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Ceres and the Grain Trade: from Sicily and North Africa to Chicago

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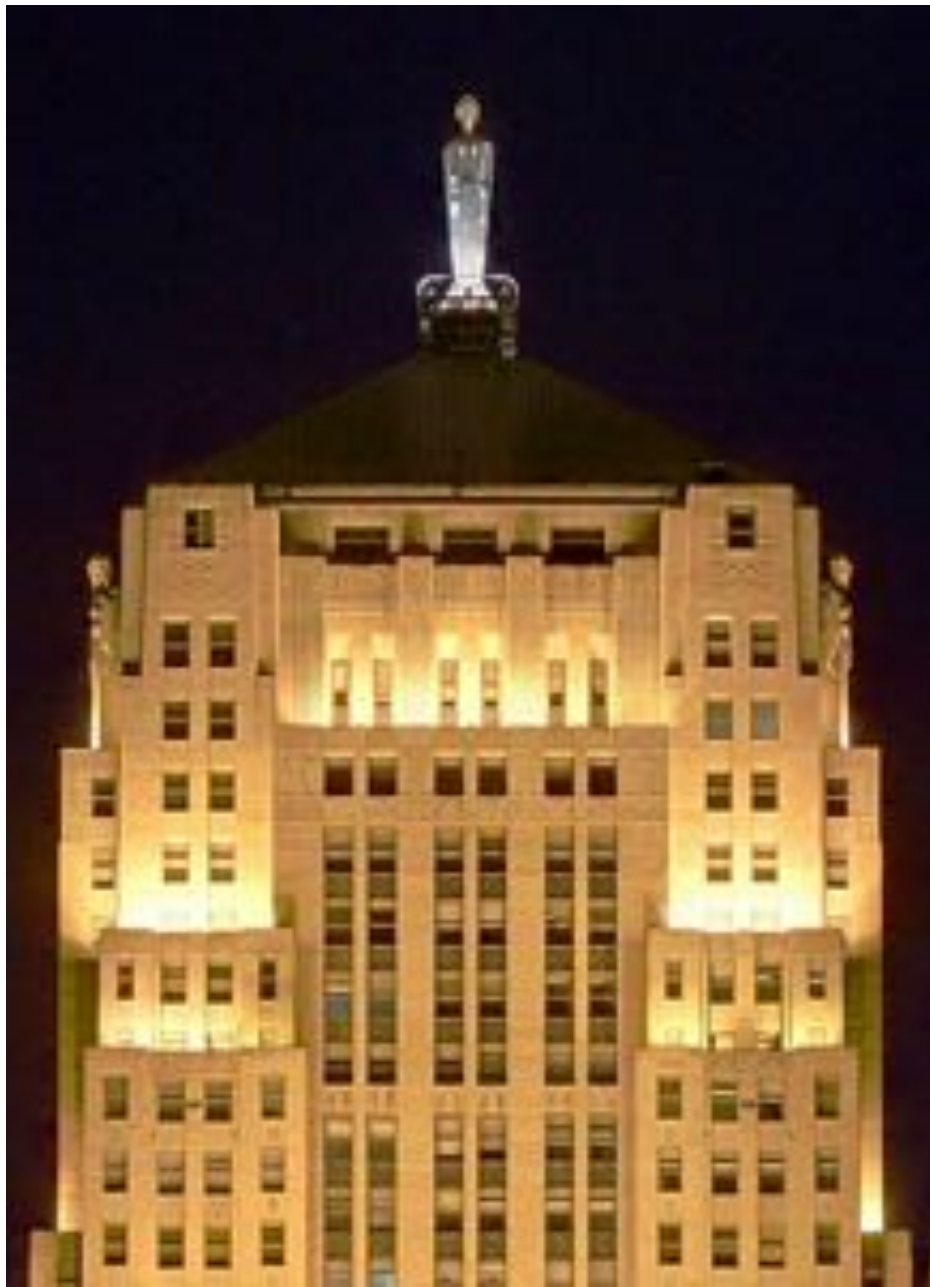
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The statue of Ceres atop the Chicago Board of Trade Building represents for many the historical origin and vitality of Chicago as the centre of the American grain trade, following initial settlement of the region by European pioneers in the early part of the 19th century. Designed by Chicago architect John Storrs (1885 - 1956), the aluminium goddess was dedicated in June 1930, along with the new Chicago Board of Trade Building, at the juncture of West Jackson Boulevard and LaSalle Street. At 31 feet tall, and standing 605 feet above ground-level, Ceres marked the highest point on the Chicago skyline until 1965, and remains to this day a prominent reminder of the city's commercial and agricultural roots.

A faceless and static, minimalist figure, Ceres was intended from the first to blend in “architectural harmony with the building on which it was to stand.” The linear fluting of her gown echoes the lines of the roof and columns below, and the schematic rendition of her physiognomy, clothing and accoutrements (small bag clutched in the right hand, sheaf of grain in the left) continue the architectural simplicity and the “continuous, flowing totality” of the skyscraper itself. This was a principle central to the Art Deco movement, of which the Board of Trade Building itself became a shining architectural exemplar (quotations attributed to Storrs by Philip Hampson, ‘Ancient Goddess in Modern Form to Command City,’ *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, May 4, 1930).

The decision, however, to create the “ultimate Art Deco goddess” was not determined entirely by the nature of the skyscraper for which he had been given his commission (Frackman 88-90). Storrs, granted total artistic freedom by the building's architects, had a deep interest in the interrelation between architecture and the human form, as his earlier studies of abstract and mechanistic figures demonstrate, themselves often emerging only half-visible from tower-like blocks of stone. At the same time, Storrs' other series of surreal, and frequently organic designs for imaginary towers and skyscraper cities approached the intersection of the architectural and the figural from the opposite perspective. The Ceres in many ways blends two strains of sculptural exploration – the architectural human form and the organic tower-block – that were fundamental to Storrs' development as a sculptor.

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The mechanistic human figures and the geometric-organic architectural forms exhibit a further influence, crucial to the genesis of the Ceres statue. Storrs' interest in Eastern – especially ancient Greek, Egyptian and Assyrian – architecture and sculpture, in part fostered by his travels in the early 1900s, provided inspiration and even specific models for the integration of the human and the architectural form, the simple and stylised contours of the female body, and the curvilinear or zigzag motifs that texture the surface of his skyscraper designs and human sculptures alike. Most appropriately, for the statue of Ceres, he was confronted with the caryatids and freestanding *korai* of Archaic and Classical Greece.

Famously supposed to represent the captive women of Caria, the caryatids were columns sculpted in the form of women, bearing the weight of the marble pediment in the Erechtheion at Athens and the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi. The integration of these monumental women into the architectural program of the

shrines was only one step beyond the emergence of human figures from the metopes, which presented mythological scenes in deep relief, but it is an important step, in terms of 20th century thinking about architecture as an organic form.

Archaic Greek *korai* statues were in many respects the predecessors of the caryatids. Dedicated in sanctuaries and set up as funerary monuments for unmarried girls, the *korai* represented a standing female figure, her features often stylized and symmetrical, her hair and drapery elaborately arranged. Occasionally, like Storrs' Ceres, she might hold an object in her outstretched hand. These girls, in their dress and jewels, indeed in themselves, represented the wealth of their families, just as Ceres represents the wealth, in grain, of a city and its territory.

Storr's choice to model his Ceres on the ancient *korai* statues was in part aesthetic, but also in part symbolic. *Kore* is the name not only for the statue type (and the word for 'girl'), but also the cult title for Persephone, the daughter of Demeter/Ceres, the Greco-Roman goddess of grain.

Persephone and Demeter were key figures in Greek religious festivals and mystery cults, but by far the greatest proportion of sanctuaries dedicated to the two goddesses are found in the

overseas colonies: in Sicily, and in North Africa. During the high period of Greek colonisation (8th – 5th centuries BCE), Sicily was a significant source of grain for Mainland Greece, and much of the wealth of the Greco-Sicilian tyrants (6th-5th centuries BCE) was based in agricultural exploitation of the island's fertile plains. Likewise, grain and oil imports from North Africa were crucial to ensuring a regular grain supply for the burgeoning urban population in late Republican and Imperial Rome. In Sicily this agricultural importance is reflected by the predominance of *Kore* sanctuaries, producing a flood of votive statues representing the goddess in various poses: seated, standing, holding a sheaf of wheat, holding a pig, wearing a crown of grain. In North Africa the importance of Ceres appears not only in the shrines dedicated to the goddess, but to the prominence of the priesthood of Ceres throughout Roman communities, as a civic office and honour, and a sign of aristocratic standing.

The honour given to Ceres was partially instigated by Roman authorities, as a symbol of Roman power and possession, but also in part by local elites, who often appropriated the institutions and technological investments established by Rome to generate their own wealth and prestige. In North Africa, for example, the financial investment of Roman senators in olive presses, and the organisation of local communities into Roman 'estates' enabled the mass-exploitation of the olive; the construction of roads, and the establishment of trade routes further facilitated exportation as a source of wealth. Gaining economic power through participation in the Roman commercial networks, local elites were able to re-invest their capital in more olive presses and bigger farms, or – as at Leptis Magna – in the construction of vast marble monuments to their success. It is no coincidence that Septimius Severus – wealthy equestrian turned Roman Emperor – was born into the North African elite.



Like Sicily and North Africa, Chicago stood at the centre of fertile plains on which America's urban centres came to rely for their grain supply. The merchants and investors of Chicago, like the elites of Sicily and North Africa, exploited this agricultural advantage to gain economic wealth, which they re-invested, either financially, in buying up 'future' grain supplies, or more

practically in the development and construction of grain elevators, of rail roads and of canal transportation systems. Many wealthy merchants also expended their wealth in euergetic offerings to the community – the establishment of universities, for example – or in monuments to themselves and to their success. The Chicago Board of Trade Building, constructed out of money gained through the Board's function as the world's largest grain market, and functioning as the symbolic and literal heart of the grain-trading community, was one such monument: the statue of the goddess Ceres could hardly have been better chosen.

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** The two images included in this research note are drawn from Wikimedia Commons. The first, "Top of Chicago Board of Trade at Night," was taken by Daniel Schwen, and the second, "Scale model of John H. Storrs' statue of Ceres as on display in the Art Institute of Chicago. A 9.6 meter tall version of this statue is on top of the Chicago Board of Trade building," was taken by Compro, and they are both used here under Creative Commons ^[3] Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported ^[4]

Images of the statue and building may also be found in N. Frackman, *John Storrs* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 1986) figures 87 and 89 (*Ceres in situ*), 92 (a steel copy), 93 (sketch) and 94 (bronze bust).

Further References

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John Storrs Drawings: Figures, Monuments and Abstract Forms (April 27 – June 15, 2001), Robert Henry Adams Fine Art (exhibition catalogue)

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