The Court Archive:
Blindfolded Justice

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Many images of Lady Justice, whether statues, murals, bas reliefs, or friezes, show her with a blindfold around her eyes. However, in the Illinois Supreme Court Building, Lady Justice appears with her eyes uncovered. Why did Illinois's Supreme Court go a different route than many other court buildings.

The Euro-American Lady Justice is based on the Greek goddesses Dike and Themis, and their Roman counterpart Justitia, the goddess of justice. In Greek and Roman depictions, Themis and Justitia were frequently portrayed with a sword, signifying the power of the law, and with scales, representing two sides of an argument and eventual balance and justice. The Egyptian goddess Ma'at predated Dike, Themis, and Justitia. Ma'at was the goddess governing truth, justice, and order. None of these goddesses, all female, had eye coverings, allowing them to easily see the merits of the cases before them.

In the late-1400s, artists began to portray Lady Justice with a blindfold. However, the blindfold was meant to be sarcastic. A blindfolded Lady Justice was unable to see clearly and thus unable to wield her sword or balance her scales to deliver justice effectively. This new representation mirrored negative connotations with blindfolds in other artwork depicting Death, Anger, and even Cupid.

By the mid-1500s, the satirical representation of Lady Justice with a blindfold transformed into a positive interpretation signifying impartiality and neutrality. The common expression of "Justice is blind" resonated in the Renaissance period that Lady Justice could determine correct outcomes without the prejudice of sight. Another interpretation of the blindfold began to represent how the law takes cautious steps forward over rushed judgments. A blindfolded person will not run forward quickly but will take each step carefully and deliberately in order to determine the best path.

W. Carbys Zimmerman, the architect for the Illinois Supreme Court Building, understood that the Beaux Arts, or neo-classical, building should have classically inspired artwork. All of the art at the Illinois Supreme Court Building has Justice portrayed without a blindfold: Charles Mulligan's statue of Justice at the building's entrance, Edgar Spier Cameron's mural of Lady Justice in the

Law Library, and Albert H. Krehbiel's several murals featuring Lady Justice in the Supreme Court courtroom and Appellate courtroom. Krehbiel, Mulligan, and Cameron were classically trained artists and probably undertook significant research into the meaning of blindfolds. They chose to portray a building with classically inspired, not Renaissance inspired, artwork.

In court buildings throughout the country, there is no right or wrong representation of Lady Justice—blindfolded or not. Blindfolded Lady Justices will demonstrate the architect's or artist's frame of reference as the Renaissance period. Non-blindfolded Lady Justices will demonstrate the architect's or artist's frame of reference as ancient Greek or Rome. Either way, the representation of Lady Justice remains as a deliberate and sober woman considering the merits of a case with her scale and executing swift justice with her sword.