

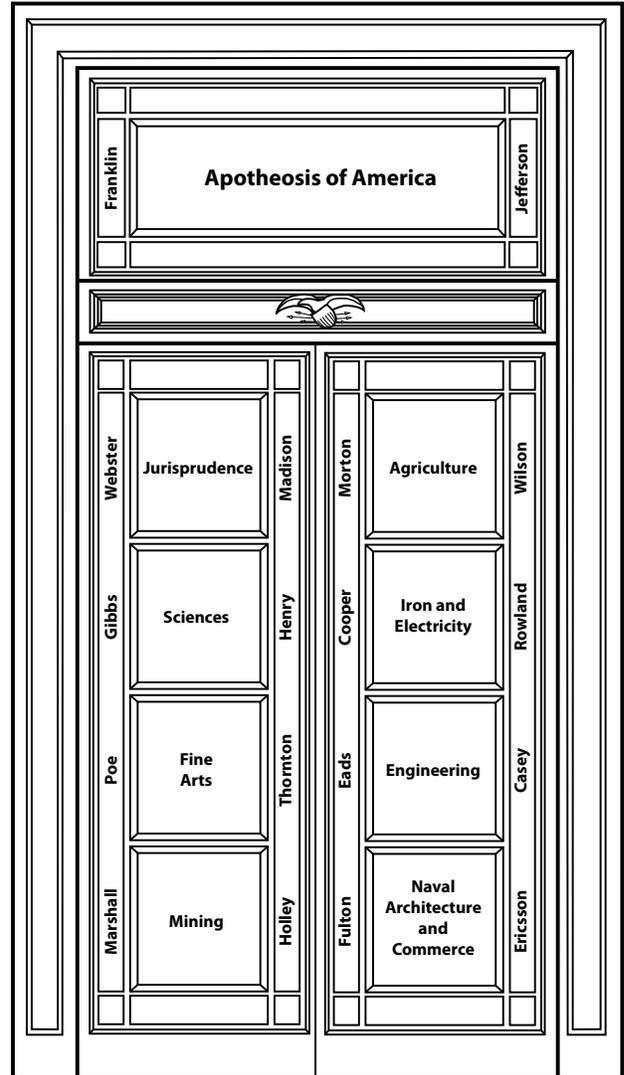


The Amateis Doors

Bronze by Louis Amateis, 1908

The bronze Amateis Doors on display in the House Wing of the Capitol were designed by sculptor Louis Amateis for the center first-floor West Front entrance of the Capitol. The doors are cast in relief ranging from very low to high and consist of a transom, two valves, and a surrounding frame. The transom, titled “Apotheosis of America,” depicts an allegorical figure of America surrounded by figural representations of education, architecture, painting, literature, music, sculpture, commerce, mining, and industry. In the

valves below Amateis created panels with scenes of many of these subjects as well as jurisprudence, sciences, agriculture, iron and electricity, and engineering. Bordering the transom and panels are eighteen portrait figures and twenty-eight medallions of people noted for their work in the fields represented in the adjacent scenes. The ornamental frame consists of oak and laurel leaves, symbolizing strength and victory, and the names of the subjects of the panels appear in relief in a variety of decorative motifs.



In March 1901 legislation was passed to appropriate funds for the Architect of the Capitol to prepare and submit to the Congress plans and estimates for reconstructing the central portion of the Capitol, a project that would include refacing the West Front in marble. In 1903 Elliott Woods, Superintendent of the U.S. Capitol and Grounds, started to explore the possibility of placing grand bronze doors, similar to those at the main East Front entrances, on the new façade. He began exchanging ideas with Louis Amateis, who founded the School of Architecture and Fine Arts at Columbian University (today The George Washington University) and was chairman of its Fine Arts Department, about possible designs and subjects.

Their initial idea was to give the doors a historical subject. In planning the design, Amateis studied a plaster cast of Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise doors at the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the bronze Columbus Doors on the East Front. He soon became convinced that the West Front doors would be too narrow for double doors divided into panels of historical scenes, because the figures would need be too diminutive in size. This was confirmed when Woods and Amateis tested the idea in a clay model of one panel. In a January 1904 letter informing the Joint Committee on the Library of his formal selection of Amateis to model the doors, Woods also noted their test and stated that he felt the alternative idea of more general subjects, such as science, art, and literature, would be more successful. Amateis's contract to model the doors was finalized three months later.

Woods and Amateis had a general idea of the subjects to be depicted in the doors, but the final choice of scenes and selection of details were worked out through a series of drawings and models, including a full-size color rendering of the doors placed in the doorway of the West Front entrance. Initially, statuettes were not planned as part of the design and medallions were to be used only if needed, but after reviewing the drawings Amateis found both to be necessary. In selecting the persons to appear in these features, he consulted a colleague at Columbian University. Woods continued to have an active role through the course of the commission. He assembled a committee of prominent architects and sculptors, including architect Thomas Hastings of the firm Carrère and Hastings and sculptor Daniel Chester

Louis Amateis (1855–1913)



This undated photograph shows Louis Amateis in his studio.

Louis Amateis was born on December 13, 1855, in Turin, Italy, where he studied architecture at the Institute of Technology and sculpture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, receiving a gold medal from the latter for his work. He next studied art in Paris and Milan and in 1882 emigrated to the United States, becoming a naturalized citizen. He first lived in New York City, where he designed some architectural sculpture, most often for the firm McKim, Mead, and White.

After marrying in 1889, he moved to Washington, D.C., where he founded the School of Architecture and Fine Arts at Columbian University. Amateis's other sculptures include a portrait bust of President Chester A. Arthur, architectural sculpture for the National Cathedral School, and monuments to the Texas Revolution. He kept a studio in West Falls Church, Virginia, and he died in that city on March 16, 1913.

French, to review Amateis's work. The full-size plaster model of the doors was approved in 1908.

The casting was put out to bid the following year and the contract was awarded to Jno. Williams, Inc., with The Roman Bronze Works as subcontractor. At the committee's recommendation, Jno. Williams, Inc. was to cast the frame for the doors using the sand casting method and The Roman Bronze Works was to cast the reliefs in the lost-wax method, which Amateis had advocated as the best process for capturing the details of the sculpture. Amateis retouched the wax molds, reviewed the work in the foundries, and gave approval of the final doors, which were completed in 1910.

By the time the doors were cast, however, the reconstruction of the West Front had not been authorized. Amateis unsuccessfully attempted to persuade Woods to place the doors in the existing West Front entrance anyway, arguing that when the reconstruction eventually took place the doors could easily be taken down and later reinstalled. (In fact, the reconstruction was never authorized.) The doors were instead displayed at the Corcoran Gallery of Art from 1910 to 1914. They were lent for display to the Smithsonian Institution in February 1914 and exhibited at the new National Museum (now the National Museum of Natural History) until 1967. The doors were then returned to the Congress and placed in storage until 1972, when they were installed in their current location across from the Bulfinch stairway near the Memorial Door entrance. The first professional conservation of the doors was performed in February 2013. Dust, degraded coatings, and hand oils from people touching the doors were removed; the original patina color was restored; and a protective wax coating was applied.

Description of Subjects

Transom.

America is seated in a chariot drawn by two lions led by a child, symbolizing the superiority of intellect over brute strength. Surrounding America are figural representations of education, architecture, painting, literature, music, sculpture, commerce, mining, and industry. The words "Apotheosis of America" appear in a banner below. Statuettes of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson flanking the transom, and in

the four corners are portrait medallions of George Peabody, financier of educational institutions; philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson; educator Horace Mann; and philanthropist Johns Hopkins. Below the center of the transom, above the valves, appears an American eagle clutching arrows and the shield of the United States.

Left Valve

Jurisprudence

The scene depicts Chief Justice John Marshall, located at the center, presiding over a meeting of the Supreme Court that decided the case of *Marbury v. Madison*. A bust of George Washington appears directly above Marshall. Amateis took this case of the supremacy of the judicial over the executive power as the highest expression of jurisprudence. Statuettes of Daniel Webster and James Madison flank the scene, and the subjects of the portrait medallions are lawyer Rufus Choate; Chief Justice Roger B. Taney; and patriot Patrick Henry.

Science

This scene depicts an imaginary gathering of scientific thinkers throughout history. The statuettes represent chemist Oliver W. Gibbs and physicist Joseph Henry. Geologist James D. Dana; astronomer Simon Newcomb; Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone; and Samuel F.B. Morse, inventor of the telegraph, are represented in the medallions. Amateis signed the doors "L. Amateis Wash D.C." at the bottom of this panel.

Fine Arts

In the Fine Arts panel are historic figures from literature and music; among them are the blind poet Homer, with his guide; Shakespeare; and Beethoven. Above them is the flying figure of Genius. Statuettes depict writer Edgar Allen Poe and William Thornton, the first architect of the U.S. Capitol. Portrait painter Gilbert Stuart and sculptor Henry Kirke Brown are represented in the medallions.

Mining

Figures work in a mine, swinging pick axes and hammers and erecting timbers. The statuettes flanking the scene represent James W. Marshall, discoverer of gold in California; and Alexander L. Holley, mining

engineer. Below are medallions of engineer E.B. Case; industrialist Abram Hewitt; and geologist Clarence King.

Right Valve

Agriculture

This scene depicts the cultivation of land and the harvesting of crops. Details in the background include the figure carrying wheat and the waterwheel of a mill, where grain is processed. The statuettes depict Samuel G. Morton, physician and ethnologist; and James Wilson, agriculturist and Secretary of Agriculture. Medallions are of Senator Justin S. Morrill and agricultural chemists John Pitkin Norton and Benjamin Bussey.

Iron and Electricity

In this panel, figures are shown operating machinery and studying plans. The statuettes are of philanthropist Peter Cooper; and physicist Henry A. Rowland. The medallions show Matthias W. Baldwin, an inventor and manufacturer of locomotives, and Thomas A. Edison, inventor.

Engineering

Workers are shown laying railroad tracks, and in the background stands a feat of engineering, an iron bridge. The statuettes are James B. Eads, builder of the St. Louis Railroad; and engineer Thomas L. Casey. The medallions are of John A. Roebling, engineer of the Brooklyn Bridge; and Edwin A. Stevens, of transcontinental railroad fame.

Naval Architecture and Commerce

A figure symbolizing Naval Architecture shows Commerce and Agriculture the places on a globe where they can sell their wares. The globe is held by a youth. A sailor holds a flag surmounted by a liberty cap, significant of an open-door policy. Statuettes portray Robert Fulton, inventor of the steamboat, and John Ericsson, designer of the ironclad ship *Monitor*. Medallions depict Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin; Elias Howe, inventor of the sewing machine; John C. Fremont, the "Pathfinder"; Cyrus W. Field, financier of the Atlantic Cable; and naval constructor John Lenthall.

September 2013