

The Unusual Case of the Nunavut Carving



To honour Canada's development and prevent rewriting of history, by tradition stone carvings or sculptures are never removed from the country's Parliament buildings once placed there. There is a single known exception – a Canadian coat of arms was removed to make room for representation of the country's newest territory.

Brenda Labelle

Once something is carved in the stone of our nation's Parliament buildings, there it remains. By tradition, carvings or sculptures are not removed from Parliament buildings. They are "carved in stone," both literally and figuratively. There is only one recorded example of a break in this tradition.

Each architectural element in our Parliament's buildings is emblematic of a moment in Canadian history. For example, provincial coats of arms are found in the Library of Parliament where, notably, some provinces are not represented, and the coats of arms of several provinces are outdated. These carvings will not be altered, however, as they reflect the Canada of 1876, the year in which the library building was completed. Yet in 1999, a carving of Canada's coat of arms was removed so that the newly created territory of Nunavut could be represented in the rotunda of Parliament's Centre Block.

The rotunda, also called Confederation Hall, is the grand entrance of the main building. It is the heart of Parliament linking the Senate and the House of Commons on either side and the library to the north. The space features a central column that leads dramatically up into the vaulted ceiling. Archways and columns encircle the hall, and it is above these archways that we find carvings of the coats of arms of all of the provinces and territories, as well as the Canadian coat of arms. In 1999, the coat of arms of the territory of Nunavut was added above the entrance on the south side of the rotunda where a second Canadian of arms had been located.

At the time, enquiries apropos of the appropriate placement for the new coat of arms were made by Alfonso Gagliano, the Minister of Public Works. Subsequently, the Dominion Sculptor, Maurice Joannis, made recommendations. We can only assume that the fact that there were two Canadian coats of arms opposite each other in the rotunda influenced the decision to replace one of them with the Nunavut coat of arms. Final approval for the project, which involved bringing the Canadian coat of arms down to a flat surface and pinning new Tyndall stone to the existing stone, was provided by the Speaker of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Commons in a joint letter. No alterations were made to the foliage surrounding the carving.

The Nunavut coat of arms is easily identifiable when juxtaposed with those of other provinces and territories as it is the only one featuring a round shield. With no military or heraldic tradition tying Nunavut to a specific shield, the circle was chosen. There are many possible interpretations regarding the importance of that symbol for the people of Nunavut; however, no fixed meaning has been ascribed to the shield's shape. There is one other representation of the Nunavut coat of arms in Parliament's Centre Block and it is on the doors of the Senate Chamber.

Brenda Labelle is a research assistant for the Library of Parliament's Research Publications and Data Visualization Group.

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Senate Chamber Door
(Nunavut coat of arms):
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