When I first moved to Chicago I lived just west of the Loop. I would wander out to explore downtown. For my new job I was detailed to teach a course of lectures on Roman civilization and as I meandered I kept an eye out for visual aids. Of course, motifs borrowed from Classical art and architecture are everywhere. But I wanted more than abstract motifs. I wanted things to see in downtown Chicago that evoke some particular item in ancient Mediterranean culture. What better way to teach my students that we are all still surrounded by the Classics?

Here are some of the things I found. This was not a rigorous exercise. I am not an expert in the history of Chicago, in art or architecture. My research was not more than to potter about town and take snaps with my cheap little camera. These are just some of the things my Classical training led me to notice and think, in and around the Loop.

Embedded in the lower courses of the gothic Tribune Building, visible to passers-by, are bits of stone from edifices and natural features of many times and places. One imagines newspapermen fanning out round the globe to chisel with company pride at future UNESCO treasures. Naturally there are not a few Classical examples. Here we have a bit of what the Neapolitans claim was the cave of the Sibyl, a prophetess esteemed by the Romans.

In literature the most famous visitor to the cave is Virgil’s Aeneas, who finds it an entrance to the underworld. The Sibyl leads him there to hear, among other things, a prophecy of Rome’s imperial future. I suppose this is the sort of thing an ambitious oracle like the Tribune would want to be associated with. A ‘tribune’, incidentally, was a Roman official who could veto the business of government on behalf of the people. Going on its name, the Trib should stand up for us to the oligarchs.

No essay of this kind would be complete without Ceres reigning over LaSalle Street. The Roman goddess stands at the apex of the Board of Trade. Ceres, as Chicagoans know, was a goddess of fertility and the soil. She holds a sheaf of wheat – an image that would be familiar to a Roman. She also, I believe, has a bag of maize, a new world crop. Chicago built itself by trading the agricultural bounty of the American mid-continent.

In Greco-Roman myth Ceres symbolized the cycle of the seasons, too. Her daughter (whom the Romans called Proserpina) was stolen away to the underworld for six months a year. Ceres’ six months of sadness mean six months of infertility in the winter. Creative trading of commodities and futures depends on the fickle cycles of nature to make money.
There is something unsettling about this pagan goddess, faceless because designed to be seen from the street far below and rendered in futuristic aluminum. But she is an apt symbol for the B.o.T. and the city.

According to the virtual tour on Chicago’s Public Library website, this is Ceres, too. She peeks from her halo of leaves at regular intervals around the Harold Washington building – newer than many images here. She’s at eye-level from the
Library CTA stop; this one is on Congress Pkwy. She has a fine corn stalk growing from the crown of her head. One of the city's mottos, *Urbs in Horto*, 'the City in a Garden', is there in her native Latin.

To me she looks too young and puckish to be Ceres, the care-worn mother of the adult Proserpina. She seems more a junior nymph up to mischief in the fields. But as with the B.o.T. there is a clear statement for me: the city's 'garden' is not just the parks but the vast growing lands of the prairies. Chicago wants to take Old World culture and transplant it to make the best of the New World's harvests. Can we call this statement the 'Prairie Classical' style? You see it everywhere in Chicago.

Ceres does not exhaust the newly-made Classical symbols on the Washington Library. At the corners of the roof, as on a Greek temple, are massive decorative sculptures.

But what is that monstrous hell-beast, lowering at us from the flames of the inferno? According to the library site, it symbolizes 'Knowledge' and so I expect we have the owl of Athena, goddess of wisdom, and the symbol of her city, Athens. In its talon (the one it isn't waving threateningly) it clutches a scroll, the ancient form of book. Has it just snatched the book away in a predatory stoop, or is it about to bomb Chicago children who don't do their homework? It makes the library weird and forbidding. I am reminded of the young, ambitious city of Alexandria which schemed to steal away old Athenian books for its famous library. Chicago asserts justifiable pride in its civic regard for wisdom. But I try to avoid the owls' huge and hollow gaze.
Nothing says 'probity' like a golden statue of winged Victory in your lobby. Here is one such from the headquarters of the Citadel Investment Group (at Dearborn and Adams). It reproduces a famous sculpture now in the Louvre, the Victory of Samothrace. On the plinth it says it was cast from a mould of the original. Victoria (Latin) or Nike (Greek) was a much-celebrated goddess in the warlike Greco-Roman world and was imagined as a winged woman. She often looks like an angel.

Over at the Michigan Avenue bridge, there are stirring scenes of derring-do from the history of the city. Over each floats a winged female figure. At least some of them look like 'Victories' to me, including this one, who delivers a palm (an ancient token of a victor). I think it goes to a soldier named in the inscription as Captain Wells. Wells, of course, lost the battle to defend people fleeing Fort Dearborn from the Potowatomis. But I assume we are supposed to see him as a moral victor.
This, if memory serves, is the door besieged at the end of *The Blues Brothers*. It is to the Cook County Building, on Clark St. Significant figures sit on either side, but I want to look at the symbol above the door.

11. Fasces above a door of the Cook County Building.

This is the *fasces*, a bundle of rods around an axe, hung I think with a crown of laurel leaves. The *fasces* was a symbol of authority in Rome. In early times it belonged to the King, but when Rome became a Republic the most senior elected officials kept it. Not a bad icon for county and city government, then. The axe is odd because it symbolized the absolute power of life and death which fell to a Roman official when he left Rome itself. The axe was removed when he entered the city, where his fellow citizens had the right of appeal. Still, the axe is common in American versions of the *fasces*. The laurel wreath is a little odder. The person who could put one on his *fasces* was an *Imperator* – most prominently, the Emperor.
I see the fasces often in American political symbolism, especially in emblems devised before the rise of fascism (which took its name from the fasces). Since then, understandably, its use has declined.

12. Relief above the southeast door to the Daily News Building by Madison St. and the river.

Picture 12 is of a relief above a door to the art deco building that housed the Daily News. The building alludes often to antiquity, including to Greece and Rome. On the same side of the building are reliefs of stages in the history of writing – up to ‘Linotype Man’, surely the most advanced human of his day. My relief mentions some of the literary genres popular in the Greco-Roman world – epic, comedy, drama in general – and the Classical allusion is secured by the mask in the center. With its large, distorted mouth it clearly recalls the masks of Roman stage comedy. I suppose to sell a newspaper takes the same sort of stories as kept an ancient audience entertained.

The Daily News lived across the river from the Civic Opera House, perhaps the richest source of Classical imagery I found.
The building (Roman style V) uses Roman imagery to convey that it is (a) CIVIC and (b) for the OPERA. I believe that the company for which it was built was called the Civic, but now the Lyric Opera has it.

One way it expresses its civility is with the stylized fasces you find if you walk around it. This time the fasces lack an axe. The bundled rods are now a symbol of the civitas, as the Romans called the 'citizen body' or the state, the notion from which we get 'city', 'civic' and the like.

In the Roman world the theatre was, indeed, civic. A city's theatre was a meeting-place, a source of pride and a cultural hub. In the frieze above are musical figures (note the pipes at left and drum at right) lounging on Roman theatrical masks. The one on the left looks to be a tragic mask to me, the one on the right, comic. Music, comedy, tragedy: the opera.

A leitmotif all over the building are these remodellings of the ancient masks. They are sinister, like gargoyles, but not so playful. As we have seen, the Chicagoan moulding of an ancient icon often leaves me cold or unsettled. Of course, I'm always thrilled to find them – chalk a point to the Greeks and Romans! But the styles of the times, especially the dark first half of the twentieth century, leave the sculptures sleek and alien, built for a future that thankfully never quite came to be.

The Romans raced chariots at the Circus Maximus, a long thin racetrack. In the middle was a long 'spine' with obelisks at either end. The drivers careered down one side, made the perilous 180° turn round an obelisk, then raced back down the other side of the spine. Picture 17 below shows Wacker Drive right by the Opera house. With intent or not I don't know, but its layout is strikingly like the Circus. Two lanes of cars either side replace the chariots, the median forms the spine and there are even turning-spots by the obelisks. The cabbies take them like the racers of old.
17. Upper N. & S. Wacker Dr., looking south from Washington St.

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