

# RHYME AND REGION

## Herring Coe's Houston City Hall Reliefs

David Baker

Perhaps the most engaging features of Houston's modernistic City Hall are the iconographic reliefs by Herring Coe that embellish its entrances and band the parapets of each of its three set-back tiers. Designed by Joseph Finger in 1937, City Hall was built with funds provided by the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works and completed in 1939. Soon after, a panel of "leading citizens" surveyed by *Architectural Record* selected it as the city's most outstanding building.<sup>1</sup> It stands today as an accomplished example of Works Progress Administration-sponsored architecture and a source of civic pride.

City Hall's only outward concession to regional or local identity, aside from its abundant use of Texas fossilated limestone, is to be found in motives incorporated in Coe's reliefs. Although the building was entered on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977, the iconographic program devised by Coe in consultation with the architect remained undocumented until the sculptor was contacted at his home in Beaumont last fall.

Coe's ornamental scheme uses Finger's three-stage stepped massing to illustrate simultaneously a hierarchy and a geography of activities representative of Houston and its environs. The lowest tier, also the most expansive in plan, represents agriculture, associated with the periphery of the city; the second portrays industry, closer to the center; and the highest and centermost depicts the concerns of city government, at the heart of the metropolis. Over portals and windows at ground level is a series of allegorical figures illustrating societal and historical themes.

Protruding "medallions" carry the first level's agricultural adornment, a serial garland depicting cultivators of corn,

cotton, rice, garden vegetables, and fruit. Recessed plaques form an interrupted "frieze" at the second level, where a "men at work" series illustrates the railroad, oil refining, cotton processing, lumber milling, shipping, cattle ranching, and factory machinery industries. The endeavors of city government that surmount the third tier are enacted by figures representing safety, shelter, education, recreation, and health.

Back at ground level, the horse tamers on the lintels above the principal entrances (east and west) represent "men uniting to control the forces of nature." Above, in square panels that bracket the words "City Hall," are figures representing liberty (a man holding a torch, crouched to fit the frame, with an eagle in the background) and equality (a woman with flowing hair holding an equilateral triangle). Flanking the horse tamers in separate plaques are precepts of government: allegiance (a man with his hand on a book, with the American flag in the background) and knowledge (a woman with a torch against a background of clouds). Relief figures emerge obliquely from the corners of engaged pilasters aligned with the projecting portal surrounds of the main entrance: a man with a sword, personifying power, and

a woman with a scales, embodying justice. Two fluted semicircular pedestals to either side of the portals were reserved for statues of John and Augustus Allen, the founders of Houston, but these were never commissioned. Small plaques of men representing the present capabilities and future strength of Houston flank the side entrances. The blind attic of City Hall is studded with Texas bobcat heads, prescribed by Finger and modeled by Coe from a specimen in the Beaumont Zoo.

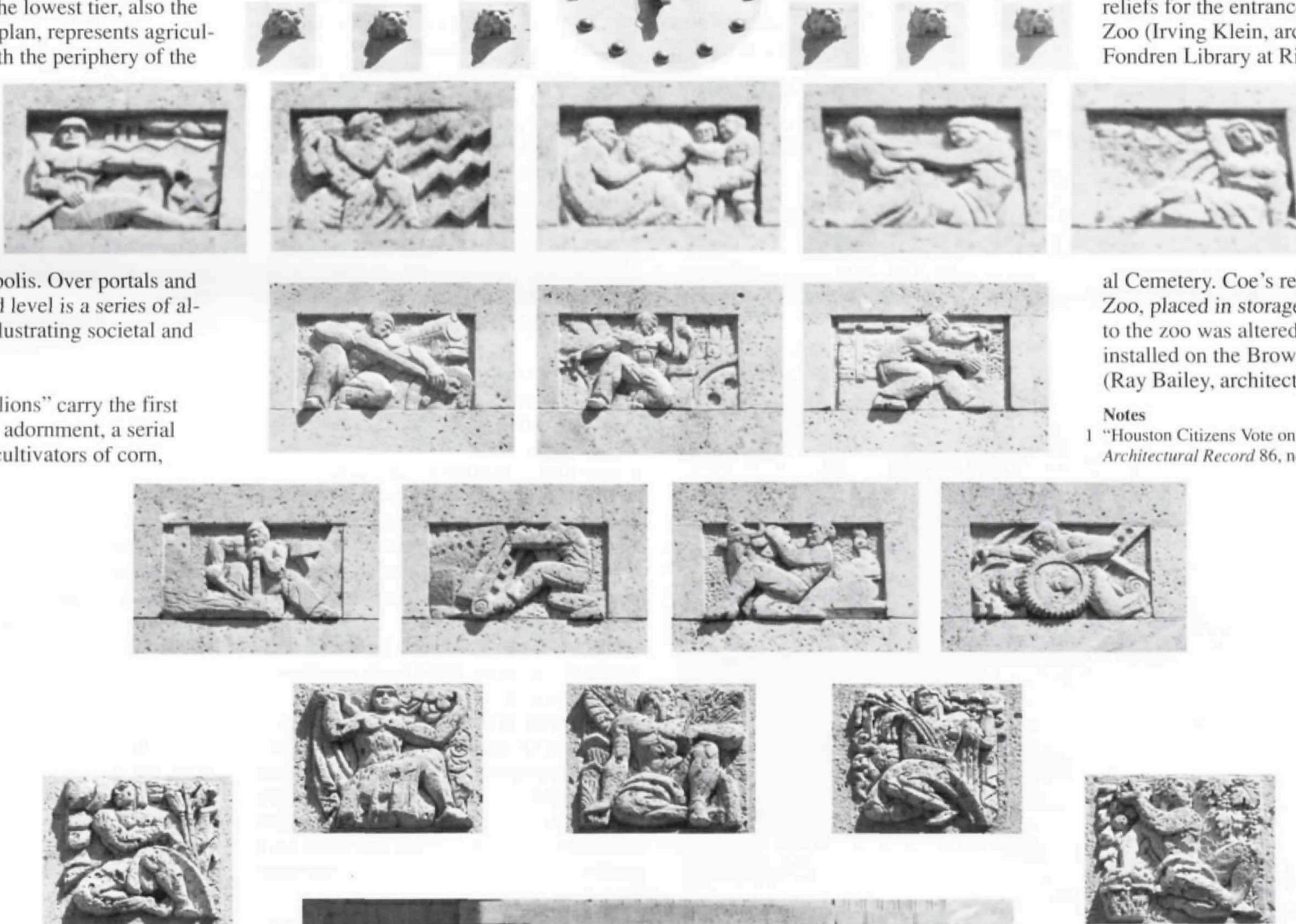
Herring Coe was born in Beaumont in 1907 and graduated in 1926 from South Park College (now Lamar University), where he studied electrical engineering. He worked briefly at the Magnolia Oil Company refinery, where he began to pursue sculpture as a hobby. After taking a job with a cemetery monument company to learn carving techniques, he moved to Houston in 1928 and worked (along with sculptor William McVey) for the Pyramid Stone Company, an architectural ornament enterprise that failed in 1929. Coe returned to Beaumont that year and supported himself as a sculptor, producing reliefs for the First National Bank of Beaumont (Stone and Pitts, 1936) that came to Finger's attention and led to the commission for the Houston City Hall in 1937.

The previous year, Coe had been chosen by the Texas Centennial Commission to produce a monument to Dick Dowling at the site of the Battle of Sabine Pass (1863). In 1937 he also won a competition for a cenotaph to the victims of the New London (Texas) Consolidated School explosion, a project that was postponed while he devised the 27 City Hall sculptures.

For the City Hall reliefs, Coe first prepared sketches that he sent to Raoul Josset in Dallas for comment (Josset had produced allegorical sculptures to commemorate the Texas Centennial in 1936 for the state fairgrounds). He next produced clay models in Beaumont, then shipped them to Austin to be carved in the same fossilated Texas limestone used for the rest of City Hall.

In 1939, having completed the New London cenotaph, Coe, acting on the suggestion of William McVey, entered the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, where he studied with Carl Milles through 1940. Coe served with the Seabees of the U.S. Navy during World War II and contracted malaria on Guadalcanal. Stationed thereafter at Camp Parks in California, he produced sculptural pieces for the post chapel, designed by Bruce Goff (1944). After the war he returned to Beaumont, where he executed reliefs for the entrance to the Houston Zoo (Irving Klein, architect, 1952) and Fondren Library at Rice University (Staub and Rather, 1947-49). In 1960, as part of the Civil War Centennial observance, he produced a colossal statue for the Vicksburg National Cemetery. Coe's reliefs for the Houston Zoo, placed in storage when the entrance to the zoo was altered, have recently been installed on the Brown Education Building (Ray Bailey, architect, 1988). ■

**Notes**  
 1 "Houston Citizens Vote on Recent Buildings," *Architectural Record* 86, no. 5 (Nov. 1939), p. 14.



**City Hall, top to bottom.**  
 Attic: Texas bobcats flanking neon clock.  
 Endeavors of city government: safety, shelter, education, recreation, health.  
 Industries of Houston, first row: railroads, oil refining, cotton processing; second row: lumber milling, shipping, cattle ranching, factory machinery. Agriculture: corn, cotton, rice, garden vegetables, fruit.

**East entrance, left to right:**  
 power, allegiance, liberty, equality, justice, knowledge. **Central panel:** "men uniting to control the forces of nature." **Beneath windows:** pedestals for statues of John and Augustus Allen.