



The West Pediment

INFORMATION SHEET

The West Pediment, the sculptural group of nine figures above the entrance to the Supreme Court Building, is the work of artist Robert I. Aitken (1878 - 1949). The architect of the building, Cass Gilbert (1867 - 1934), recommended Aitken to the Supreme Court Building Commission and gave him free rein in choosing the subject matter for the sculpture, requesting only that the composition “*be worthy of the great Supreme Court.*” Mr. Aitken proposed a design incorporating nine allegorical figures, and described them as follows:

My simple Sculptural story is as follows: Liberty enthroned - looking confidently into the Future - across her lap the Scales of Justice - She is surrounded in the composition by two Guardian figures. On her right “Order”...On her left “Authority”...Then to the right and left...two figures each represent “Council.” Then to the right and left...two figures represent “Research” Past and Present.

Blocks of rough-hewn Vermont marble were set into the pediment for Aitken's sculpture in September 1933. Carving of the nine figures began within a shed enclosing the pediment (*below*).



*The West Pediment under construction – January 4, 1934
Photograph by Commercial Photo Company*



The West Pediment by Robert I. Aitken

When the pediment was completed and the shed removed, many people were surprised to find that the six allegorical figures flanking the central grouping were, in fact, sculpted portraits of persons influential in the creation of the Court's new home. The figures from left to right (*above*) are:

Reclining on the far left is *Chief Justice William Howard Taft*, representing **Research Present**. He is portrayed as a student at Yale University, and is facing an English crown, a Pope's miter and a Bishop's crosier.

Second from left is Senator *Elihu Root*, who introduced President Taft's bill to create Washington's Fine Arts Commission.

Third from left is the architect of the Supreme Court Building, *Cass Gilbert*.

The three central figures, from left to right, are: **Order, Liberty Enthroned and Authority**.

Third from the right is *Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes*, who succeeded Taft as Chief Justice as well as Chairman of the Supreme Court Building Commission.

Second from right is *Robert Aitken*, sculptor of the pediment.

At the far right is *John Marshall*, Chief Justice of the United States from 1801 to 1835, representing **Research Past**. He is holding Roman scrolls, and is gazing at an urn, mosaic tables and an oil lamp, that rest at his feet.

The inscription of the West Pediment, *Equal Justice Under Law*, was submitted to the Architect of the Capitol, David Lynn, by Cass Gilbert's architectural firm. No source for the inscription is known. In May of 1932, the inscription was approved by Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes, and subsequently, the United States Supreme Court Building Commission.