



The West Pediment

INFORMATION SHEET

The West Pediment, the sculptural group of nine figures above the entrance to the Supreme Court Building, is the work of artist Robert I. Aitken (1878–1949). The architect of the building, Cass Gilbert (1859–1934), recommended Aitken to the Supreme Court Building Commission and gave him free rein in choosing the subject matter for the sculpture, requesting only that the composition “be worthy of the great Supreme Court.” Mr. Aitken proposed a design incorporating nine allegorical figures, and described them as follows:

“My simple Sculptural story is as follows: Liberty enthroned—looking confidently into the Future—across her lap the Scales of Justice—She is surrounded in the composition by two Guardian figures. On her right ‘Order’...On her left ‘Authority’...Then to the right and left...two figures each represent ‘Council.’ Then to the right and left...two figures represent ‘Research’ Past and Present.”

Blocks of rough-hewn Vermont marble were set into the pediment for Aitken's sculpture in September 1933. Carving of the nine figures began within a shed enclosing the pediment (*below*).



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The West Pediment under construction—January 4, 1934.



The West Pediment by Robert I. Aitken

When the pediment was completed and the shed removed, many people were surprised to find that the six allegorical figures flanking the central grouping were, in fact, sculpted portraits of persons influential in the creation of the Court's new home.

The three central figures, from left to right, are: **Order**, **Liberty Enthroned**, and **Authority**.

At the far left is Chief Justice William Howard Taft, representing **Research Present**. He is portrayed as a student at Yale University, and is facing an English crown, a Pope's miter, and a Bishop's crosier. At the far right is Chief Justice John Marshall, representing **Research Past**. He is holding Roman scrolls and gazing at an urn, mosaic tables, and an oil lamp resting at his feet.

Second from left is Senator Elihu Root, representing **Council**. Root introduced President Taft's bill to create Washington's Fine Arts Commission. Cass Gilbert, the architect of the Supreme Court Building and the third figure from the left, is shown talking to Root. Third from the right, also representing **Council**, is Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes, who served as Chairman of the Supreme Court Building Commission. Hughes is shown talking to Robert Aitken, sculptor of the pediment and the second figure from the right.

The inscription of the West Pediment, 'Equal Justice Under Law,' was submitted to the Architect of the Capitol, David Lynn, by Cass Gilbert's architectural firm. No source for the inscription is known. In May of 1932, the inscription was approved by Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes, and subsequently, the United States Supreme Court Building Commission.