Oliver Ellsworth

(1745–1807)

A U.S. senator from Connecticut and third chief justice of the United States, Oliver Ellsworth was described by a contemporary as "tall, dignified, and commanding."[1] Born in Windsor, Connecticut, Ellsworth was educated at Yale and Princeton. He practiced law, served as a judge of the Connecticut Superior Court, and was politically active during the Revolutionary War. For six years he represented Connecticut in the Continental Congress. Later, as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, he helped shape the Connecticut Compromise, which assured each state equal representation in the Senate and population-based representation in the House of Representatives.

After ratification of the Constitution, Ellsworth was elected to the first United States Senate; he served from 1789 to 1796. A wise figure whose authority in the Senate was said to surpass even that of Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Daniel Webster, Ellsworth reported the first set of Senate rules and drafted the bill organizing the federal judiciary. John Adams considered Ellsworth the "firmest pillar" of Washington's administration.[2] When appointed chief justice of the United States Supreme Court in 1796, Ellsworth resigned from the Senate.

In 1799 Ellsworth was named diplomatic commissioner to France, a temporary assignment that permitted him to continue his position with the Court. He was then sent abroad to negotiate a treaty with Napoleon Bonaparte. The demands of the trip apparently contributed to a breakdown in the chief justice's health. After completing his mission, Ellsworth wrote to President John Adams on October 16, 1800 to resign as chief justice. Returning to America the following spring, Ellsworth served on the Connecticut Governor's Council and later accepted—but then declined—the chief justiceship of the state supreme court. Semi-retired, Ellsworth remained in Connecticut where he died in 1807.

Born in New Haven, Connecticut, Hezekiah Augur was the son of a carpenter-joiner who discouraged the boy from undertaking a manual occupation. Instead, he directed his son to the dry goods trade. Though a failure as a merchant, Augur invented a lace-making machine that brought him some financial security. Meanwhile, he pursued wood carving on his own. In 1823 Augur followed the advice of Samuel F.B. Morse to carve directly in marble. When his marble bust of Apollo was exhibited in New York City, critics hailed the self-taught sculptor as "the Yankee Phidias," recalling the greatest artist of ancient Greece.

Augur continued to sculpt portrait busts and classical groups in New Haven. His most respected and widely known work before his bust of Ellsworth was the marble group, *Jephthah and His Daughter* (ca. 1828–32), which illustrates a cautionary tale from the Old Testament (Judg. 11:34–35). These half life-size figures were exhibited in Washington, D.C. In this way Augur might have come to the attention of the Joint Committee on the Library, which commissioned the likeness of Ellsworth in 1834. The fact that the sculptor, like the sitter, was a Connecticut native likely played a part in the decision.

Modeled between 1834 and 1837, this startlingly bold likeness of the long-deceased chief justice typifies Augur's New England neoclassicism. The emphatically modeled, rugged features appear to radiate from the blank eyes that seem unusually large because of the arching, angular eyebrows presiding over the face. This angularity, echoed in the facial folds descending from the nose and the forthright structure of the jaw, is repeated in the larger forms of collar and cloak that support the head.

It is not known what source Augur consulted for the sitter's appearance, but his style clearly derives from the wood carving that the artist pursued until 1823. He approached marble with more boldness than subtlety, and with a certain daring skill—as seen in, for example, the deeply cut jabot and ornamental ruffles on the front of the shirt.

The blank eyeballs that commonly appear in American neoclassic sculpture resulted from a misconception about Greek and Roman practice. The paint that once in a very naturalistic way completed ancient eyes (when they were not carved or inlaid) wore off with time, leading to the incorrect emulation of the blank eye by latter-day artists. The bust is believed to be Augur's last piece of sculpture, although he lived another 20 years.

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Hezekiah Augur (1791–1858)

Marble, ca. 1837
26¼ x 26¾ x 17 inches (66.7 x 67.9 x 43.2 cm)
Unsigned
Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1834
Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1837
Cat. no. 21.00005