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James Earl Fraser, 1910

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The Vice Presidential Bust Collection

History of the Collection

The United States Senate’s Vice Presidential Bust Collection honors the presidents of the Senate and forms the institution’s oldest continuing art collection. The Senate commissioned the first bust in 1885 as a tribute to Vice President Henry Wilson and placed it in the Vice President’s Room, adjacent to the Senate Chamber. In 1886, the Senate passed a resolution establishing a collection of marble vice presidential portraits. After the first busts filled the 20 niches that surround the Senate Chamber gallery, new additions were placed throughout the Senate wing of the Capitol.

Traditionally, each vice president chooses an artist, and the necessary sum was raised after the vice president leaves office. Since 1947, the Senate Committee on the Library, now the Committee on Rules and Administration, has served as vice president and pays tribute to their tenure in the history of the Senate. It also provides a unique survey of American sculpture from the 19th century to the present.

The Office of Vice President

“The Vice President of the United States shall be President of the Senate but shall have no Vote, unless they be equally divided.”

Article I, Section 3, The Constitution

Busts breaking a tie vote in the Senate, the Constitution assigns few responsibilities to the vice president. John Adams summed up his role when he observed, “I am Vice President, in this I am nothing, but may be everything.” Since then, the functions of the office have been shaped by each vice president’s relationship to the presidency, and by the events of the era. Vice presidents have served as unofficial envoys to Congress, presidential emissaries to official ceremonies, and have acceded to the presidency upon the death of the president.

Traditionally, each vice president took an active role in Chamber procedure—presiding over debates and interpreting parliamentary questions. In response, the Senate developed rules and practices to affirm its independence from this representative of the executive branch. Nonetheless, the vice president has continued over the years to serve as a bridge between the administration and the Senate, and still maintains an office in the Capitol for that reason.

John Tyler

(1790–1862) ❶

William C. McCaulden, 1889

Tyler, a member of the “Virginia dynasty,” was known for his firm to his political convictions. He was an “acting president” during the death of a president. Rejecting the notion that he was an “acting president,” Tyler established himself as president in his own right by holding firm to his political convictions.

Washington, D.C. artist William C. McCaulden executed the bust of John Tyler for the Senate. Because the Senate commissioned the Tyler bust after the subject’s death, McCaulden relied upon portraits painted during Tyler’s lifetime as models. The artist also created the busts of Vice Presidents William R. King and Andrew Johnson in the Senate collection.

Henry Wilson

(1812–1875) ❷

Daniel Chester French, 1886

Wilson soon embarked on a career in politics, and worked his way from the Massachusetts legislature to the U.S. Senate. In a politically turbulent era, he shifted political parties several times, but maintained a consistent stand against slavery throughout his career. Wilson was elected to the vice presidency on the 1872 Republican ticket with Ulysses S. Grant. He died in the Vice President’s Room in the Capitol in 1875. Ten years later, the Senate placed a bust of Wilson in that room as a memorial to him.

Daniel Chester French, long considered the “dean of American sculptors,” modeled the bust of Henry Wilson. One of the country’s most popular and prolific artists, French is known for his public monuments, private memorials, and portrait busts. French’s most celebrated work is the memorial statue of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Morgan Lewis

(1810–1875) ❸

Daniel Chester French, 1886

Lewis was elected vice president in 1872 as a Democrat and reelected with Andrew Johnson in 1876. Although a supporter of the Reconstruction era, Lewis became disillusioned with Reconstruction and served only one term. He later moved to Florida, where he engaged in real estate and helped to establish the University of Florida.

Daniel Chester French modeled the Lewis bust, which was placed in the Senate from 1878–1884. French also created the bust of Vice President Chester Alan Arthur, who served under President Grover Cleveland.

Chester Alan Arthur

(1829–1886) ❹

Augustus Saint-Gaudens, 1889

Arthur was elected vice president after the assassination of James Garfield in 1881. Arthur later served as president. In 1885, the Senate placed a bust of Arthur in the Senate Chamber, which was replaced by the bust of Vice President Henry Wilson in 1950.

The vice president’s bust from 1878–1884.

French’s bust of Lewis depicts the vice president in a white uniform, with a sword and a laurel wreath. It was displayed in the Senate from 1878–1884, then replaced by a bust of Chester Alan Arthur in 1885. When the Senate placed a bust of Vice President Henry Wilson in that room, it commissioned French to model a new bust of Wilson that was placed in the Senate Chamber in 1889.

Masonry and portraits

French de­signed the bust of James Madison, the first vice pres­ident, which was placed in the Senate Chamber in 1885. It was the first of seven busts of Madison’s successors that were placed in the room as they were painted. By 1889, French had created busts of the first 22 vice presidents, with the exception of Martin Van Buren, whose bust was not commissioned.

The collection chronicles the individuals who have served as vice presidents. The bust of Vice President John C. Calhoun, for example, was placed in the Senate Chamber in 1886. Calhoun was the first vice president to be inaugurated in a presidential inauguration ceremony, and is known for his role in the Nullification Crisis of 1832. The bust of Vice President Andrew Jackson, re­elected with Andrew Johnson in 1836, was placed in the Senate Chamber in 1886. Jackson is known for his role in the War of 1812 and for his presidency following the assassination of President James Madison.

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Henry Wilson (1812–1875)  
Daniel Chester French, 1886

Henry Wilson epitomized the American Dream. Born to a destitute family, at age 21 he walked to a nearby town and began a business as a cobbler. Wilson soon embarked on a career in politics, and worked his way from the Massachusetts legislature to the U.S. Senate. In a politically turbulent era, he shifted political parties several times, but maintained a consistent stand against slavery throughout his career. Wilson was elected to the vice presidency on the 1872 Republican ticket with Ulysses S. Grant. He died in the Vice President’s Room in the Capitol in 1875. Ten years later, the Senate placed a bust of Wilson in that room as a memorial to him.

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Chester Alan Arthur (1830–1886)  
Augustus Saint-Gaudens, 1891

In 1881, just months after assuming the vice presidency, Chester Alan Arthur became president following the assassination of James Garfield. Although his early political success had been through the machine politics of New York, Arthur surprised critics by fighting political corruption. He supported the first civil service reform, and his administration was marked by honesty and efficiency. Because he refused to engage in partisan politics, party regulars did not nominate him in 1884.

Sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens originally declined to create Arthur’s official vice presidential bust, citing his own schedule and the low commission the Senate offered. Eventually he reconsidered, and delivered the finished work in 1892. One of America’s best known sculptors, Saint-Gaudens also created the statue of Abraham Lincoln in Chicago’s Lincoln Park and the design for the 1907 $20 gold piece, considered by many collectors to be America’s most beautiful coin.

Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919)  
James Earle Fraser, 1910

Theodore Roosevelt served as governor of New York prior to his term as vice president. He succeeded to the presidency following the assassination of William McKinley in 1901. Roosevelt strongly supported railroad regulation, construction of the Panama Canal, and conservation of natural resources, especially through national parks. In 1906, Roosevelt won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in ending the Russo-Japanese war.

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Jo Davidson, 1930

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Charles N. Frick (1865–1909) 
James Earle Fraser, 1901

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