

# Theodore Roosevelt

(1858–1919)

Theodore Roosevelt, 25th vice president and 26th president of the United States, was born in New York City. He was elected as a Republican to the New York state legislature in 1881 and built a reputation as an opponent of party machine corruption. In 1889 President Benjamin Harrison appointed Roosevelt to the U.S. Civil Service Commission, a position he held until 1895, when he became head of the New York City police board. In 1897 President William McKinley chose Roosevelt as assistant secretary of the United States Navy, where the spirited politician oversaw America's preparations for war with Spain.

At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, Roosevelt resigned his post. With his friend Leonard Wood, he formed the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, known as the "Rough Riders." Roosevelt became a national hero with his exploits in Cuba, including the famed charge up Kettle Hill during the battle for San Juan Hill. The state of New York subsequently elected him governor in 1898, and two years later the nation elected him vice president for McKinley's second term. Roosevelt assumed the presidency following McKinley's assassination in September 1901.

A forceful and dynamic president, Roosevelt waged a powerful antitrust campaign to reform monopolizing business practices and financial trusts. Reelected in 1904, he advocated passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act, promoted legislation to revitalize the Interstate Commerce Commission, and sought railroad regulation. Roosevelt's support of a revolution in Panama led to construction of a canal through the isthmus, connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and benefiting American commerce.

Roosevelt himself was perhaps most satisfied with his accomplishments in the conservation arena. During his administrations, millions of acres of public lands were converted into national forests, funds were channeled into irrigation projects, and public attention was focused on the country's natural resources.

Having succeeded to the presidency after the assassination of William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt was elected president in his own right in 1904. Early in his second presidential term, he was asked to select a sculptor for his bust for the Senate's Vice Presidential Bust Collection. "If St. Gaudens would do it I should be glad to have him," wrote the president. The famous sculptor's fee of \$5,000, however, was far too high for the government commission. Though Saint-Gaudens had already carved two busts for the U.S. Capitol many years before (Chester A. Arthur [p. 18], and Roger B. Taney [p. 356]), he did not now need the work or the Senate's low standard fee of \$800.

In a 1905 letter to President Roosevelt, Saint-Gaudens recommended his former studio assistant, James Earle Fraser, as a worthy substitute, noting that his work was "equal to the best things of the Renaissance." Senator George Peabody Wetmore, chairman of the Joint Committee on the Library, offered Fraser the commission in 1906, and the sculptor accepted.

Fraser had learned much from his master's great achievements in portraiture, and this training, combined with a lifelong passion for the heroism and pathos of the American frontier, prepared him perfectly for the Roosevelt commission. The bust became his most famous portrait, even though for the final marble he was obliged to execute the less animated of his two life studies. He had worked to capture the characteristically aggressive stance of the president, but Roosevelt is reported to have said that he wished to "go down in posterity as a man of repose."<sup>1</sup> Whether for that reason, or because the more animated bust might have seemed out of place among the generally placid troop of marble vice presidents, the more formal pose was executed. The approved marble bust was delivered to the Capitol in 1910; it stood briefly in the Senate Chamber and then was placed in the main corridor of the Senate wing in conjunction with a chronological rearrangement.

Fraser's bust of Roosevelt is genial, if somewhat introspective. The massive head and bull neck are faithfully reproduced but not pugnacious. Although the inclusion of eyeglasses in sculpture is a problematic decision—they can date the work and they present illusionistic difficulties—the viewer may miss TR's familiar spectacles. In his unpublished autobiography, Fraser explains the decision: During the first sitting in the East Room of the White House, he recalls, the president "told me exactly

*Theodore Roosevelt*

**James Earle Fraser (1876-1953)**

Marble, 1910

36 x 31 ½ x 17 inches (91.4 x 80 x 43.2 cm)

Signed (under subject's truncated left arm): FRASER

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1906

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1910

Cat. no. 22.00025



In 1906 Roosevelt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in ending the Russo-Japanese War. By the end of his second term, Roosevelt had moved to the left politically. The Republicans were deeply divided between the Progressives, Roosevelt among them, and the Old Guard. Keeping a 1904 campaign promise that he would not seek reelection in 1908, he threw his weight behind William Howard Taft as his successor. After Taft's election, Roosevelt, an avid hunter, journeyed to Africa, where he collected big game specimens for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and for New York City's American Museum of Natural History.

In 1912 the former president returned to politics, contending with his now conservatively aligned successor, Taft, for the Republican presidential nomination. When he failed, he founded his own short-lived Progressive—or “Bull Moose”—Party and finished second to Woodrow Wilson in the three-way election. In retirement, Roosevelt was a ceaseless critic of President Wilson. He wrote on politics and travel, and even offered to lead a volunteer division of infantry and cavalry after the United States declared war on Germany in 1917. This offer was rejected, but Roosevelt continued his lively interest in Republican politics. His health began to suffer in 1918, the decline spurred by the loss of his youngest son Quentin, whose plane was shot down behind enemy lines. Although Roosevelt entertained hopes of a run for the presidency in 1920, he died in his sleep at Sagamore Hill, his home near Oyster Bay, New York, in 1919.

**The final selection for the marble bust of Theodore Roosevelt was the subject of Clifford Berryman's cartoon on the front page of the *Washington, D.C. Evening Star* on July 7, 1909.**

(Courtesy D.C. Public Library)

how he wanted to have it done. He was not to wear glasses.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, without glasses, Roosevelt's eyes seem small in the massive head.

That said, this is a bust that—rather remarkably—suggests a full-length figure. There is an indication of a striding pose in that the cropped sleeves are not parallel: Roosevelt's right arm advances slightly, while the left markedly recedes. This suggestion of torsion is reinforced by the right coat lapel, which is pushed into a roll by the advancing arm. The bust is mostly presented frontally, and the relative symmetry is stressed by the double-breasted vest and the heavy, drooping moustache. There is a suppression of detail in the costume (the tie, for instance, is a faint shallow outline). Likewise, Roosevelt's hair lacks detail, which only enhances the bold effect of the over-life-size torso and head. Finally, it may be that Fraser's most interesting and expressive artistic statement was his decision not to polish the marble. The rough finish seems fitting for the one-time Rough Rider.

Fraser, who taught at New York's Art Students League during the period in which he sculpted Roosevelt for the Senate, made a specialty of the subject. Examples include a bronze bust of the Rough Rider in the collections of the White House and the Forest Lawn Museum in California, an adventuring-equestrian Roosevelt fronting the Museum of Natural History in New York City, and a miniature bronze portrait issued in an edition of 12. He even took Roosevelt's death mask. Originally a westerner, Fraser was perhaps best known in the popular mind

for his mounted Native American figure, *End of the Trail*, and for designing the “Buffalo” nickel. His bust of John Nance Garner (p. 170) is in the Senate's Vice Presidential Bust Collection, and three relief sculptures by his wife, Laura Gardin Fraser, are located in the House Chamber of the U.S. Capitol.





**James Earle Fraser works on the first of two models for his bust of Theodore Roosevelt for the Senate's Vice Presidential Bust Collection, 1904.**

(James Earle & Laura Gardin Fraser Collection, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University)