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Lee Lawrie, Courthouse Sculptor

-- Paul D. Nelson

“Vision of Peace” is not the only sculpture at City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse in downtown St. Paul. It may seem to be—Carl Milles’s enormous, spectacular, and iconic figure has a way of grabbing just about all the artistic attention the public has to give. In fact, though, there are eleven other major carvings in the building at the corner of Kellogg and Wabasha: the second floor bust of Jose Marti; Albert Stewart’s six wonderful, main-floor, bronze elevator doors; and four large exterior relief works — the subject of this article — by the greatest artist to work on the building, Lee Lawrie.

Not many people today know Lee Lawrie’s name, nor was he much known to the public in his lifetime, 1877–1963. But during the first half of the twentieth century, Lawrie was one of the busiest and most successful of American artists, and hundreds of thousands of people still enjoy his work today. His most famous (but not best) piece is the statue of Atlas at Rockefeller Center in New York City.

Atlas is not at all typical of Lee Lawrie works; he did comparatively few free-standing statues. His specialty and passion was architectural sculpture, the fancy term for carving on buildings.

His architectural commissions were many and celebrated: the Los Angeles Public Library, the

Louisiana State Capitol, the Bok Carillon Tower in Florida, Rockefeller Center (where he did much more than Atlas), and his masterpiece, the Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln.¹

While at the peak of his powers, and just before beginning Rockefeller Center, Lawrie found time in 1931 and 1932 for a minor commission, the Ramsey County Courthouse in St. Paul.²

Lee Oskar Lawrie was born in Prussia in 1877 and came to the United States in 1881. (His birth name was Hugo Belling; the surname Lawrie came from an American stepfather; where Lee and Oskar



Lee Lawrie’s “Atlas,” Rockefeller Center.
Photo by Gregory Harm.

came from is unknown.) At age fourteen, living with his mother in Chicago, a two-word sign, “Boy Wanted,” introduced him to his fate, his muse, his life. It led him to a job with a local sculptor, and then to the sculpture workshops of the World’s Columbian Exposition, otherwise known as the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893.

This was the famous White City, European classical architectural forms recreated (often magnificently) on the reclaimed swampland north of downtown.

The sculpture was imitation European too, in the style known as Beaux Arts, based on classical forms, but sometimes a little ostentatious. In Minnesota the “Father of Waters” sculpture at the Minneapolis City Hall is an excellent example. This is the first style that Laurie learned, but not the last.

After Chicago Lawrie, while still a teenager, bounced around the East, working as an assistant and apprentice to several sculptors, Augustus St. Gaudens the most prominent among them.

In 1895 by chance he met a rising young architect named Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, whose



“The Last Supper,” St. John’s Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut.

Photo from *Lee Lawrie*, Joseph F. Morris, ed.

specialty at the time was churches in the Gothic style. Gothic is what most people see in their minds when they think of the great cathedrals of Europe like Notre Dame—pointed arches, tall, narrow spires, rose windows, and lots of statues. Probably the best local example, though unadorned, is Central Lutheran Church in downtown Minneapolis.

With Goodhue Lawrie mastered the Gothic and found his area of genius, architectural sculpture. Gothic churches required endless iterations of the human form—Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the saints—to fill their countless portals, niches, chapels, and



Lawrie’s “Majestas,” Cathedral of St. John the Divine (Gothic style), New York.

altars. This was adornment with a purpose, beauty designed also to instruct the congregants (who in the original Gothic era did not read Scripture) in the ideas and the personalities of the faith.

In the Gothic style architecture and sculpture complemented one another in the service of a greater purpose. This conception of sculpture took hold of Lee Lawrie’s imagination and never let go. All the rest of his career, including his work in St. Paul, he strove to have his sculptural work announce and enhance the buildings of which they were part.

This goal was straightforward in churches, where the buildings’ purpose was clear and the forms well known. The task was more difficult with commercial and government buildings, especially when the skyscraper came along.

The invention of the skyscraper presented ar-



Lee Lawrie, Library of Congress photo.

chitects and architectural sculptors with unprecedented challenges. For architects, the challenge lay in how to go very tall and incorporate both function and beauty.

For sculptors the challenge was perhaps greater. As buildings rose skyward, the style of design went simple: clean lines, great masses, basic geometric forms. Where did sculpture, so recently rather busy and ornate, fit in? More profoundly, perhaps, the tall building presented a problem of scale.

Throughout history sculpture had been placed where the unaided eye could (more or less) comfortably appreciate it. But, what place could outdoor sculpture have on a building three hundred feet tall?



Nebraska Capitol.
Postcard courtesy of Gregory Harm.

One answer, of course, was to dispense with architectural sculpture altogether. Another was to search for a new approach to fit the new times.

Lee Lawrie had the good fortune to possess that artistic temperament that thrives within narrow limits, like Shakespeare's poetry within the



Solon, Nebraska Capitol, Gregory Harm photo.

confines of the sonnet. He wrote, "I think there is more opportunity for artistic thought in meeting the resistance that a modern building puts up than in purely aesthetic sculpture."³

His companion good fortune lay in his alliance with Goodhue, an architect who changed masterfully with the times.

In 1919 the Nebraska legislature resolved to build a new state capitol, and opened a design competition. Goodhue won it and insisted that Lawrie be his sculptor. The Nebraskans demanded plenty in the design: magnificence, functionality, modernity, and history.

The Nebraska capitol rejects the neoclassical style of almost all U.S. capitols, starting with the national capitol in Washington, D.C.: no dome, no columns, no reference at all to Greek or Roman architectural models. Minnesotans are rightly proud of Cass Gilbert's marvelous elaboration of the familiar capitol design (a Beaux Arts style, commissioned in 1895), but there is nothing original about it. The design's clear Greek and Roman lineage is supposed to remind people of the ancient and European origins of democracy.

The Nebraskans, rulers of a young state in a



Lee Lawrie's "Pioneers," Nebraska Capitol.

new civilization, insisted on American styles and references in their new capitol. In Nebraska's capital city of Lincoln, the huge space Goodhue had to work with enabled him to achieve functionality, modernity, and magnificence by a low, massive, blocky, and spacious base with a skyscraper tower in the center. The lines are clean and the forms geometric, like Nebraska itself.

The clean lines presented sculptor Lawrie, charged with portraying Nebraska history in stone, with a fundamental challenge: on flat surfaces, where does sculpture go? In one of his answers we see the template for what he did in St. Paul. Rather than build carvings onto the building, Lawrie cut the carvings into it.

The reliefs, never deep, preserve the essential flatness of the exterior. The story of Nebraska history, going back to Magna Carta then through the Founders and on to statehood, is told in a series of horizontal panels—the signing of the Declaration of Independence, President Lincoln issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, and so on, familiar scenes to all.

The composition is mostly static and stylized, as the Gothic compositions Lawrie had done so often tended to be. In these panels the figures are blockier, plainer, less realistic than in his Gothic works, easier to understand from a distance.

The panels in the Nebraska carvings are static except for one, the centerpiece, the frieze over the main entrance. Here we have motion. Called "The Pioneers," this one shows a band of Nebraska pioneers striding (or maybe trudging) across the prairie, all but their guide (modeled on Buffalo Bill Cody) looking resolutely forward. Though idealized, these figures are realistically done.

One can see what Goodhue and Lawrie were up to. The historical scenes are relentlessly horizontal and earthbound, like Nebraska. The background events are static, but Nebraska itself, expressed in "The Pioneers," is in motion, dynamic, alive. Above all, atop the central tower, stands "The Sower," the symbol of agriculture and by extension civilization, his scattered seeds giving rise to life, community, prosperity. This is Goodhue's and Lawrie's combined masterpiece, architecture and sculpture united.⁴



Ramsey County Courthouse and St. Paul City Hall.

Like the Nebraska statehouse, the new St. Paul City Hall/Ramsey County Courthouse pointedly rejected older styles and embraced the new. It is a skyscraper, all flat surfaces and basic shapes, a low base with a central tower.

Unlike Nebraska, sculpture was not inherent in the original plans. Though sculpture may have been contemplated by the commission in charge of the building, and by the architects (Holabird and Root of Chicago and Ellerbe Associates of St. Paul) too, no mention of it appears in the records until 1931, two years into the planning.

Lawrie was chosen, apparently without controversy or debate, on November 25, 1931, on the architects' recommendation. On that date the building was already partially built. Lawrie's bid, \$13,750, was accepted a few weeks later. Though one has to assume that Lawrie and the architects consulted from time to time, there is no evidence that Lawrie ever visited St. Paul. He lived and worked in New York.

That architectural sculpture was an afterthought in the design of the City Hall/County Courthouse is suggested by this: When dignitaries and the public came to see the building at its ceremonial opening, December 17, 1932, there was no sculpture to see. Lawrie's models for the courthouse were not accepted until two days later. Carving began still later.

The Courthouse Commission did not tell the artist what to carve; instead, it adopted “Suggestions for Themes Exterior Stone Sculptoring.” Lawrie followed some of them.

The Suggestions proclaimed the Fourth Street doorway to be “the main monumental entrance to the building.” They called for a five- by eight-foot inscription panel above the door, flanked by four- by five-foot panels of relief sculpture. Above these, the Suggestions called for “a figure of Liberty conceived as the ‘Rights of the Citizen.’” It was to be 3.5 feet wide and 11 feet tall, holding an open book inscribed on the right with the words “Vox Populi, symbolizing the sources of sovereignty in the civic and community government, and upon the left hand “Jus Civile,” emblematic of the courts and their interpretation of the fundamental law of the community.”

Lawrie carried out these directions to the letter, though “Liberty” was placed not directly above the door, but much higher. Standing outside the Fourth Street entrance, one has to look sharply (and uncomfortably) upward to see it.

For the inscription and lateral panels the Commission offered a choice of three inscriptions, four lines of fourteen to seventeen letters each, and reproduced here as in the original document:

JUSTICE IS A CON-
STANT AND PERPET-
UAL WILL TO RENDER
UNTO EACH HIS DUE

LAW IS THE RAMPART
OF THE CITY; LAWS
ARE THE REGISTERS
OF THE PUBLIC WILL

LIBERTY IS THE RIGHT
OF INTELLIGENCE TO
ASSUME ITS OWN RE-
SPONSIBILITIES.

There were two to be two flanking panels. One was to symbolize WISE COUNSEL, that is, “the administration of public welfare by the City,” in the form of an “Indian-American council;” the other



Vox Populi

STRAIGHT JUSTICE, symbolized by a frontier justice of the peace. Maybe it was all the hyphens -- Lawrie responded to these suggestions by ignoring them.⁵

There would be no inscription. He filled the space above the doors instead with a street scene he called “The People.” The similarities with his Nebraska over-the-entrance frieze, “The Pioneers,” are so numerous that one is tempted to conclude that the artist imitated himself.



“The People,” top, and “The Pioneers.”

The two show the same sense of movement, though the urban scene is more crowded and hectic; the figures walk with the same tread, their gazes downcast at the same angle. In Nebraska the idealized pioneers represent the people of that rural state; in St. Paul the idealized street throng represents an urban people. And Lawrie was careful to include a variety of classes, occupations, ages, and, with one African American, even races.

There are important differences between the panels too. The Nebraska frieze is full of local references—plants, animals, tools, and Buffalo Bill. The St. Paul scene has no local anchor; it could be a street in just about any city in the Americas or Europe.



Above the Fourth St. entrance.

In Nebraska Lawrie worked with the architect from the earliest stages of planning, with careful attention to local detail; in St. Paul Lawrie came in late and never had the same intensity of engagement with the site.

The two buildings do share a similar relationship between major symbols. Visually, the elements form a very tall, narrow triangle. In Lincoln, “The Pioneers” at the base, “The Sower” at the apex; in St. Paul, “The People” at the base and “Liberty” at the apex.

In St. Paul the artist’s message seems clear—from the people, absorbed in their daily tasks, arises their collective practicality and wisdom, “Vox Populi” (voice of the people), which becomes “Jus Civile,” the fundamental law of the community. Together they are embodied in the figure “Liberty,” portrayed in severe classical form, a reference to its Greek and Roman origins. The contrast between the realistic figures of “The People” and the nearly abstract “Liberty,” stands for the transformation of the quotidian to the eternal.

All residents of Ramsey County owe thanks to Mr. Lawrie for preferring his own judgment to that of the Commission. Imagine the embarrassment today of having an Indian-American council—a treaty council?—with its whiff of theft and coercion, adorning the seat of government under the banner, “Wise Counsel.”

That was the north-side entrance. The south,

then Third Street, now Kellogg Boulevard, entrance was always conceived as less important, probably because the lively downtown of the early 1930s had most of its bustle to the north.

On the south the Commission suggested two relief panels, one on each side of the doors. On the left, the “County” side, images suggesting the Life of the Fields, “perhaps symbols of the old St. Paul landing with the early flour and lumber mills, with figures symbolizing law as protectress of the life of the community as typified by childhood, youth, maturity.”

On the right, or City side, “a civic goddess with mural crown, and in the background the skyline of the city, with secondary figures representing the early builders of the city, the Woodsman, Furtrader, Pioneer, Soldier.”⁶

Lawrie responded in a general way to these suggestions. If one can say there are city and county sides (it is not obvious looking at the panels today), he switched them, putting city on the left. There is a goddess with a crown, and a skyline (featuring the new city hall), but no other human figures; instead, early industries are represented by the geared wheels, anvil, and barrel. The goddess bears the symbols of authority and law; an open book symbolizes education.

On the right, or county side, another goddess figure stands heroically, bearing symbols of agri-



“City Side.”



“County Side.”

cultural bounty. In the background, there are tall pines and a hurrying freight train. The skyline and pine forest are the only identifiably local visual references that Lawrie produced.

In style, Lawrie borrowed from the images of the ancient Middle East, which he had learned about from his late mentor Goodhue (and possibly saw firsthand at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.) The stiff, heavily stylized goddess figures call to mind Egyptian and Assyrian sculpture.

Lawrie had very little formal education, but he had studied the history of his art. (His lack of schooling did not prevent Yale—where he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1908—and Harvard from hiring him as an instructor.) He placed his work in a tradition going back to the great civilizations of Egypt.

These panels have some delightful details. On the City Side, note the match between the hair of the goddess and the profile of the courthouse, and the diagonal line formed by her staff and the spokes of the wheel. On the County Side, Lawrie played with the hair again, this time pairing it with the trail of smoke from the locomotive. And here there are interplays of arcs: the sickle, the cornucopia, the sunrise, and the horn. Both compositions are rhythmic and balanced, with a hint of humor.

It is commonplace today to think of all art as the artist's self-expression, but this is a new idea in human history and one that Lee Lawrie rejected. His goal always was to express not himself but the purpose and function of the building. In 1934 he wrote, "It is the mural sculptor's business to see to it that his expression is consistently in accord with the idea of the building, its time and place, as well as its design." To Lawrie, that was the purpose of his art (which he called "modern mural sculpture"): to announce to the public and to posterity, the nature of the building of which his works were an integral part.⁷



Lee Lawrie frieze from a World War I memorial, St. Thomas Episcopal Church, New York.

We do not know exactly when the courthouse sculptures were completed, though it was probably in 1933. (The actual carving was done by John Garatti, an Italian-born St. Paulite who also worked on "Vision of Peace.") We do not know how the public reacted to them. We do know how Lawrie wanted people to react: "As we go about and look at the buildings critically we can decide for ourselves whether the mural sculptures are merely works of art in themselves, or whether they take their place as complements to their surrounding architecture; whether they represent ideas foreign to the purposes of the building, or whether they make the building's purpose more articulate."

Just so, as much today as in 1933: The visitor to the Ramsey County Courthouse can decide for him or herself whether Lee Lawrie's sculptures are

mere decorations, or expressions of the purpose of the building, or something else. Do the four main pieces form, with the design of the building itself, a harmonious and interrelated whole? Whether Lawrie succeeded by his own measures, or not, he created in St. Paul the most

thoughtful and subtle architectural sculpture in the Twin Cities.

Based in part on the St. Paul pieces, critic Walter Agard wrote in his 1935 book, *The New Architectural Sculpture*, that "we may declare with conviction that Lee Lawrie is the foremost architectural sculptor in America."⁸

Writing in 1934, Lee Lawrie saw a great future for architectural sculpture in North America. "The promise for the future is bright. It is not improbable that the American mural sculptor will do for his country what the Greek did for his — achieve what is not borrowed, but native."

He was wrong. The Depression coincided with the advance of modernism in architecture, a movement that disdained decoration. Henry-Russell Hitchcock Jr. and Philip Johnson's influential 1932 book, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922*,

held as one of its three principles of architecture the elimination of all exterior sculpture.

After Lee Lawrie completed Rockefeller Center (1937), his phone stopped ringing. By the end of the decade he so despaired of working again that he had resigned himself to subsistence farming in Maryland.

It never quite came to that; Lawrie worked intermittently as a sculptor and consultant until his death in 1963, but his art form did not survive him.

In the United States, architectural sculpture is dead. It is like the silent film; you can find examples that still bring delight and amazement, but there are no new creations. In his prime — the era of his St. Paul work — Lee Lawrie saw himself as the inheritor and modernizer of an ancient tradition that would continue forever. Instead, it died with him. His works, including the little-noticed St. Paul panels and details, live on; examples, perhaps, of American sculpture, “not borrowed, but native.”⁹

Acknowledgments

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Many thanks are due to Gregory Harm, the leading scholar of the life and works of Lee Lawrie. His book, *Lee Lawrie's Prairie Deco: History in Stone at the Nebraska State Capitol* (available at www.blurb.com), is the most thorough appreciation of Lee Lawrie's work yet published. His contribution of photographs, information, and encouragement has been invaluable.

Notes

1. Enumeration of Lawrie's works comes from a variety of sources: Timothy J. Garvey, *Lee O. Lawrie: Classicism and American Culture, 1919–1954* (Minneapolis: Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1980); Lee Lawrie, *Sculpture* (Cleveland: J.H. Jansen, 1936); Joseph F. Morris, ed., *Lee Lawrie* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1955); and three web sites: Smithsonian Institution Art Inventories Catalog, <http://sirisartinventories.si.edu>, and www.leelwarie.com and www.bisonwerks.com, maintained by the independent scholar Gregory Harm. No comprehen-

Details

There are four major Lawrie pieces on the courthouse exterior, but the attentive visitor will notice several smaller pieces too, most prominently on the roofline of the east wing, along Wabasha Street. They look like symbols (they are), but of what?



The Courthouse Commission suggested calumets; Lawrie gave them the hive, symbol of industry.



The Commission asked for scales of justice and got them.



The “unpainted washstand upon which Governor Ramsey wrote the territorial proclamation.”



A “mural crown, emblematic of civic society, Roman sword, emblem of St. Paul.”



The North Star, symbol of the State of Minnesota.

sive list has yet been published, though Mr. Harm is working on it.

2. Biographical information is from Garvey, *Lee O. Lawrie*, 9–12 and Gregory Harm, *Lee Lawrie's Prairie Deco: History in Stone at the Nebraska State Capitol* (www.blurb.com: 2009). Lawrie's views on sculpture are found in Lee O. Lawrie, *Modern Mural Sculpture* (Pasadena, Calif.: Esto Publishing Co., 1934).

3. Eric Scott McCready, "The Nebraska State Capitol: Its Design, Background and Influence," *Nebraska History* 55, no. 3 (Fall 1974): 377.

4. Garvey, *Lee O. Lawrie*, 60–123; Charles H. Whitaker and Hartley B. Alexander, *The Architectural Sculpture of the State Capitol at Lincoln Nebraska* (New York: American Institute of Architects, 1926).

5. Files of the St. Paul City Hall-Ramsey County Courthouse Commission (call no. 113.J.5.6.F), Minnesota Historical Society (MHS); Ellerbe & Co. and Holabird and Root, "Saint Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse," *American Architect* (July 1933); *Pioneer Press*, December 18, 1932, p. 1 (ceremonial opening).

6. "Suggestions for Themes Exterior Stone Sculptoring," in the files of the St. Paul City Hall-Ramsey County Courthouse Commission, MHS.

7. Lawrie, *Modern Mural Sculpture*. Lawrie did not deny the role of individual creativity, but to him it came out in the service of a bigger purpose: "Although no new ways of designing and modeling are available, the personal characteristics that stamp each sculptor's work, when applied to an original theme and an architectural problem make it a creation."

8. Walter Agard, *The New Architectural Sculpture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1935), 45.

9. Lawrie, *Modern Mural Sculpture*; Garvey, *Lee O. Lawrie*, 260–282 (later years.)



Lectern, Rockefeller Chapel, Chicago

Lawrie's Works

Lee Lawrie produced a great variety and quantity of works; some statuary, much more relief sculpture—Beaux Arts, Gothic, modernistic; some somber, some funny.

A Lee Lawrie tour of the United States would cover a lot of ground: Providence, Rhode Island; West Point, Brooklyn, and Manhattan in New York; Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; Florida; Louisiana; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; South Bend, Indiana; Chicago; Lincoln, Nebraska; St. Paul, and on to California.



Los Angeles Public Library, photo from *Sculpture*, by Lee Lawrie.

We offer here just a sampling of Lawrie's work, designed to give the reader a sense of his productivity and range of styles. No one has yet compiled a complete list of his creations, and that is beyond the scope of this article. It will suffice here to mention some of his noteworthy commissions.



Wisdom, Rockefeller Center, photo by Gregory Harm



Eagle, Nebraska Capitol, photo by Gregory Harm

- Post Headquarters and Chapel, U.S. Military Academy, West Point (1905)
- Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York (1913–1914)
- St. Thomas's Church, New York (1917–1919)
- Nebraska State Capitol, Lincoln (1920–1924)
- National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C. (1920–1924)
- Los Angeles Public Library, (1923–1926)
- Fidelity Mutual Life Insurance Building, Philadelphia (1927)
- Rockefeller Chapel, University of Chicago (1928)
- Episcopal Church of the Heavenly Rest, New York (1929)
- Bok Carillon Tower, Lake Wales, Florida (1929)



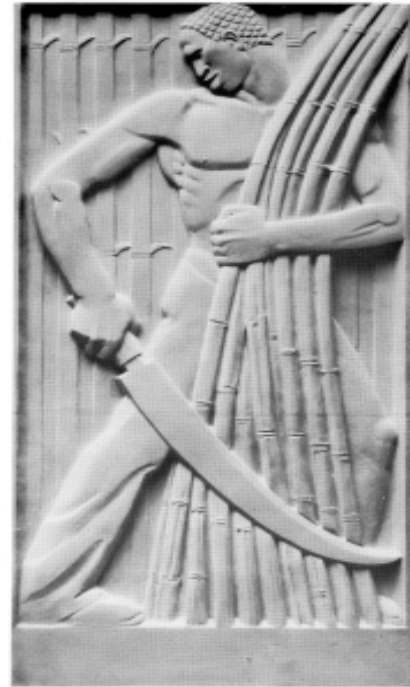
Mary, Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York.



Church of the Heavenly Rest, New York

- St. Paul City Hall/Ramsey County Courthouse (1932)
- Pennsylvania Education Building, Harrisburg, (1932)
- Louisiana State Capitol, Baton Rouge, (1932)
- Rockefeller Center, New York (1933–1937)

- Wichita Art Institute, Wichita, Kansas (1935)
- Jefferson Annex to the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (1938)
- Corn Products Research Center, Argo, Illinois (1945)



"Cane Cutter," Louisiana State Capitol

Cane Cutter, Louisiana Capitol, photo from *Sculpture*, by Lee Lawrie

Those looking for photographs of Lawrie's works should consult Christine Roussel's thoroughly beautiful volume, *The Art of Rockefeller Center* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), and Gregory Harm's newly published *Lee Lawrie's Prairie Deco: History in Stone at the Nebraska State Capitol* (available at www.blurb.com). But the world awaits a comprehensive appreciation of Lee Oskar Lawrie.



Angels with Trumpets, Rockefeller Chapel, Chicago