



The Bronze Doors

INFORMATION SHEET

“Out of all of our monumental projects, spread over two lifetimes, the Supreme Court doors are the only work that we ever signed - that’s how important they were.”

- JOHN DONNELLY, JR., *Sculptor*

In designing the Supreme Court Building, architect Cass Gilbert (1867–1934) utilized a classically inspired entrance procession leading to the Courtroom. Key elements in this sequence are the bronze doors, centered behind the massive columns of the front portico. Signifying the importance of the proceedings that occur within, the oversized doors measure 17 feet high, 9 ½ feet wide and weigh about 13 tons. The doors were designed by Gilbert and John Donnelly, Sr. (1867–1947) and sculpted by his son, John Donnelly, Jr. (1903–1970). Cast by The General Bronze Corporation of Long Island City, New York, they were shipped to Washington and installed in early 1935.

Each door is comprised of four bas-reliefs which illustrate significant events in the evolution of justice in the Western tradition. Arranged chronologically, the thematic sequence begins on the lower left panel and moves up to the top of that door. It continues with the bottom right panel and concludes with the upper right corner. The events depicted are:



The Bronze Doors, c. 1993

1. SHIELD OF ACHILLES

Two men debate a point of law, with the winner to receive the two gold coins on the pedestal. This scene is described in the *Iliad* as part of the decoration on the Shield of Achilles forged by Vulcan. It is recreated here by the Donnellys who described it as “the most famous representation of primitive law.”

2. PRAETOR’S EDICT

A Roman *praetor* (magistrate) publishes his edict proclaiming the validity of judge-made or “common” law. A soldier, perhaps representing the power of government to enforce the common law, stands by.

3. JULIAN AND SCHOLAR

Julian, one of the most prominent law teachers in Ancient Rome, instructs a pupil. According to the Donnellys, this represents “the development of law by scholar and advocate.”

4. JUSTINIAN CODE

This panel depicts the publishing of the *Corpus Juris* by order of the Roman (Byzantine) Emperor Justinian in the sixth century AD. This is considered to be the first codification of Roman law.

5. MAGNA CARTA

King John of England is coerced by the Barons to place his seal upon the Magna Carta in 1215.

6. WESTMINSTER STATUTE

King Edward I watches as his chancellor (secretary) publishes the Statute of Westminster in 1275. The Donnellys' description states "The greatest single legal reform in our history."

7. COKE AND JAMES I

England's Lord Chief Justice Coke bars King James I from the "King's Court," making the court, by law, independent of the executive branch of government.

8. MARSHALL AND STORY

The Donnellys describe this event as Chief Justice John Marshall and Associate Justice Joseph Story discussing the 1803 *Marbury v. Madison* opinion in front of the U.S. Capitol. It should be noted that Justice Story did not join the Court until 1811, eight years after this historic decision was handed down.

To view the doors in unison (*as seen below*), visitors must arrive during non-business hours because these sculpted doors are rolled into pockets in the wall each weekday morning when the main entrance to the Supreme Court opens.

