

Symbols in the Utah State Capitol

Acanthus

In Greco-Roman symbols, the acanthus tree and its leaves stood for life's trials surmounted.

Bee

Qualities attributed to bees include diligence, organizational and technical skills, sociability, purity, chastity, cleanliness, spirituality, wisdom, courage, abstinence, sobriety, creativity, selflessness, eloquence and illumination. The bee symbolized royalty in the ancient Near East, Greece and Egypt.



The bee is an attribute of many gods. In Greek myth, Zeus was raised on milk and honey by the nymph Amalthea. The bee is also associated with the goddesses Cybele, Artemis, and Demeter. Christian tradition describes a monastic communities and the Church itself as a beehive. The beehive is an attribute of Catholic saints Ambrose and Bernard of Clairvaux.

Christ is associated with the bee as well. The bee is a resurrection symbol on tombs, perhaps because of its winter dormancy. And the bee's honey and sting represent the sweetness and pains of Christ.

A symbol of reincarnation, the bee is also an attribute of Hindu gods.

Circle

Circles are a symbol of totality, perfection, unity, eternity – a symbol of completeness that can include ideas of both permanence and dynamism. To the Neo-Platonists, the circle embodied God, the uncircumscribed center of the cosmos. Because the circle is a form potentially without beginning or end, it is the most important and universal of all geometric symbols in mystical thought.

Symbolic meaning and function were combined in the use of the circle to calculate time (the sundial) and space (directional, astrological and astronomical points of reference).

Circles stand for inclusive harmony, such as in the Arthurian Round Table, or the interlocking circles of the Olympic emblem.

During the Renaissance the circle was considered the perfect shape. One well known example of this is Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian man" - which illustrated the best known example of human geometry.

In Western and Eastern thought the circle enclosing a square stands for heaven enclosing the earth. Circular domes, vaults, or cupolas incorporate the celestial symbolism of the rounded decoration in Romanesque churches or pagan temples into architecture based on the square, cross, or rectangle. The Renaissance and later cultures admired the few surviving ancient circular temples including the Pantheon in Rome.

Cornucopia

The “Horn of Plenty” overflowing with fruits, flowers and grains, is a symbol not only of abundance, prosperity and good luck but also of divine generosity. In Greek myth, Zeus accidentally broke off the horn of the goat that suckled him. He gave it to his nurse Amalthea, whereupon it provided inexhaustible food and drink. In another version, Hercules (as one of his 12 labors) fought the bull Achelous as a bull and tore off a horn, but “the naiads filled it with fruits and fragrant flowers, and sanctified it”.

A popular motif in art, the cornucopia appears as an attribute of Demeter, Dionysus, Priapus and Flora but also of many allegorical characters including Earth, Autumn, Hospitality, Peace, Fortune and Concord. *Putti* were often painted spilling nourishment (for the spirit) from a cornucopia.

Eagle

As a master of the air, the eagle is one of the most well known and universal symbols representing power, speed, perception, majesty, domination, victory, valor, inspiration and spiritual aspiration.

It is the personification of great gods – in Greek myth it is associated with Zeus, in Christianity with Christ and St. John, in Hindu with Vishnu, and is present in Native American culture as well.

The eagle is one of the most ancient and popular emblems of victory, its flight taken as a prediction of military success. Heraldic use of the eagle was widespread throughout Europe and many empires used the eagle as symbol of their power including the Romans, Byzantines, The Holy Roman Empire, Hapsburgs, and the Russians.

The American bald eagle with outstretched wings is the emblem of the United States. In art, the eagle can be an attribute of Pride.

Egg

Eggs are a symbol of birth, Genesis, the mystery of original creation, life bursting from primordial silence. Few simple natural objects have such self explanatory yet profound meaning, and the body of myth and folklore that surrounds the egg is huge and appears in many



cultures.

Pre-Christian cultures associated the egg with hope and rebirth. The egg is linked with resurrection: the phoenix, dying in fire, rose from its own egg. The egg's white purity, and the miracle of life contained within its shell fit perfectly into the Christian culture and can be found in paintings such as Piero della Francesca's altarpiece *Madonna and Child* (c.1450) in which an egg symbolizes the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

In Jewish culture the egg is a symbol of promise, and traditionally eggs are the first food offered to Jewish mourners.

In folklore throughout the world, the egg is a propitious symbol, suggesting luck, wealth and health. Magical eggs of gold or silver appear in fairytales, in Greek myth Helen of Troy was born of an egg that fell from the moon.

Griffin

See the entry on **Wyvern**.

Heraldry

See the entry on **Lions**.

Lions

Lions have been symbols of royal authority, courage, wisdom, justice and protection in both Eastern and Western civilizations. Lions were guardians of the dead in ancient Egypt and China. In the ancient Near East, India, and Greece they were placed at the entrances to palaces, thrones and city gates. Lions were thought to be always calm in the face of danger. In ancient Roman classical architecture, they were symbols of dominion, victory, bravery, vigilance and fortitude.



In medieval Europe, soldiers often were covered with so much protective armor that the opposing sides in a battle were unrecognizable to the enemy or each other. As a shorthand method of identification, one solution became the custom of fixing symbols of affiliation on a warrior's shield. Known in the language of **heraldry** as **blazens**—hence we often say a Jazz basketball fan, for example, wears the team's symbol “emblazoned” on a cap or shirt—or later as **coats of arms** (meaning symbolic images on weapons rather than jackets on upper extremities), today we would refer to the blazens as a trademark or a brand.

Historically, as the symbols passed through generations, the images became more and more complicated records of identity and genealogy. Whole books were written to track variations and connections of the symbols of a blazen. Descriptions were generally written in French since the origins of heraldry were begun there.

When a lion appeared on a shield or herald such as a flag, it was important, for purposes of interpretation to know if the lion or other creatures were "rampant" or "passant", that is, whether the animal was rearing or crouching. If rampant, the lord announced war-like intentions on the shield. If passant, the intentions were seen as peaceful.



The third version of the Utah State Capitol lions, sculpted by Ohio artist Nick Fairplay, has the four great guardians of Utah in passant (passive) poses: retracted claws, down- or inward-turned paws, closed jaws, alert eyes). And using the language of ancient and medieval symbols, their ages and poses are intended to signify Patience (the west entrance, middle-aged); Integrity (west entrance, middle-aged); Fortitude (east entrance, elderly with open mouth); Courage (east entrance, young).

Pentacle, Pentagram

The five-point star, often called the pentagram, is one of the more important symbols in the Capitol. It is also one of the more confusing ones because it stands for very different concepts in Greco-Roman, Christian or Druid symbol systems.

The pentagram is a geometric shape made by cross connecting five lines and points of equal length and distances apart. In the context of the neoclassical Capitol, with architecture based on Greek and Roman traditions, its meaning is that of perfect harmony, strength and power. And depending on its orientation it stands for mankind's plea for heavenly guidance (one point up/two points down) or heaven's attention to the proceedings in the room or chamber (one point down/two points up).



Pine Cone

Anciently the pine cone was a symbol of agricultural growth; in neo-classical setting it is a symbol of rebirth and the bounty of the earth. In Greek mythology it was often seen at the end of Jupiter's (Zeus') spear or staff called a *thyrsus*. It is sometimes mistaken for a pineapple. However, in architecture built in the style of the Capitol, it stands for spring and rebirth and is sometimes seen wound around lamb's wool.



Pole Star

The six- or eight-point star, seen on the balcony railings in the House Chamber, is a symbol of constancy or dependability. Shown in the middle of the block U, it is meant to remind House members of their responsibility to always focus on the needs of the citizens of Utah because of the star's reference to a great wheel turning in the sky—the North Star—that, as it turns, it never moves from its position. It is the unmoving point in the universe linking terrestrial and celestial realms.

In Christian symbolism, it is meant to represent God. The six-pointed Pole Star is often used to represent what are referred to as the “Six Works of Mercy” the Gospel of Matthew (25: 35-37) Jesus asks his followers to do: (1) tend the hungry, (2) provide water for the thirsty, (3) take in the stranger, (4) clothe the naked, (5) minister to the sick, and (6) aid and visit the prisoner.

Pomegranate

The many seeds contained in its tough skin made it a symbol of the unity of the many under one authority so that in setting like the Capitol of a State, it stands for the idea that the many are stronger than the individual when bound by law.

In a religious building, the pomegranate became Christian symbol of the resurrection borrowed from Greek and Roman mythology where the pomegranate was a symbol for Persephone, the Queen of the underworld. Before she returned to the earth, her husband Hades, made her eat the seeds of the pomegranate. The seeds had the magic power of eternal life. For eight months of the year she was allowed to stay above the ground (with her mother Demeter, the goddess of the Earth). During that time everything was warm and plants grew. But because Hades had power over her (she ate his

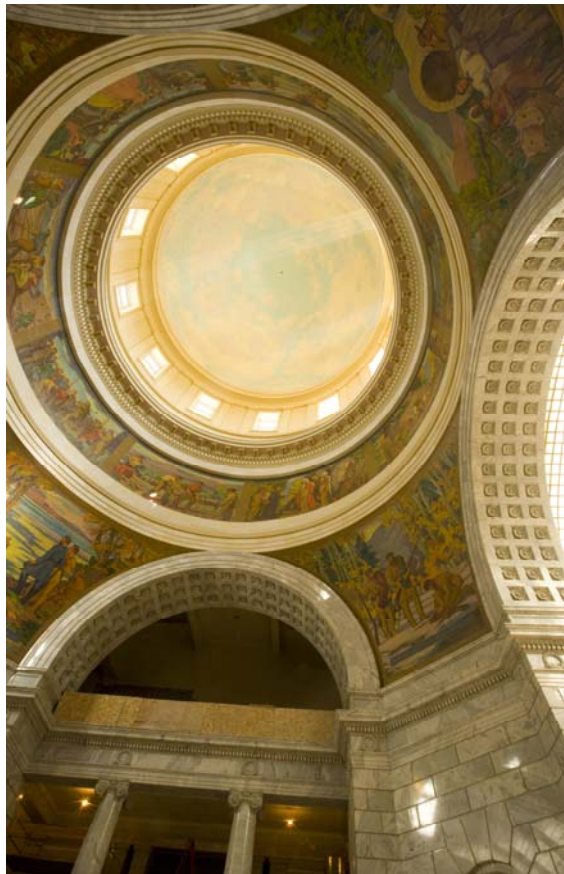


pomegranate seeds) Persephone had to return to the underworld for three months of the year to live with him. The myth explained the cold winter months of December through February and, when Persephone returned every spring to the earth's surface, things that appeared frozen and dead came to life again.

Ram

A ram's head, with curling horns, tops the light fixtures in the atrium vaults of the Capitol. It is an appropriate place for the symbol of solar energy and fire. A ram's horns were an emblem of the increasing solar power of Egypt's Amun-Ra.

A ram is the first symbol of the Zodiac, and as such, it symbolizes the renewal of the earth and the returning warmth of the sun at the March equinox.



Rose

A symbol of eternal life, the heart, the center of a cosmic wheel, the rose is also, in Christian symbolism, the emblem of the Virgin Mary. In classical symbolism, it is the equivalent of the lotus, the symbol of wisdom and eternal life.

Square

A common phrase describing honesty is to say that the person got a "square deal." The square symbolizes permanence, security, balance, and the rational organization of space; correct proportions, limitation, and moral rectitude.

A square is seen as the most static and stable of graphic shapes. Combined with a circle, it stands for the union of heaven and earth – in the Capitol a dome (a 3-dimensional

circle) built on top of a square. It also stands as an emblem of the perfect city, built for eternity – the perfect four walls that surround a dwelling.



Wreath

Wreaths, swags, and **garlands** in the Capitol are made to look like **acanthus** leaves/branches. When woven of living things, they are living crowns, suggesting both victory and vitality.



Wreaths are symbols of superiority and, in funerary settings, they suggest eternity and immortality.

Wreaths were given to victorious athletes in ancient Greek contests: those honoring Zeus were made of olive branches (or parsley!), for Poseidon a pine tree, and for Apollo, the god of the arts and music, a laurel.

Wyvern

Wyverns are a type of **griffin** (see above) with special meaning. There are eight in the Capitol, located at the corners of the atrium vaults.

A wyvern has the head and front paws of a lion or a dragon, the wings of an eagle and a serpent's or sea creature's tail. The Capitol's wyverns wear a shield across their chests as one paw rests on a scrolled **acanthus leaf**. A **pine cone** hangs beneath their tails over the top of the plinth.



In medieval heraldry, a wyvern was a guardian figure with magic powers of protection for warriors serving a powerful lord in battle. They are often pictured on shields carried by the noblest soldiers.



Helpful References on Symbols

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