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zoom

in on america

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Library of Symbols



Edwin Blashfield mural on the ceiling of the dome in the Main Reading Room of the Library of Congress, Photo © AP Images

In this issue: Library of Congress

Zoom in on America

The Main Reading Room

The photo on the cover shows a mural in the highest part of the dome in the Library of Congress Main Reading Room. A beautiful woman who represents Human Understanding lifts the veil of ignorance and looks forward to intellectual progress. She is attended by two cherubs: one is holding the book of wisdom and knowledge and the other seems to be encouraging viewers to persist in their struggle toward perfection. A careful viewer will notice a detail which is not part of the painting - a bird flying below the scene. This is a live Cooper hawk that on Friday, January 21, 2011 actually visited the Main Reading Room, perched on the pillars and circled round under the dome. The bird had first been spotted in the Library of Congress two days earlier and a team from the Raptor Conservancy of Virginia was summoned. For almost a week the hawk avoided all traps but was finally captured using a caged pair of starlings, as bait. The public and the staff took great interest in the hawk and *The Washington Post* even carried out a poll among its readers on the name for the bird. The adventure with books proved perilous for the bird which was diagnosed emaciated and taken to a rehabilitation center for recovery.

It is quite natural to start our tour of symbols in the **Main Reading Room** as this is perhaps the most well-known reading room of all libraries in the world. Looking down from the dome we perceive twelve male and female figures who represent the twelve countries, or epochs, which in 1897 (the year when the building was constructed) were thought to have contributed the most to modern civilization. These include Egypt representing Written Records, Judea - Religion, Greece - Philosophy, Rome - Administration, Islam - Physics, The Middle Ages

- Modern Languages, Italy - the Fine Arts, Germany - the Art of Printing, Spain - Discovery, England - Literature, France - Emancipation, and America - Science.

Below the dome, allegorical female figures stand on top of the eight giant marble columns which circle the Main Reading Room. The plaster statues represent characteristic features of civilized life and thought: Religion, Commerce, History, Art, Philosophy, Poetry, Law and Science. The inscriptions above the figures try to define the notions. Art, for example, is explained in the words of a 19th century American Romantic poet James Russell Lowell: *As one lamp lights another, nor grows less, /So nobleness enkindleth nobleness.*

A little way below, on the balustrades of the galleries 16 bronze statues of men whose actions seemed important for the world to the creators of the Library of Congress are presented. And so we see Michelangelo, Beethoven, Columbus, Fulton, Herodotus, Gibbon, Solon, Kent, Plato, Bacon, Homer, Shakespeare, Moses, Saint Paul, Newton and Joseph Henry.

One of the most symbolic items in the Main Reading Room is the **clock**, created by John Flanagan. It is constructed of a variety of brilliantly colored precious marbles. The background is composed of the signs of the zodiac in bronze. A life-size figure of Father Time with scythe in hand is placed atop the clock. On both his sides are the figures of maidens with children representing the seasons. The gilded hands of the clock are jeweled with semiprecious stones.

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(clockwise from left): Library of Congress, Reading Room; the dome; statue symbolizing Commerce; statue of Columbus, the clock
(photos Carol M. Highsmith, Library of Congress)

Welcome Riddles

The Artists' Goal

"The largest, costliest and, safest," these superlatives were used to describe the Library of Congress when it was opened to the public in 1897. It would hardly be an exaggeration, if the phrase "the most symbolic" was added to the above description. Each and every artist of the team of nearly 50 who decorated the Thomas Jefferson Building employed the language of symbol and allegory in the workings of their brush or chisel. The purpose of this elaborate symbolism was to link the United States to classical traditions and to show the development of this country and its role in spreading knowledge.

A Lesson in Allegory

Certain symbols are repeated in numerous works and rooms. The Roman Goddess of learning and wisdom, **Minerva**, is a recurring motif. She is depicted for example in a mosaic in the Great Hall as the Minerva of Peace with an unfolded scroll in her hand on which is written a list of various fields of learning: Architecture, Law, Statistics, Sociology, Botany, Biography, Mechanics, Philosophy, Zoology, and others. An **owl**, which is a symbol of wisdom, a **torch**, which represents the pursuit of knowledge, an **eagle**, which stands for the federal government, and a **book** itself are frequent motifs on numerous works.

Famous Quotes

In addition to paintings, sculptures, and mosaics, there are inscriptions with quotations from famous

books and poems of the world's literature. The choice was the responsibility of two men: Ainsworth Spofford (1825-1908), Librarian of Congress and Charles W. Eliot (1834-1926), president of Harvard University. Plaques with names and quotes speak to visitors from the moment they enter the building.

Library's Landmark

As the **Great Hall** is the first place a visitor to the Library of Congress sees, it was made to impress. Everything, from the floor to the ceiling, overflows with opulence. Marbles of different color and origin, arches, richly decorated staircases, marble busts, bronze statues, and mosaics speak to the visitor in a fine detail as well as in larger forms. At the base of each staircase stands a bronze female figure in classic drapery crowned with laurel, holding a torch in welcome. The staircases are adorned with the figures of little boys - "putti" - which represent various occupations (a mechanic, a hunter, a farmer, a gardener, a printer, etc.) The plaster bust of Thomas Jefferson, whose rich book collection gave rise to the library, and the bronze bust of George Washington welcome readers and tourists to the library.

Illuminating Light

The Jefferson Building was one of the first to be illuminated with electric light. As America's contribution to the discovery of electricity was substantial and as light is also a symbol of wisdom, the bare light bulbs are proudly exposed throughout the library.



(from left clockwise): Library of Congress, the Main Hall; photo, view of the ceiling; sculptures of Minerva of Peace and Minerva of War; putti on the Grand Staircase (student and printer); night view of the Thomas Jefferson Building, (photos Carol M. Highsmith, Library of Congress)

Activity Page

Win a Prize!
MAY 2011 CONTEST

Which Library of Congress building is the youngest: the John Adams Building, the James Madison Building or the Thomas Jefferson Building?

Send the answer
(with your home address) to:
zoom@usinfo.pl

Deadline: June 5

Win a Prize!

The answer to the April contest was:

Old American West

Thank you for participating

The winners are:

Maya from Gliwice, Maciej from Sulechów, and Anna from Wrocław

CONGRATULATIONS

The prizes will be sent to you by mail.

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Exercise 1 Match the beginnings of sentences 1-14 with their endings A-N:

1. The Library of Congress is...
 2. The library serves the members and staff of the Congress as...
 3. The library was founded and housed in the Capitol...
 4. The British burned the Capitol in 1812, ...
 5. Thomas Jefferson's library of 6,487 ...
 6. Unfortunately, a fire in 1851 ...
 7. In 1897 the library was moved to the Thomas Jefferson Building ...
 8. The Thomas Jefferson Building ...
 9. In 1939 another building was built for the purposes of the library, this ...
 10. The James Madison Memorial Building, built in 1980, is the third edifice ...
 11. Everyone who wants a copyright for their book or other publication must leave ...
 12. On an average work day, the library adds about ...
 13. The library's collections include ...
 14. There have been 13 ...
- A. ... 32 million books.
 - B. ... because the Capitol could no longer house its growing collection.
 - C. ... the largest library in the world.
 - D. ... books was bought to enrich the collection of the Library of Congress.
 - E. ... Librarians of Congress since this position was established in 1802.
 - F. ... was the John Adams Building.
 - G. ... well as other government agencies and the general public.
 - H. ... 2 copies of the work at the Copyright office in the Library of Congress.
 - I. ... holding the Library of Congress collection.
 - J. ... was completed in 1897.
 - K. ... destroyed two thirds of the collection.
 - L. ... destroying the library collection.
 - M. ... when the U.S. Capitol was moved from Philadelphia to Washington in 1800.
 - N. ... 10,000 new items to its collection out of about 20,000 received.

Exercise 2 Now that your sentences from exercise 1 are complete, make questions to them, e.g.:

Sentence: "In 1897 the library was moved to the Thomas Jefferson Building because the Capitol could no longer house its growing collection."

Question: "Why was the library moved to a new building in 1897?"

Exercise 3 Speaking:

Before it was opened in 1897, a British scientist Sir Charles Lyell pronounced the Library of Congress "the most beautiful room in the world." Debate with the class why the scientist had such a high opinion about the Thomas Jefferson Building.

Exercise 4 Speaking:

Work with another student. Look at the photo on the right. Describe the photo and talk about the problems a library faces today.

Useful links:

Library of Congress

Virtual tour of the Library of Congress



Steven Herman, head of the Library of Congress, The library has more than 500 miles of shelving, Photo © AP Images