far more comprehensive scheme, Barnard's commission on the Capitol was eventually whittled down to the two large figural groups of more than thirty figures in heroic scale that flank either side of the main (western) entrance. The left-hand or north group depicts *Love and Labor: The Unbroken Law* (fig. 3), and the right-hand or south group depicts *The Burden of Life: The Broken Law* (fig. 4). As with the iconography of the dome, the sculptures are a complicated conflation of history and contemporary issues, of Medieval/Renaissance symbolism and early twentieth-century American ideals, made with apparent ease by both artist and public.

Barnard's heroic figural groups, with their themes of sin, redemption, and paradise, hark back to Dante, resonate with many Renaissance works—for example, Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*—and also owe some debt to Rodin's *Gates of Hell*. The group representing *The Broken Law* states

<sup>13</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping, May 30, 1902, *ibid.*

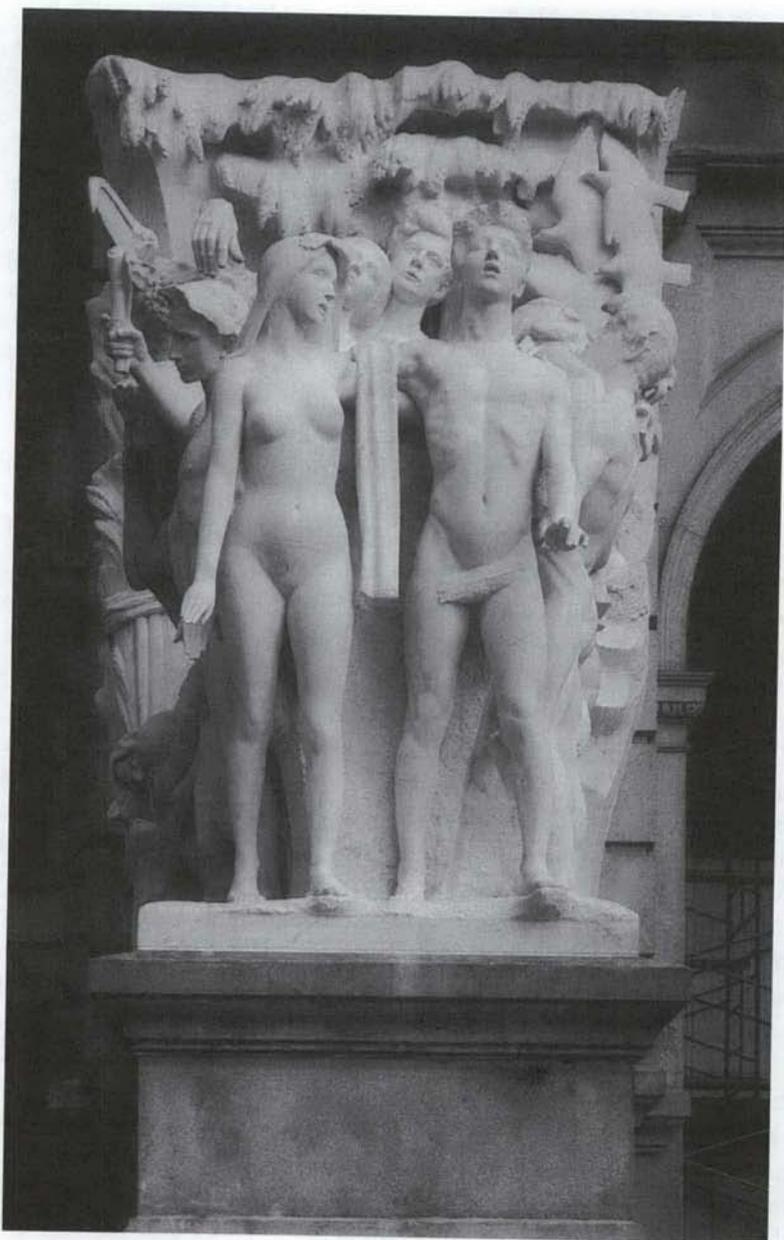


Fig. 3. George Grey Barnard, *Love and Labor: The Unbroken Law*, 1902–11



Fig. 4. George Grey Barnard, *The Burden of Life: The Broken Law*, 1902–11

its theme in the high-relief panel that serves to mediate between the pedestal group and the building. The panel shows Adam and Eve in a bower of hanging fruit, and refers to the irretrievable, Miltonian moment of the original breaking of the law. The figures that spill forth, both physically and metaphorically, represent the evils that follow that transgression. They consist of, among others, the "Forsaken Mother," a "Mourning Woman," the "Burden Bearer," and, at the front, the pair of weeping "Despair" and winged "Hope." The figure of Hope turns his head to his right, as if looking over to the more promising message of the northern group representing *The Unbroken Law*. There, the relief panel features a new Adam and Eve representing "Agriculture: The Rewards of Labor," from whom flow such hopeful groups as "The Baptism," "The Young Parents," and the "Philosopher-Teacher." These culminate in the "The New Youth," an Adam and Eve for the new day who gaze westward toward the land of promise.

Although the undertaking had been mired in budgetary problems and ultimately scandal, the triumphant dedication ceremonies in 1911 revealed in the artistic accomplishment. Speakers made hopeful and proud proclamations, such as the claim made by John C. Bell, the state attorney general, that "the frieze of the Parthenon, perfect in classic line and form, made Athens famous as the art center of the world; and so Barnard's statues will make our Capitol and its citadel, like the Acropolis, a Mecca of art."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the artist, he claimed, "has no rival who can share his glory save only these 'mountains of the past—Phidias and Michael Angelo.'"<sup>15</sup>

The irresistible urge to liken the art at the Capitol to acknowledged European masterpieces, as well as to emphasize the iconographic associations not only with the past but with overarching themes of sin and redemption, was a commonplace in the public reception of the Barnard groups. Even the *New York Times* made far-reaching comparisons that linked the sculpture to the Parthenon, with its moral and civic lessons, and suggested that it presented an object-lesson in citizenship and humanity equal to any of the works of the past:

In this great work for the Pennsylvania Capitol the sculptor is revealing, and confiding to posterity, a grand, noble, humanitarian conception—a splendid

<sup>14</sup> John C. Bell, "Barnard and His Statues," in *Dedication Ceremonies of the Barnard Statues* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1911), 31-32.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

object lesson—from which cannot fail to be drawn inspiration leading to good American citizenship, in the broadest and highest acceptance of that term. Does the artist impart that purity of sentiment comparable, for instance, with that of the friezes of the Parthenon? . . . Is it the American Apollo or the American Hercules?<sup>16</sup>

Although the references both within the work and in its critical and popular reception may have made much of Ancient and Renaissance sources, Barnard was, like Huston, quick to emphasize the modernity of the subject matter. His reasons for choosing his subject matter were almost prosaic. The idea of a universal law that, when broken, leads to suffering, and when followed, leads to earthly paradise, seemed to Barnard “peculiarly appropriate to the headquarters of a legislature.”<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, he also had higher notions of what his art could accomplish. He claimed to want to modernize the generic and universal ideals of the Greeks through a celebration of individuality and specificity in America. Like Huston, he saw a way to translate Greek, as it were, into American:

I saw that the ideal of the Greeks was to make gods. They created beautiful forms, beautiful symbols which they set on pedestals, but in their statuary they stopped short, deliberately, at anything that was individual or characteristic of humanity. The day of the gods is passed. This is the day of the people and it is the people that I want to fix in sculpture.<sup>18</sup>

Much was made of the groups' universality, but, at the same time, they were also interpreted as uniquely American. The same Dedication Day speaker who likened the sculpture to the Parthenon also drew symbolic parallels to the Civil War, suggesting that the two groups represented the former strife between North and South: *The Broken Law* representing the broken Union, and *The Unbroken Law* representing “that era of peace and perfect union, from which the Nation, new born, is advancing on the path of her destiny”—a particularly poignant thought for the state that occupied the northern side of the Mason-Dixon line.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *New York Times*, Oct. 14, 1905, newspaper clipping scrapbooks, 1901–06, Joseph M. Huston Collection, Manuscript Group 75, Pennsylvania State Archives.

<sup>17</sup> *Current Literature* 49 (Aug. 1910), as quoted in Harold E. Dickson, “Barnard's Sculptures for the Pennsylvania Capitol,” *Art Quarterly* 22 (Summer 1959), 133–34.

<sup>18</sup> George Grey Barnard quoted by John C. Bell, attorney general of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, in his “Barnard and His Statues,” 20.

<sup>19</sup> Bell, “Barnard and His Statues,” 23.



Fig. 5. Joseph Miller Huston and Otto Jahnsen, *Bronze Doors*, 1906

Much attention was also given to the bronze doors commissioned for the main entrance standing between Barnard's two groups. The doors (fig. 5) were designed by Huston, modeled by Otto Jahnsen, and cast, each leaf in a single casting, by the Henry Bonnard Bronze Company. The cycle of

panels in the doors substitutes American history for medieval typology. On the two lowest panels, the natural resources of the state—agricultural and mineral—literally “ground” the upper scenes as an Old Testament story might prefigure a New Testament scene in a medieval cycle. Two roundels above the lowest panels rise a level in allegory, depicting “History” and “Education.” They support—again both visually and metaphorically—the two top panels with scenes depicting the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The tympanum above the doors is then subdivided into two lunettes depicting scenes from William Penn’s life, his landing at New Castle, Delaware, in 1682, and his famous treaty with the Indians. Finally, larger than any other figure in the composition, the entire cycle is surmounted by an eagle supporting a portrait of Penn himself, occupying the same position ordinarily occupied by Christ in any medieval or Renaissance door of a similar nature. The obvious historical reference is to the so-called “Gates of Paradise” by Lorenzo Ghiberti at the Florentine Baptistery, and this connection is much discussed in the guides to the Capitol building.<sup>20</sup> Penn, a benign deity, provides his blessing to the entrance of the Capitol, borne aloft by the eagle and surrounded by an aureole of laurel leaves serving as his halo.

Having climbed the great staircase at the main entrance, passed between the sculptural groups and through the bronze doors, the visitor’s education and enlightenment has only just begun. The interior of the statehouse is also replete with decorative cycles in paint, stained glass, and terra-cotta, all of which amplified Huston’s dream of an overall scheme entirely devoted to the history and natural resources of Pennsylvania. Well before the artists were selected, Huston had made drawings of the interior, most notably the rotunda area, in which paintings featured prominently. Huston’s drawings depicted one of the rotunda lunettes as, more or less, Raphael’s *School of Athens*, and the female figures encircled by the roundels as Michelangelo’s Sibyls from the Sistine Chapel ceiling.<sup>21</sup>

The paintings of Edwin Austin Abbey and Violet Oakley provide the most important elements of the interior decoration. In 1902, Huston approached Abbey, a native Philadelphian who lived as an expatriate in England, and commissioned him to execute four 38 × 22 foot lunettes between

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., “The Entrance Hall and Rotunda,” in Charles Henry Caffin, *Handbook of the New Capitol of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1906), 17–18.

<sup>21</sup> As noted in *The Pennsylvania Capitol: A Documentary History*, 120.

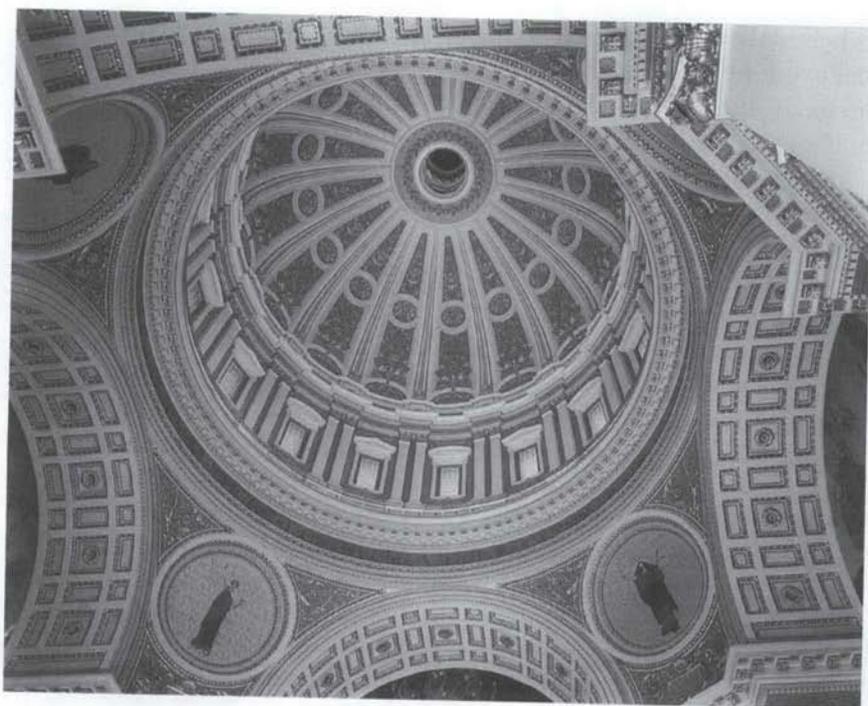


Fig. 6. Interior View of Rotunda

the piers supporting the dome and four 14-foot-diameter roundels in the pendentives (fig. 6). Huston later expanded Abbey's commission to include the murals for the House of Representatives, which were completed, and the Senate and Supreme Court chambers, which were begun but left incomplete at Abbey's death in 1911.

Abbey's four lunettes in the rotunda allegorically celebrate the history and wealth of Pennsylvania. *The Spirit of Religious Liberty*, which Huston thought of utmost importance, has pride of place on the west wall, above the entrance from the vestibule. It depicts an endless parade of ships on the open sea, led by three floating goddesses representing Faith, Hope, and Religious Freedom. The painting transforms the Trinity of Christian theology into a trinity of choice and conscience. This is a remarkable transformation, suggesting that faith and government by fiat—the Old World order—has been supplanted by a politics of choice and a new faith based on reason and representative government. On the east wall, opposite the *Spirit*

of *Religious Liberty*, *Science Revealing the Treasures of the Earth* depicts another trinity, this time of Science, Fortune, and Abundance. They float regally above a group of miners who exhume the riches of the state from the depths of the earth. This trinity forms a kind of terrestrial parallel to the trio floating above the waters. One is spiritual, the other earthly, but both are transformative of age-old themes and iconography. The trinity presiding over the miners is familiar: Fortune, blind, with her wheel; Abundance, recognizable as Flora from Botticelli's *Primavera*; and helmeted, severe Science, a modern-day Athena. Thus luck, plenty, and know-how combine in a fortuitous way in Pennsylvania to make it a state rich in the resources of the earth, its people's extraction of its mineral resources condoned by the heavens.

The two remaining murals, facing each other on the north and south walls, take even greater interest in being modern. *The Spirit of Vulcan* transforms the ancient god of the forge into a deity supervising the steel industry that made Pennsylvania a world leader in steel production and railroading. As one critic rather wryly observed, "Vulcan is enthroned over a blast furnace that, in its modernity, must come as a surprise to the pagan god."<sup>22</sup> *The Spirit of Light* refers not to any kind of spiritual enlightenment but to the production of light through electricity, powered by the state's petroleum industry (fig. 7). It depicts a group of female nudes rising from the earth like an ethereal exhalation, with oil derricks in the background—an interesting reassignment of symbolism. The iconography of light has played a major role in art since the Renaissance reinvented its use in painting. Employing a unified light source has allowed artists since Masaccio in the early fifteenth century to depict modeling and shadows, and to give visual form to spiritual ideas. Masaccio depicted St. Peter, for example, healing with his shadow, in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence. Light became an even more important player for the Baroque artist Caravaggio, who, in works like *The Conversion of St. Paul*, made it the vehicle of spiritual transformation. Caravaggio made palpable the conundrum of the blind who can see, with an internal or spiritual light.

In *The Spirit of Light*, Abbey, on the other hand, celebrated not a spiritual vision but rather the seemingly mundane—yet miraculous—process of transforming the tapped resources of the Pennsylvania earth into light, turning nighttime into day, and, not least, ushering in the modern indus-

<sup>22</sup> "N. N.," "Mr. Abbey's Decorations for Harrisburg," *The Nation* 86 (1908), 384.

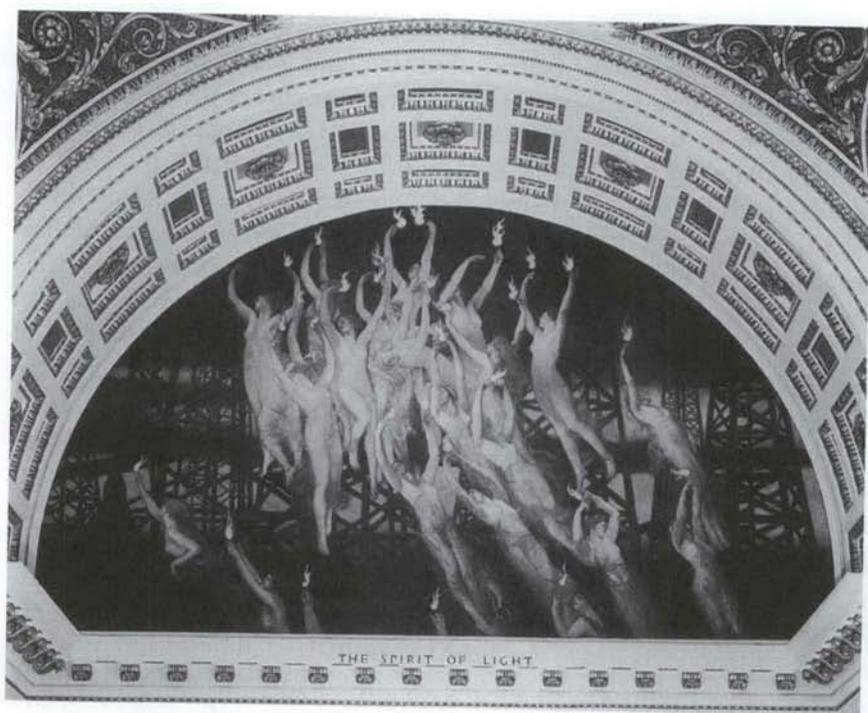


Fig. 7. Edwin Austin Abbey, *The Spirit of Light*, Lunette in Rotunda, 1908

trial era. In preparation for the series, Abbey had asked Huston for photographs and verbal descriptions of the machinery and industrial sites. He had also studied the machinery of the Bethlehem Steel works and the production of petroleum of the Standard Oil Company.<sup>23</sup> In his lunette, he created a realistic, gritty, even brooding portrayal of the oil derricks, their apexes ablaze with a perpetual flame, before which streams forth a veritable flood of nudes, bearing torches (and suggestive of a more exhibitionist Statue of Liberty). In this vision, mankind subsumes and overtakes Apollo, releases Prometheus, and turns night into day at will—with the flick of a switch.

To a modern eye, this operatic, mythical treatment of what is perceived today as an environmental hazard and, at best, a mixed blessing, seems overblown. But to a contemporary, Royal Cortissoz, one of the most dis-

<sup>23</sup> *The Pennsylvania Capitol: A Documentary History*, 340–41.

tinguished critics of the time, the lunettes appeared both appropriate and modern. He praised the paintings as "a group finer than anything [Abbey] has ever done before, and constituting a landmark in his career."<sup>24</sup> But Cortissoz chose to introduce his piece on the Harrisburg murals with the notion that they were, above all, modern:

The paintings which Mr. Abbey has recently executed for the Capitol at Harrisburg, offer strong testimony to the susceptibility of an artist to the spirit of his time. They are modern and he has hitherto lived much in the past. . . . Mr. Abbey has proved that he is a man of the world in which he lives. . . . He is a twentieth-century American . . . and he now interprets motives of modern science as sympathetically as he once limned the loveliness of Anthea and Chloris.<sup>25</sup>

Although Cortissoz approved of the "modern" subject matter, he also referred obliquely to Abbey's earlier mural commission for the Delivery Room of the Boston Public Library. These are probably Abbey's best-known works in the United States, and they were based on the Arthurian legend of the Holy Grail. The demand that the decoration of the Pennsylvania statehouse be exclusively indigenous had inspired Abbey to paint vigorous, modern works for Harrisburg, more suitable for an emerging world power than the Boston murals. One critic made the comparison explicit:

The one thing certain is that Mr. Abbey has made an interesting and new departure in his subjects; that these are more powerful in their appeal than the Sir Galahad series at Boston—the present generation being much more immediately concerned with oil and iron and coal than with the Holy Grail; and that he has shown ingenuity in carrying out his modern themes.<sup>26</sup>

The identification of the lunettes with modernity may, as with the dome and the sculpture groups, run counter to current definitions of what constitutes modernity, especially because the subjects and styles depended so heavily on older European models. But this apparent disjunction was clearly not problematic either for the artists, patrons, or contemporary viewers of this ensemble.

Abbey also executed the four roundels in the pendentives of the rotunda

<sup>24</sup> Royal Cortissoz, "Abbey's Latest Mural Paintings," *Scribner's Magazine* 44 (1908), 660.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 656.

<sup>26</sup> "N. N.," "Mr. Abbey's Decorations," 384.

area. Each depicts an allegorical figure—Law, Religion, Science, Art—surrounded by an apt quotation. Abbey chose more illustrative than abstract themes for the roundels, his style deliberately less “modern.” Each heroic female figure stands against a gold ground reminiscent of Byzantine mosaic, and is surrounded by the words of a historical source: Hugh Latimer for Religion; Alexander Hamilton for Law; an inscription from an Egyptian temple for Science; and Plotinus for Art. Their accoutrements are traditional and easy to recognize: Religion stamps on the serpent of evil, and raises her arms to God, with an altar nearby; Law, with scales and sword, is blindfolded; Science holds both fire and the owl of Athena; and Art bears a replica of the Parthenon. Only the typography, disjointed and interrupted by the figures, appears as unusual and modern—even post-modern!—to our eyes, and was indeed criticized at the time as difficult to read.

Abbey's work eventually extended beyond the rotunda area, culminating in the grand-scale murals in the House of Representatives, mostly completed by his death in 1911. Three panels cover the entire rostrum (or south) wall, consisting of two smaller panels plus a large one about thirty-five feet square. The two side panels depict *Penn's Treaty with the Indians* and *The Reading of the Declaration of Independence*, and the large center panel depicts the *Apotheosis of Pennsylvania* (fig. 8). Abbey also completed a circular ceiling panel, twenty-four feet in diameter, depicting the hours of the day, personified, among the stars of the constellations. Two other paintings, *Valley Forge* and *The Battle of Gettysburg*, both for the Senate Chamber, were begun during this period, but were left incomplete at his death. Abbey's House of Representatives murals are even more densely packed with, and richly associative of, the art, history, and iconography of the past than the works previously discussed.

The tripartite structure of the rostrum wall, with a nearly square center and side wings each approximately one-half the width of the center, resembles a medieval triptych that could be folded neatly shut. The arrangement of subjects and figures is also tightly ordered, with the two pendant pieces supplying secondary historical information—much as a Renaissance or medieval altarpiece would include incidents from the life of the Virgin appended to the central figure of Christ, or secondary saints important to the particular locality where the altarpiece was painted. Thus the function of the paintings of *Penn's Treaty* and the *Declaration of Independence* correlate to, say, an Annunciation or Nativity scene on a Christian altarpiece,



Fig. 8. Edwin Austin Abbey, *Apotheosis of Pennsylvania*, House of Representatives Chamber, 1911

and give specificity and historical detail to the more sacerdotal and idealized central panel, the *Apotheosis of Pennsylvania*.

This large, allegorical piece functions rather like a Pennsylvanian version of Raphael's *School of Athens* in the Vatican. Raphael's famous work depicts ancient philosophers and mathematicians from many centuries together with a selection of Renaissance contemporaries, in a timeless, idealized space, a pantheon of genius. Raphael, like Abbey, employed both actual and painted architecture to harmonize the painting with the surrounding space and to bind the figures within a theatrical and hierarchical space. The colonnade that curves behind Abbey's scene appears to be a continuation of the actual columns that frame the mural, and above it, a temple hovers, in which is grandly enshrined a seated statue symbolizing the "Genius of State." Three levels below the temple, but directly in a line with the Genius of State, the most prominent figure, in a voluminous red robe, is William Penn. Unlike Raphael's Plato and Aristotle, who share the philosophical

limelight in the *School of Athens*, Abbey features only the singular figure, the founder of Pennsylvania, dominating the rest of the group. As in the Raphael fresco, the rest of the figures are grouped together in units that subdivide the canvas into discrete areas, allowing the eye to focus on separate portions of the picture. Thus Penn is the dominant figure in a tripartite group that consists not of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but of Penn with Benjamin Franklin to the left and Robert Morris to the right. Lest the religious association escape the viewer, the Pennsylvania trinity stands upon a rock which is inscribed with a passage from Deuteronomy, "Remember the Days of Old, Consider the Years of Many Generations: Ask Thy Father and He Will Show Thee, Thy Elders, and They Will Tell Thee." Separated by empty space to right and left, Penn, Franklin, and Morris stand splendidly isolated from the other Pennsylvania worthies.

The first level below the "Genius of State" is dedicated to the earliest discoverers and pioneers: Peter Minuit, Henry Hudson, Sir Walter Raleigh, Daniel Boone, Francis Pastorius, and Johann Kelpius. The next tier of men, all seated, consists of somewhat more domesticated legislators, civil servants, and intellectual and spiritual leaders, including Dr. Benjamin Rush, David Rittenhouse, General John Muhlenberg, Professor William Smith, and John Dickinson. The remaining portions of the huge canvas are given over to celebrating Pennsylvania's military history on the left, and its industrial workers on the right. This crowd of historic and symbolic figures surround and seem to pay homage to the triune body in the center, much as the saints and angels of a medieval triptych or even Baroque ceiling painting might form the heavenly court celebrating a Christ in majesty or an Assumption of the Virgin.

Just as he merged historicism with contemporary relevance in his lunettes, so here, too, Abbey augmented his Renaissance imagery with closely studied historical details as well as inescapably modern overtones. He studied historical costume in order to get the apparel and uniforms of the various figures correct, and wherever possible made his individuals true-to-life portraits. Along with the classical colonnade and temple, Abbey included in the background, as critic Cortisoz observed, "glimpses of the ship upon its stocks, the machines of the steel foundry, and the towering derricks of the oil field."<sup>27</sup> Temporal accuracy was forsworn in favor of a blended pic-

<sup>27</sup> Royal Cortisoz, "Abbey's Last Mural Paintings," *Scribner's Magazine* 51 (1912), 10.

torial conception of history—and even this has origins in the Renaissance, where one may often find contemporary donor figures portrayed in the same space with long-dead saints.

Abbey's artistic fancy appears to have had entirely free rein in his ceiling painting for the House of Representatives, the circular (in more ways than one) *Hours*. Twenty-four female figures, from darkly swathed midnight to the dancing hours of midday, form a continuous cycle of the passage of time. They encircle a heaven of golden stars forming the constellations. As he does elsewhere, Abbey is drawing upon age-old themes. Chapel ceilings painted with stars can be found, for example, at the late Gothic Ste.-Chapelle in Paris or in the famous Arena Chapel frescoed by Giotto in Padua. The *tempus fugit* theme, one that legislators both then and now might do well to heed, is also familiar from Gothic cathedral portals and Italian Gothic secular buildings such as the Palazzo della Ragione or Palazzo Pubblico of many Italian cities, with their decorative cycles of zodiac signs (which Abbey had initially planned to include in this piece) and images of the labors of the seasons.

Abbey's work in the Pennsylvania State Capitol provided a monumental capstone to one of the most successful painting careers of the time, and the great mural of the *Apotheosis of Pennsylvania* remains one of his most important works. It received high praise at the time. Cortissoz, for example, judged it "a noble work of art. . . . If there is any moral force in art, then 'The Apotheosis of Pennsylvania' should help weightily in the making of a better state." The critic understood the piece not as an encyclopedic compilation of history but as an object-lesson for the future, for he claimed, "Surely the law-makers who gaze upon this fabric of the painter's art must recognize in it a living inspiration."<sup>28</sup>

Philadelphian Violet Oakley was the other major painter employed upon mural works for the Capitol building. Like Abbey and their colleagues in decoration, she was acutely interested in incorporating Pennsylvania's history into her work. Filled with admiration for Penn and his principles, Oakley accepted the commissions for the Supreme Court Chambers and the Senate Chamber in 1912, after Abbey's death left the latter incomplete. She thoroughly researched William Penn's life, history, and philosophy for her work in the Governor's Reception Room, which was a frieze given over to the story of religious liberty, entitled *The Founding of the State of Liberty*

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

*Spiritual* (completed 1906). She depicted Penn much as a medieval illuminator might have depicted a saint.<sup>29</sup>

Occupying her for the next fifteen years (1912–27), Oakley's cycle of paintings in the Supreme Court Chamber were to represent *The Opening of the Book of the Law*. The cycle consisted of sixteen paintings, each ten feet high and eight feet wide, which portrayed the evolution of the history of law. Sensitive to the smaller and more intimate environment of the Supreme Court Chamber, Oakley noted that the

paintings in the Supreme Court Room come too close to the persons of the court to be cast on a large scale, dwarfing to the importance of the living law going on within its walls. By a fine and infinitely enriched scale the decorations become less oppressive in outward effect, yet richer and more impressive mentally. A unity of impression is thus gained, enhanced by the arbitrary unity of background and simplicity of style adapted from the illuminations of ancient manuscripts. It is the open book of the law, unsealed—as a scroll unrolled—upon the wall—to be read by all.<sup>30</sup>

The "scroll," as unfurled by Oakley, began with the divine law as handed down by God himself and proceeded through the law of nature, revealed law, the law of reason, common law, the law of nations, and international law, before arriving in circular fashion back to divine law. Landmarks in Oakley's history of law include the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes (revealed law), the Code of Justinian, William Blackstone and the Common Law of England, William Penn as law-giver, and the Supreme Courts of Pennsylvania and of the United States. The cycle culminates in two panels representing Oakley's ideal of the pinnacle of law: international law. These two final panels embody Oakley's unabashedly political vision of world peace, made possible by the creation of the League of Nations, which she heartily endorsed.

The first of the two *International Law* panels depicts the "International Court of Justice," in which a twelve-member panel precisely mimics Le-

<sup>29</sup> In 1922, Violet Oakley published a lavish, privately printed, and beautifully illustrated volume entitled *The Holy Experiment: A Message to the World from Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1950) in which she wrote with missionary zeal of an idea for international accord derived from the principles of Penn. Rather like a medieval theologian, Oakley wrote about Penn as a religious type, who foreshadowed the League of Nations in his 1693 "Essay towards the Present and Future PEACE of Europe by the Establishment of an European DYET, Parliament or Estates," p. 108.

<sup>30</sup> Oakley, *Holy Experiment*, 108.

Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (fig. 9). Although she avoids mentioning da Vinci in her explication of the work, she does write that the "group of twelve judges at the large table is intended to impress by its mass-gravity, and a certain choral solemnity pervading it."<sup>31</sup> Below the image is a quote from Elihu Root, secretary of state under President Theodore Roosevelt and the 1912 Nobel Peace Prize winner:

The civilized world will have to determine whether . . . International Law is to be continued as a mere code of etiquette, or is to be a real body of laws, imposing obligations much more definite and inevitable. . . . But when the war is over, the desire to have some Law in order to prevent a recurrence . . . may sweep away all reluctances and schemes for advantage and lead to agreement where agreement has never yet been possible. . . . Nor can we doubt that this will be a different world when peace comes. Suffering and sacrifice will surely have changed the heart of the nations. (1915)

No observer with even a passing acquaintance with art could mistake the source, or fail to make a mental connection between the idealism, harmony, and perfection ascribed to the art of the Renaissance master and the ideal of international harmony proposed by the quote. With an optimism born of the times, Oakley here represented the realization of Penn's vision for a "Present and Future PEACE."

The second panel of *International Law* expresses the same ideas in a more evangelistic vein. Full of vigor and energy, this panel portrays a hopeful vision for humanity. Rather than the measured calm of the previous panel, with its references to the geometric balance of the Italian Renaissance, Oakley chose to paint a great, striding figure of Christ walking on the waters of the ocean, scattering battleships before him, arms outstretched in the manner of Moses parting the Red Sea. From above Christ, streams of shining sunlight illuminate a future made bright and peaceful through "Disarmament," which is the subtitle of the panel. Beneath the image, Oakley quotes Woodrow Wilson on the founding of a League of Nations:

The people desire peace by the overcoming of evil, by the defeat of sinister forces. A supreme moment of history has come. The eyes of the people have been opened and they see, the hand of God is laid upon the nations. He will

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.



Fig. 9. Violet Oakley, *International Law*, International Court of Justice panel, Supreme Court Chamber, 1927

show them favor only if they rise to the clear heights of his own justice and mercy. (1917)

Thus Oakley, like Abbey, chose to combine references to medieval manuscript illumination, gothic and Renaissance altarpieces, High Renaissance frescoes, seventeenth-century religious history, and twentieth-century contemporary political ideas. That she dedicated herself wholeheartedly to the project and combined these various ideas in a highly personal, not to say idiosyncratic, way is perhaps best reflected in these rich and unique paintings. Oakley's Harrisburg cycle of paintings, begun before World War I and installed during the World War II years, possesses the poignancy of all visionary ideals.

Huston's vision for the Capitol building accounted for every detail, including even an iconography for the floors. As early as 1903, Huston had commissioned Henry Chapman Mercer, founder of the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works north of Philadelphia in Doylestown, to design and execute the pavement for the entire 16,000-square-foot entrance-level floor of the Capitol building. As Huston later wrote, "the idea in my mind at the time was to make such a floor as that in the Siena Cathedral," further linking the Capitol to the great monuments of Europe.<sup>32</sup> The famous and beautiful mosaic floors of Siena Cathedral depict historical and religious subjects relevant to the town and the cathedral, giving them both civic and religious importance. Huston and Mercer developed this idea of a pictorial floor to create the pavement mosaics of the history and natural resources of the state. Using a process he had only recently developed and patented, Mercer created a series of 420 mosaics dispersed across a background of red tiles. He included simple designs, such as an Indian arrowhead, the Pennsylvania keystone, or a candlestick, somewhat more elaborate designs of animals, trees, or agricultural products, and highly complex mosaics of historical import, including *Massacre of Friendly Indians by Whites*, *Penn's Treaty*, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, and a *Battleship*. Mercer's floor also illustrates modern themes, including *The Locomotive Engine*, *Oil Well*, *The House of Steel*, *Grain Elevator*, and *Blast Furnace* (fig. 10 [and cover]).<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Handwritten comment, Joseph M. Huston composition book [professional scrapbook], Huston Architectural Papers, Pennsylvania State Archives (microfilm).

<sup>33</sup> Henry C. Mercer, *Guide Book to the Tiled Pavement in the Pennsylvania Capitol*, (1908; reprint, Harrisburg, Pa., no date).



Fig. 10. Henry Mercer, *Blast Furnace*, Floor Tiles, 1903–08

As with the interior paintings and exterior sculptures, Mercer's more modern subjects unite the past, present, and future, combining the centuries-old media of terra-cotta and pavement mosaics with the contemporary world of skyscrapers and factories that constituted the reality of early twentieth-century Pennsylvania.

But even including the floors does not exhaust the decorative saga of the Pennsylvania Capitol. Paintings and stained glass by William B. Van Ingen, the sculpture *Commonwealth* by Roland Hinton Perry atop the dome, and gilt-bronze chandeliers weighing up to four tons apiece are just some of the remaining decorative features upon which the State of Pennsylvania finally spent up to thirteen million dollars, nine million over budget, most of which was written off as "furnishings." When the news of these expen-

ditures broke, it created one of the ugliest scandals to develop in the state's political history. Much has been written about the Capitol scandal—including an entire volume defending the expense by Governor Samuel Pennypacker—and the unfortunate Huston ended up convicted of conspiracy to defraud and spent six months in jail.<sup>34</sup>

One might argue that the keen desire to emulate the Renaissance papacy and/or Louis XIV brought a parallel propensity for greed, intrigue, and overspending. But one critic pointed out that the financial dealings—or mischief—with which the Capitol was erected should not interfere with an appreciation of the building itself:

First, is it a good Capitol, one that the people of Pennsylvania and of the country may be proud of—a practical and artistic success? . . . The first question, in my judgment, ought to be kept entirely separate from the others, and considered without reference to them. . . . [If] the structure was well built, suited to its purpose, and beautiful, the State had got what it wanted. . . . [It] is designed and furnished with unusual richness, extending far beyond the requirements of the mere transaction of business, but giving to the entire building unity of conception and treatment.<sup>35</sup>

Frequently praised for its lavishness, artistic unity, and iconographical import, the Pennsylvania Capitol stood then as now for an ideal of the American Renaissance. But the political scandal that dogged its early days foreshadowed the disrepute into which this type of architectural and artistic statement would soon fall.

For all the apologies on behalf of magnificent domes and classical architectural styling, the twentieth century would spell the end of American artistic striving to emulate traditional and European models—even recast with Americanized subjects and details. After the emergence of the International Style, though few state capitols remained to be built, it made inroads, for example, in Oregon, with a stripped-down Art Moderne classicism, and most daringly, in Nebraska, with a skyscraper-like tower by Bertram Goodhue in place of the dome. In 1969, the newly complete Hawaii State Capitol prompted an *Architectural Record* article entitled “‘Capitol’ Need Not Be Synonymous with ‘Dome.’” Its author stated with great

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Pennypacker, *The Desecration and Profanation of the Pennsylvania State Capitol* (Philadelphia, 1911).

<sup>35</sup> Harold J. Howland, “A Costly Triumph,” *Outlook* 85 (Jan. 26, 1907), 195.

assurance that

Dignity and symbolism, size and monumentality are attributes of major government buildings—and in traditional examples, these attributes have been achieved in traditional ways. But traditional ways no longer express the community and no longer express the relationship of the people to the government.<sup>36</sup>

This attitude would have bewildered the architects, artists, legislators, and public who built the Pennsylvania State Capitol.

The people who conceived and executed the building in Harrisburg wished for a building and symbol that would connect them to the past, while simultaneously acknowledging the present and future of the state. They held a peculiar reverence for, even subservience to, Old World models at the same time as they felt an urgent desire to translate these models into a uniquely American idiom. The grandeur of their building reveals a state committed to ideals of continuity with the past and civic unity, both at odds with contemporary reality. The artists who wrestled with the giants of the past and the demands of the present ultimately forged an uneasy compromise between the two—they were at once enforcing the language of an earlier era while dealing with modern subjects that would eventually demand new visual modalities. In so doing, they also unwittingly encapsulated themselves, leaving us with a rich artistic and iconographic treasure, layered with meaning and desire, begging for enjoyment as well as analysis. Let us not disappoint them.

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<sup>36</sup> Anonymous, "Capitol Need Not Be Synonymous with 'Dome,'" *Architectural Record* 145 (May 1969), 117.