
Chester Alan Arthur

(1829–1886)

The 21st president of the United States, Chester Alan Arthur held no elective office before his selection as James Garfield's vice president on the Republican ticket. Arthur, a lawyer, was active for many years in party politics. He had served as quartermaster general of the New York state militia during the Civil War. In 1871 President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Arthur collector of the Port of New York, a position he held for seven years until the Hayes administration ousted him for failure to carry out reforms.

Arthur was selected as Garfield's running mate in the 1880 presidential election in an effort to win New York electoral votes and to pacify certain elements within the party. Arthur served as the 20th vice president for only a few months when a deranged assassin shot Garfield, mortally wounding him. Garfield died on September 19, 1881 and the following day Chester A. Arthur assumed the presidency. Despite a background in machine politics, the new president championed the Civil Service Reform Act of 1883, and his administration won recognition for honest, efficient government. The Republican Party, unhappy with Arthur's failure to adhere to partisan principles, refused to renominate him in 1884. Within two years of leaving the White House, the former president fell ill and died at the age of 57.

Chester A. Arthur had just completed his presidential term in 1885 when the Senate adopted the resolution establishing the Senate's Vice Presidential Bust Collection. As a former vice president, Arthur was consulted and asked to name a sculptor to model his likeness, with the proviso that he choose an artist from New York State. Arthur asked that the renowned Augustus Saint-Gaudens, then at the height of his artistic career, execute his likeness. Initially Saint-Gaudens declined the commission, which was offered for the \$800 standard fee determined by the Senate. After Arthur's premature death that same year, however, Saint-Gaudens reconsidered and in July 1887 agreed to sculpt the bust.

It is regrettable that Saint-Gaudens hesitated because the bust has the appearance of a posthumous portrait; life sittings would surely have improved the result. But during the years 1886 to 1892 the sculptor was engaged in a rush of work, including some of the finest he created. In 1887 his standing portrait of Abraham Lincoln was unveiled in Chicago's Lincoln Park and *The Puritan* was formally presented in Springfield, Massachusetts. Saint-Gaudens also was working on the figure (often called *Grief*) for the Adams Memorial in Washington, D.C.'s Rock Creek Cemetery. Saint-Gaudens wrote to Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark in July 1887 concerning the press of other business. Regarding the Arthur bust the artist wrote that he could "make no promise as to the date at which I can deliver it."

As a result of these circumstances, the commission was something of an afterthought that was not pondered and labored over in the sculptor's customary way. Even though the bust is a competent work that more than holds its own in the Senate Chamber gallery, it might be called a "noble abstraction." The simplicity of the broadly disposed costume (wide-laped, double-breasted coat; demure cravat with stickpin; and wing collar) and the proportionately broad, frontal bust combine for a dignified effect. When these characteristics are extended to the head, however—where little incident is revealed in the smoothly modeled face, moustache, or hair; the eyes have no directed gaze; and the expression is empty—dignity turns toward monotony. The bust looks noticeably more impressive when seen from a lower vantage point, which, of course, is usually the case in the Senate gallery.

Chester A. Arthur

Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907)

Marble, 1891

30 x 29 x 15¾ inches (76.2 x 73.7 x 40 cm)

Unsigned

Inscribed (centered on front of base): ARTHUR

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1887

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1892

Cat. no. 22.00020



Nearly five years elapsed between the artist's formal acceptance of the commission and the Senate's receipt of the completed bust. The work was delivered to the Capitol in early 1892 and placed in a gallery niche in the Senate Chamber.

Augustus Saint-Gaudens is considered one of America's preeminent artists. He profoundly influenced the course of sculpture in this country by rejecting the formality of the neoclassical ideal and creating an original American style—one of heroic realism. He brought the medium of bronze to new heights, and his portrait reliefs were brilliantly modeled and unrivaled. His collaboration with various architects established a unique approach to outdoor monuments that incorporated multiple-figure compositions within a distinct architectural framework. His early art training included an apprenticeship as a young boy with a cameo carver, classes at the Cooper Union and at the National Academy of Design in New York City, and studies in Paris at the Petite École and later at the École des Beaux-Arts. His first major commission, the *Farragut Monument* in New York City, established Saint-Gaudens as a dominant force in American art, a position he held throughout the late 19th century. Other public commissions followed, culminating in what is considered his masterpiece, the *Robert Gould Shaw Memorial* in Boston. Although gravely ill during his last years, Saint-Gaudens was still able to create such notable works as the *Stevenson Memorial* at Saint Giles's Cathedral in Edinburgh, and the beautiful ten- and twenty-dollar Liberty gold coins. The artist is further represented in the Senate by a bust of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney (p. 356).

Augustus Saint-Gaudens with his model of *The Puritan*, completed in 1887, the same year he was commissioned to sculpt the Senate's bust of Vice President Chester A. Arthur.

(U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, NH)

