

Howard M. Metzenbaum United States Courthouse

PAINTING AND SCULPTURE | Cleveland, Ohio



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ESSAY BY DR. MARK COLE, CURATOR, THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

The Howard M. Metzenbaum United States Courthouse houses one of the nation's finest and most important collections of commissioned public art. The building's majestic exterior sculptures and grand interior mural paintings, so skillfully integrated into its elegant decorative scheme, were created by leading American artists of the early 1900s. These distinguished works feature a variety of ennobling subject matter, from allegorical images to historical renderings, as well as scenes from contemporary life. Ultimately this art was intended not only to impart beauty and refinement to its surroundings, but also to cultivate patriotism and community pride among viewers. Nearly a century after their creation, the Courthouse's artworks still have similar effects on visitors today.

The Courthouse was designed by noted architect Arnold Brunner (1857–1925) and built between 1905 and 1910. As suggested by its original name—the United States Post Office, Custom House and Court House—several divisions of the federal government originally were located in the building. In order to indicate the specific activities that took place in the most important interior spaces, Brunner commissioned artists to create works whose subject matter often correlated to the functions of the rooms. Despite changes in the building's operations over the years, these decorations remain essentially intact. All of the more than forty commissioned artworks remain on display, providing not only wonderful visual experiences to modern-day viewers, but also fascinating insights into the values and aspirations of the time in which they were made.

The Metzenbaum Courthouse epitomizes the stylistic and cultural goals of the American Renaissance, the artistic era that prevailed at the time of its construction. Many artists and architects who worked during the American Renaissance borrowed freely from classical Greek and Roman motifs. These elements were deemed especially appropriate for the United States because the nation was viewed as heir to Greek democracy and Roman law. Other important influences came from the Italian Renaissance of the 1400s and early 1500s, a time when artists collaborated with architects to create outstanding examples of public art that extolled civic virtue. Virtually all of the painters and sculptors commissioned to decorate the Metzenbaum Courthouse spent time overseas during the course of their artistic training, where they came into contact with Italian Renaissance masterpieces that had profound effects on their own work.

Jurisprudence

As had been the case in the Italian Renaissance, artists who worked during the American Renaissance frequently were drawn to allegorical subjects, in which human figures symbolize honorable abstract ideas. Far more often than not, American Renaissance allegorical figures are female, because the common viewpoint of the period maintained that womanhood embodied purity. These preferences and attitudes are clearly evident in the Metzenbaum Courthouse, where the majority of artworks include female personifications of lofty concepts promoted by the government in its official roles. Such is the case with *Jurisprudence* and *Commerce*, the two powerfully monumental marble sculptures that anchor the corners of the building's façade on Superior Avenue.

Right: Daniel Chester French,
Jurisprudence, 1908, Tennessee
Pink marble (limestone),
12 x 7.5 x 8 feet



Commerce

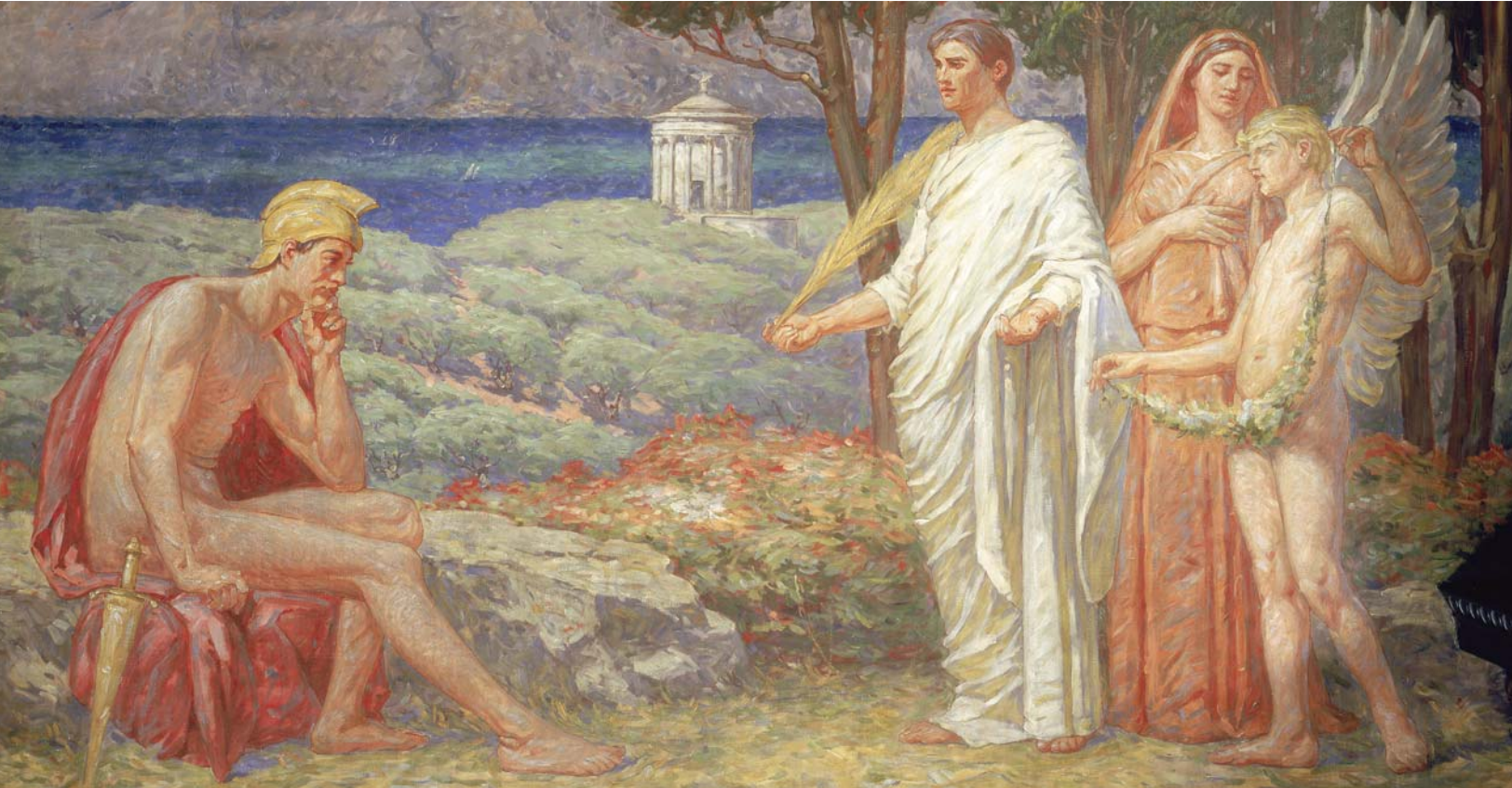
BY DANIEL CHESTER FRENCH



Above: Daniel Chester French, *Commerce*, 1908, Tennessee Pink marble (limestone), 12 x 7.5 x 8 feet

Jurisprudence presents the coolly impassive female figure of Justice—her eyes are closed to imply her impartiality—who is flanked by a mother and son on one side, and a grimacing felon in chains on the other. In her right arm she prominently displays a tablet emblazoned at the top with *LEX*, the Latin word for law. In the companion sculpture, the female figure of Commerce holds a model of a state-of-the-art steamship while leaning against a globe that symbolizes the world. She is accompanied by personifications of Electricity, who clutches a magnet, and Steam, who grasps a wheel. Because the composition combines a traditional allegorical figure with attributes that are conspicuously modern, *Commerce* reflects a key hallmark of the American Renaissance, whereby the present was optimistically viewed to be a seamless and rightful beneficiary of the glorious past. The man who created these two works, Daniel Chester French (1850–1931), was unquestionably the preeminent architectural sculptor of his day. He would later gain even greater renown for his colossal seated statue of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.

Persuasion



Above: Frederic Crowninshield, *Persuasion*, 1910, oil on canvas, 102 x 68 inches

Opposite page: *Knowledge*, 1910, oil on canvas, 102 x 68 inches

Opposite page, below: *Persuasion and Knowledge*, 1910, oil on canvas, 132 x 48 inches

Allegorical subjects are also found in murals on the interior of the Metzenbaum Courthouse, including a pair of paintings entitled *Persuasion* and *Knowledge* that decorates the Court Library. *Persuasion* depicts unarmed messengers of peace who convince a warrior to lay aside his sword. In *Knowledge*, a seated philosopher and his disciples consult a manuscript of the law, while Justice, who carries a set of scales, awaits their decision. The grove of trees and distant body of water that are present in both paintings unite their compositions. It has been suggested that this tranquil setting was directly inspired by the Italian countryside; indeed, the artist, Frederic Crowninshield (1845–1918), was living in Rome at the time he created the paintings. Not only are the subjects of the murals appropriate for the library, the unobtrusively pale colors employed by Crowninshield nicely enhance the room’s quietly contemplative mood.

Knowledge

BY FREDERIC CROWNINSHIELD



The City of Cleveland

BY WILL H. LOW

Right: Will H. Low, *The City of Cleveland, Supported by Federal Power, Welcomes the Arts Bearing the Plan for the New Civic Center*, 1910, oil on canvas, 74 x 58 inches



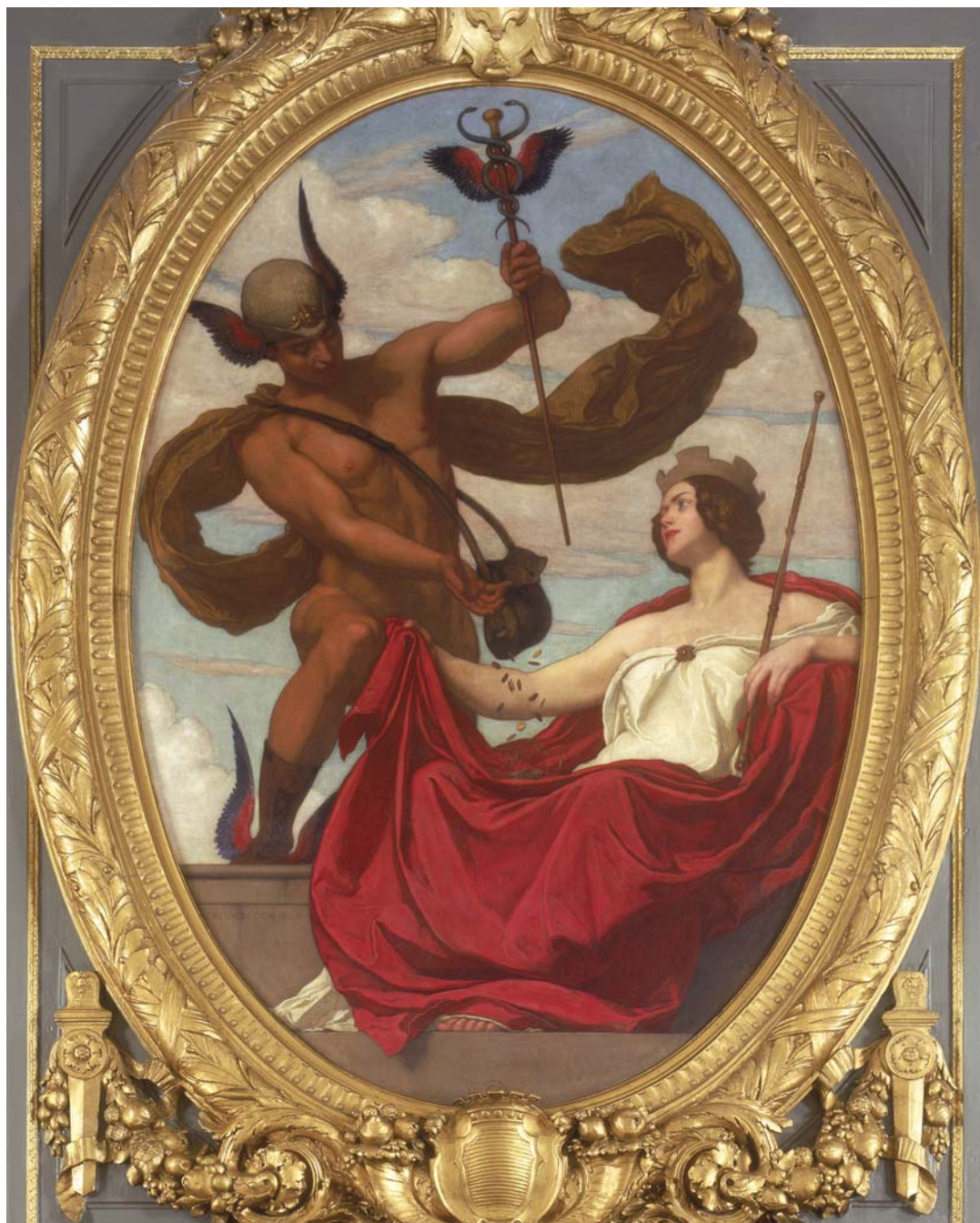
Reflecting the specific locale of the Metzenbaum Courthouse, personifications of Cleveland appear in murals by Will H. Low (1853–1932) and by Kenyon Cox (1856–1919). Both murals are installed over large stone fireplaces in their respective rooms, which were originally the Office of the Appraiser and the Office of the Collector of Customs. Low's painting is descriptively titled *The City of Cleveland, Supported by Federal Power, Welcomes the Arts Bearing the Plan for the New Civic Center*. Its bright, jewel-like colors and the elegant deportments of its figures rank it among the most graceful artworks in the Courthouse. The mural presents the enthroned figure of Cleveland backed by her federal companion who wields a sword of war and an olive branch of peace.

Cleveland is greeted by a figure representing Arts, who alights from a boat on Lake Erie to deliver a schematic architectural plan showing the city's newly proposed civic district, for which the Courthouse was the first building completed.

Kenyon Cox's painting, *Passing Commerce Pays Tribute to the Port of Cleveland*, depicts Mercury, the ancient Roman god of business, and a crowned seated female figure representing the city. In the composition, Mercury—who due to his role as messenger for the gods wears a winged helmet and boots—respectfully drops coinage, as if paying a toll, into Cleveland's lap, a symbol of the city's harbor. An especially striking feature of Cox's painting is its unusual oval format, a shape that is notoriously difficult for artists to successfully compose. In order to fill out the upper right register of the otherwise empty composition, Cox cleverly incorporated Mercury's dramatically billowing drapery and his caduceus, the serpent-coiled staff that is an ancient symbol of commerce.

Passing Commerce

BY KENYON COX



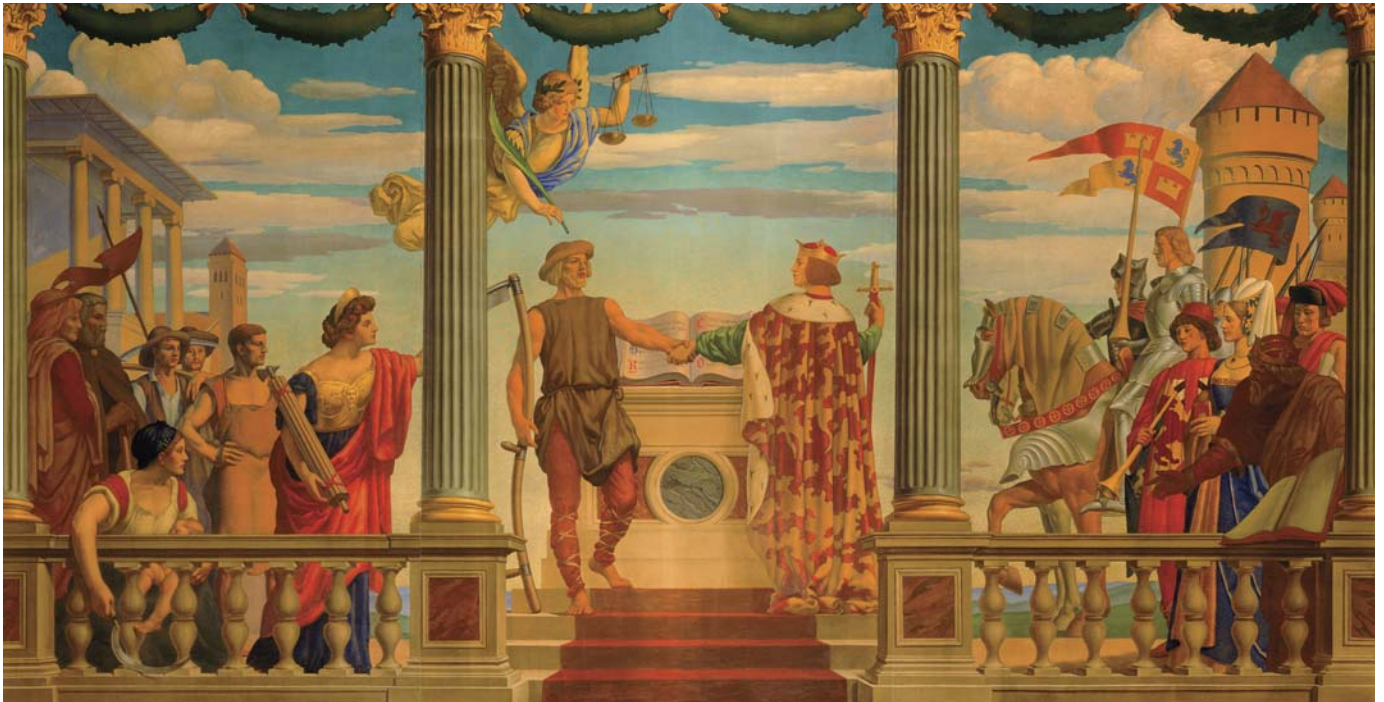
Left: Kenyon Cox, *Passing Commerce Pays Tribute to the Port of Cleveland*, 1910, oil on canvas, 84 x 54 inches

The Common Law

BY H. SIDDON'S MOWBRAY

Below: H. Siddons Mowbray,
The Common Law, 1910, oil on canvas,
22 x 12 feet

The Metzenbaum Courthouse's most imposing and impressive murals are certainly the two allegorical compositions installed in the building's main courtrooms. Although they are painted by different artists and have dissimilar concepts, both paintings place our nation's laws within the context of older legal traditions. *The Common Law*, by H. Siddons Mowbray (1858–1928), pictures a Medieval-era meeting between members of the working and ruling classes, an event that symbolizes the birth of participation by the laboring classes in a constitutional government. In the mural, a farmer and a nobleman ceremoniously shake hands in front of an audience watching with fitting solemnity. A winged figure hovers overhead, holding the scales of justice and the palm of victory. The scene has a distinct air of pageantry, as if it were a play enacted in a grand theater. This notion is enhanced by the rows of figures arranged in a shallow space, and by the painted columns and balustrade in the foreground of the composition, which approximate a stage setting.





The Law

BY EDWIN BLASHFIELD



Below: Edwin Blashfield, *The Law*, 1910, oil on canvas, 22 feet x 12 feet

The other courtroom mural, *The Law* by Edwin Blashfield (1848-1936), is a rousing montage of allegory, history, and contemporary life. Teeming with more than twenty larger-than-life-size personages, its composition is as ambitious as its considerable scale. In the center, the figure of Law sits impassively while a modern woman and her lawyer argue her case. Behind them, two angels gesture triumphantly to the Ten Commandments engraved onto a large stone tablet. Blashfield made additional



references to the history of law with the men pictured in the mural's background; among them are Moses, Alexander the Great, Charlemagne, and Napoleon. The mural's ingenious installation behind the courtroom's judicial bench adds significance: the "real-life" presiding judges sit directly below the figure of Law in the mural, subliminally identifying them as living embodiments of her power. Furthermore, the presiding judges are linked visually to the eminent lawmakers from the past.

The Battle of Lake Erie, September 10, 1813

BY RUFUS ZOGBAUM

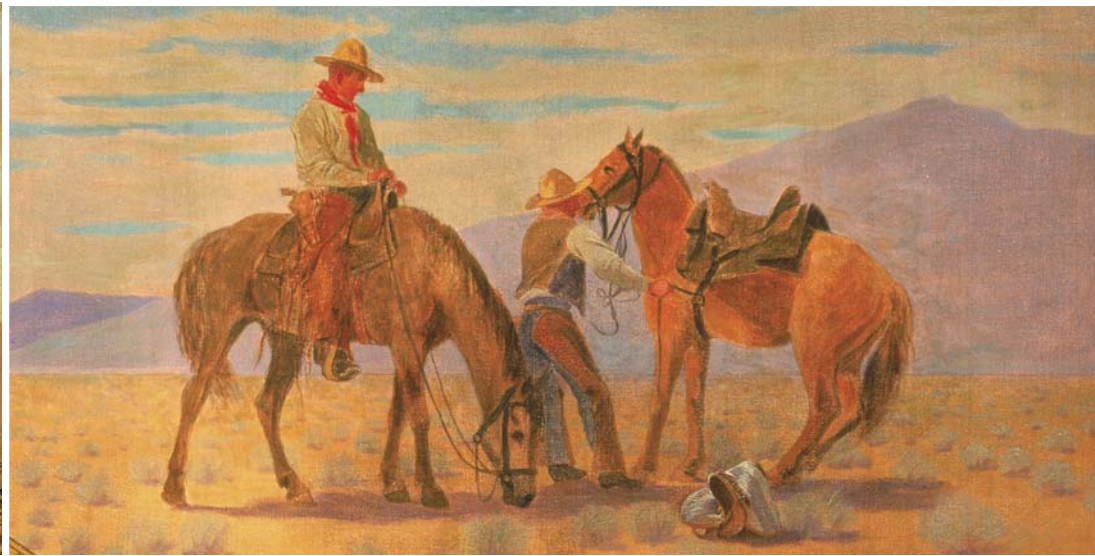
References to history and contemporary life, elements in Blashfield's mural, are amplified in the remaining mural projects in the Metzenbaum Courthouse. This move from symbolism to reality reflects a change in taste that occurred toward the end of the American Renaissance period. After a long time in which allegorical subjects were very much in fashion, a backlash against them occurred, and several artists and critics began to champion mural subjects drawn solely from history or present-day living. The preference for historical subject matter is epitomized in *Battle of Lake Erie, September 10, 1813*. This mural by Rufus Zogbaum (1849–1925) commemorates a decisive victory for the U.S. Navy under Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry during the War of 1812. The subject has much local relevance, for the battle took place in Lake Erie, less than 100 miles away from the Courthouse. Here, the artist recreated the most dramatic moment in the battle, when Perry's brig, the *Niagara*, took advantage of a favorable breeze and broke through the British line. The famed ship, visible in Zogbaum's composition just to the right of center, is bathed in an almost spiritual light as if to suggest the miraculousness of its achievement. The mural is installed over a large fireplace in a room that was originally the Office of the District Attorney; emblazoned on the mantle is Perry's famous dispatch announcing his triumph, "We have met the enemy and they are ours."

Right: Rufus Zogbaum, *The Battle of Lake Erie, September 10, 1813*, 1910, oil on canvas, 88 inches x 36 inches
Opposite page: detail





The Collection and Delivery of the Mails BY FRANCIS D. MILLET



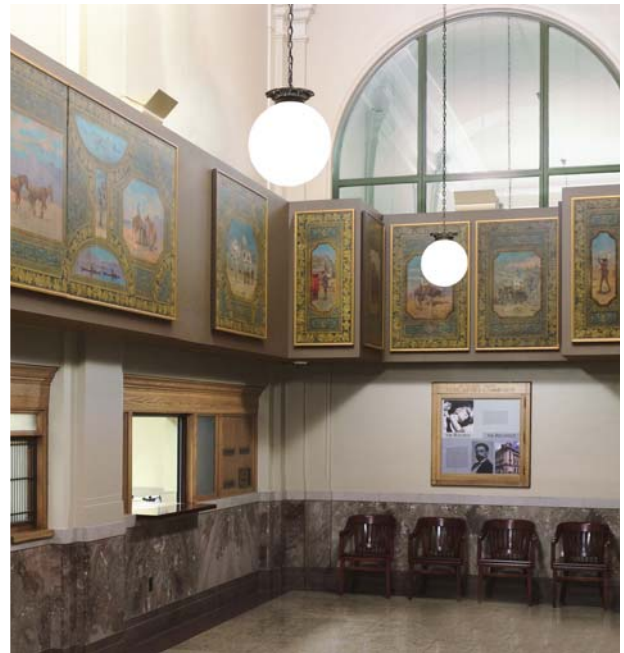
Francis D. Millet, *The Collection and Delivery of the Mails*, 1911, oil on canvas, dimensions vary

From left: *Railway Collection*—United States; *Pony Express*—United States; *Camel Post*—Arabia; *Reindeer Post*—Siberia; *Aeroplanes*—United States, France

The Metzenbaum Courthouse's most complex fine art project is a sequence of 35 paintings on 23 separate canvases that depicts mail distribution throughout numerous times and places in North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. The series, titled *The Collection and Delivery of the Mails*, was painted by Francis D. Millet (1846–1912), a journalist-turned-artist admired for the painstaking research he undertook to enhance the veracity of the subject matter, scenery, and costumes in his images. According to one critic who reviewed the mural cycle shortly after its debut, Millet was to be commended for creating “a series of strictly accurate historic documents rather than a collection of vague symbols.” This same critic assessed Millet’s panel *Railway Collection* as “not merely the picture of a train—it is a picture, one might almost say a portrait, of the famous ‘Twentieth Century Limited.’” Some of Millet’s subjects, including the *Pony Express*, are drawn from United States history. Others are contemporary, as in the composition entitled *Aeroplanes* that Millet painted the very year that the Post Office Department launched experimental airmail flights.



Challenges posed by weather and geography across the globe are addressed in panels such as *Reindeer Post* and *Camel Post*, which depict mail delivery in Siberia and Arabia respectively. In every instance, the artist's compositions are framed with decorative borders portraying intricately interlaced grapevines or morning glories. Tragically, this was Millet's last completed mural project: just a little more than a year after completing it, he perished in the sinking of the *Titanic*.



From left: Office of the Postmaster, 1912, the original location of Francis D. Millet's mural series, *The Collection and Delivery of the Mails* (image courtesy of the Cleveland Public Library Photograph Collection); U.S. Bankruptcy Court Lobby, 2006, installation of Millet's restored mural series, *The Collection and Delivery of the Mails*

Opposite page: Court Library, photograph from the March 1911 edition of *The Architectural Record*, with Frederic Crowninshield murals *Persuasion and Knowledge*

Back cover: Francis D. Millet, *Collection of Mails—Washington D.C.* (detail), 1911, oil on canvas

Millet's mural cycle was originally installed in the Postmaster's Office, a private area located on the second floor of the building. His work was removed in 1955 when the room was dismantled as part of a remodeling project. The paintings, some of which unfortunately had been badly damaged during their deinstallation, were placed in storage. After the passage of many years, the United States General Services Administration arranged for their restoration and display. Today they are installed on the first floor of the building, where for the first time in their history they are accessible to the general public. The laudable reclamation of the Millet murals was just one component of a recent large-scale project to prepare the Metzenbaum Courthouse for the new century while respecting its historic character. From 2002 to 2005, the building was extensively renovated and restored, a conscientious undertaking that included the conservation and cleaning of its works of art. As a result, the splendors of the Howard M. Metzenbaum United States Courthouse, enthusiastically praised at the time of its dedication in 1911 for "great dignity and taste," are once again abundantly evident. The Courthouse's mural paintings and monumental sculpture, which so wonderfully exemplify the era in which they were made, continue to gratify by reminding us of our nation's past and inspiring us in the present.



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The Fine Arts Program of the General Services Administration (GSA) continues a tradition of artwork in Federal buildings that dates back more than 150 years. Today, GSA's Fine Arts Collection is one of the nation's most unique collections, consisting of over 17,000 paintings, sculpture, graphics, textiles, and architectural arts. These works of art have evolved alongside American culture—from the heroic allegorical figures in the late 19th century Beaux Arts style, to the Art Deco forms of the 1930s New Deal programs, to the diverse expressions of contemporary artists commissioned by GSA's Art in Architecture Program. The collection represents the history, culture, and ideals of our nation. The Fine Arts Program maintains these public works of art as part of our cultural heritage and as a reminder of the enduring value of individual creative expression.



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