



Victorian Stenciling in Iowa's Statehouse

Photography by
Chuck Greiner

New York artist Elmer E. Garnsey designed the stenciling for the vaulted ceiling of the west corridor of the Statehouse in Des Moines. Completed about 1905, the design resembles Garnsey's earlier treatment of a vaulted ceiling in the Library of Congress. Fresco artists often used the geometrical Greek key border (here, in gold against olive). Garnsey's work had been a major element of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, where decorative arts united with architecture on a splendid scale.

Capitol Kaleidoscope

THE REPORTER in 1883 who previewed the Victorian "fresco work" in Iowa's brand new Statehouse seemed baffled about how to describe it to readers. No wonder: The elaborate stencils unite dozens of patterns in dazzling colors, visually lowering the lofty 22'9" ceilings. The accumulation of design and color wraps the rooms in Victorian elegance. As a contemporary designer wrote of successful stenciling, "nothing could be removed and leave the design equally good or better."

Touring Iowa's Statehouse is a vivid lesson in Victorian eclecticism. The building was con-

structed in the 1870s and 1880s, when the predominant architectural style for public buildings was American Renaissance. Architects looked back to classical cultures and to America's colonial period (which had been marked by Thomas Jefferson's preference for Greek- and Roman-style public buildings). They sought to artfully combine classical elements in an original and monumental manner that befit a prosperous and successful nation which had reached its centennial.

For interior ornamentation, Iowa's capitol commissioners wisely recognized that "next to

the architect, a decorative artist is counted perhaps the most important in buildings of a monumental character." The commission toured public buildings in eastern cities to view high-quality ornamental work. The role of artists and artisans, whether of national or local reputation, was to enhance the architecture. Sculptors and muralists created allegorical figures in classical garb, representing Industry, Peace, and Agriculture. Glassworkers etched borders of Greek frets on windows. Woodworkers fashioned Corinthian columns.

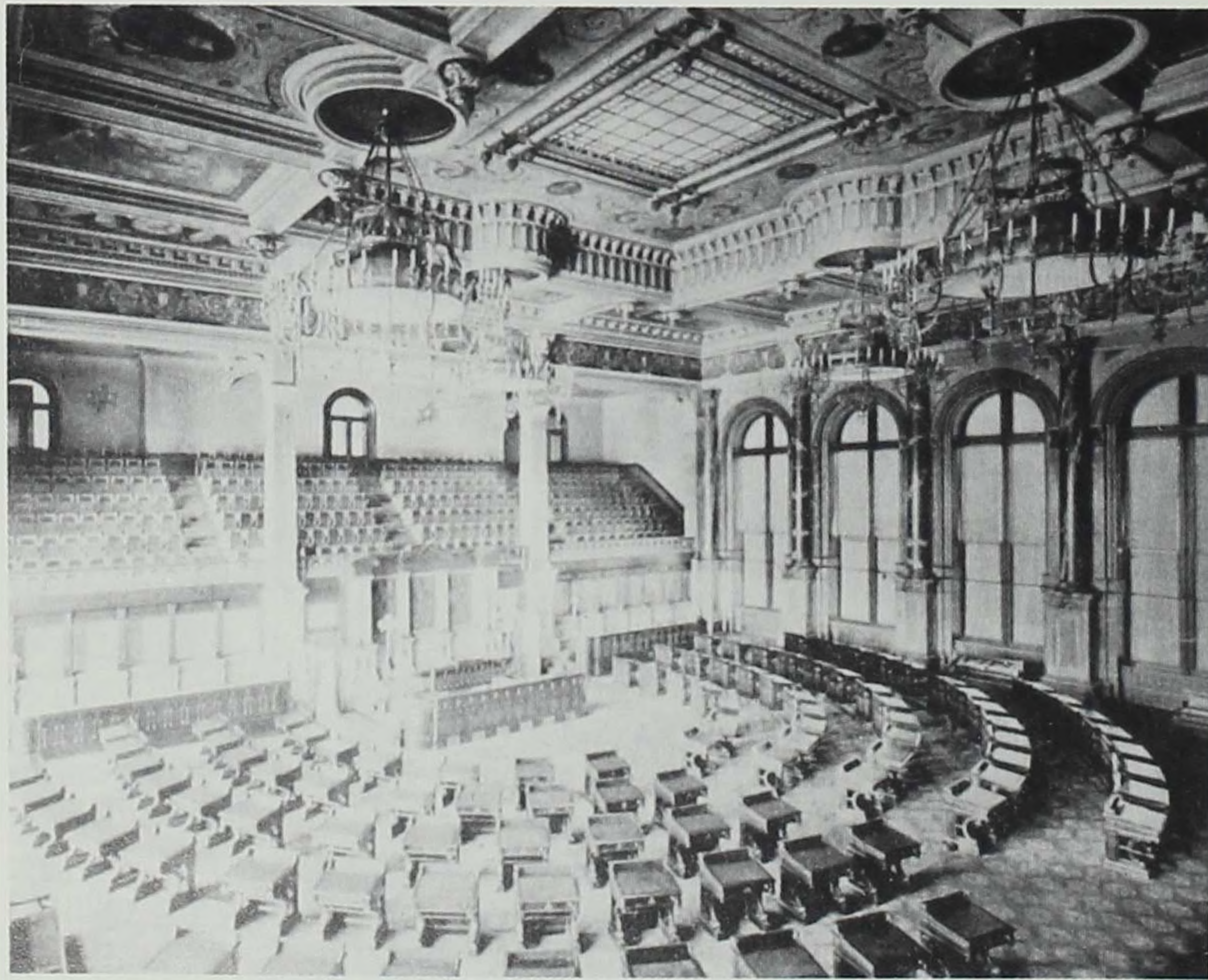
Within this union of the arts, "fresco artists" (or stencilers) also chose classical motifs, often from pattern books such as Owen Jones's 1856 *Grammar of Ornament* and its two thousand full-color examples of borders and motifs from Byzantine, Egyptian, Medieval, Greek, Oriental and other cultures. Such books also conveyed design principles, listed colors for convex or concave moldings, and recommended colors to be juxtaposed. Fresco artists used three techniques: stenciling (building a design through a series of templates), pouncing (transferring a design by forcing powder through a perforated pattern), and free-hand

brushwork (for shadows and highlights). Much of the Statehouse fresco work was completed in the 1880s; the rest was part of the remodeling that began in 1902.

Ensuing decades brought changes in taste, and some of the stenciling was painted over. In the 1970s an ambitious project took shape, in which restoration painters Jerry C. Miller and Dick Labertew and their assistants have uncovered the original patterns and colors under layers of paint, drawn new templates, and repainted walls and ceilings to their turn-of-the-century appearance. Miller, who recently retired, is collaborating on a book on the capitol's painted ornamentation, with Linda Nelson Johnson, assistant professor of design, Arizona State University. (Johnson helped with the restoration as part of her 1986 thesis at Iowa State University.) Their book will be available by mid-1989.

The following examples of original and restored stenciling gleam like patterns in a Victorian kaleidoscope, and the *Palimpsest* is pleased to present this holiday gift to its readers.

— The Editor



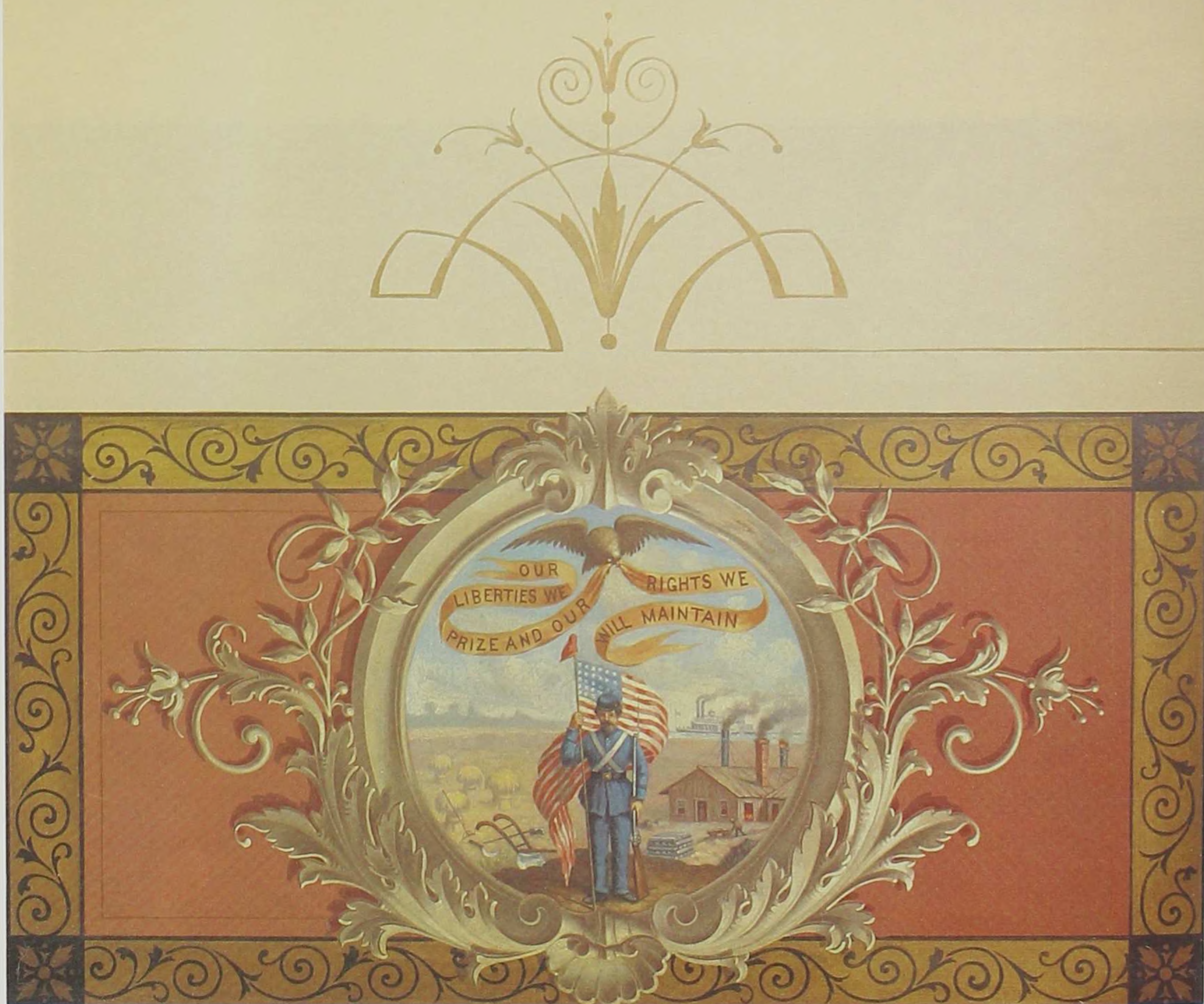
House of Representatives Chambers. Original ornamentation was designed by fresco artist E. S. Mirgoli of St. Louis. In January 1904, fire did extensive damage in the north wing, forever destroying Mirgoli's artistry in the House.

"A *Register* reporter looked into the new Senate chamber yesterday, and found it even more magnificent than he had hoped, for the scaffolding is now out of the way, and there is an unobstructed view of the grand ceiling . . . to long attest the artistic skill of Sig. Mirgoli."

Iowa State Register,
Jan. 11, 1883



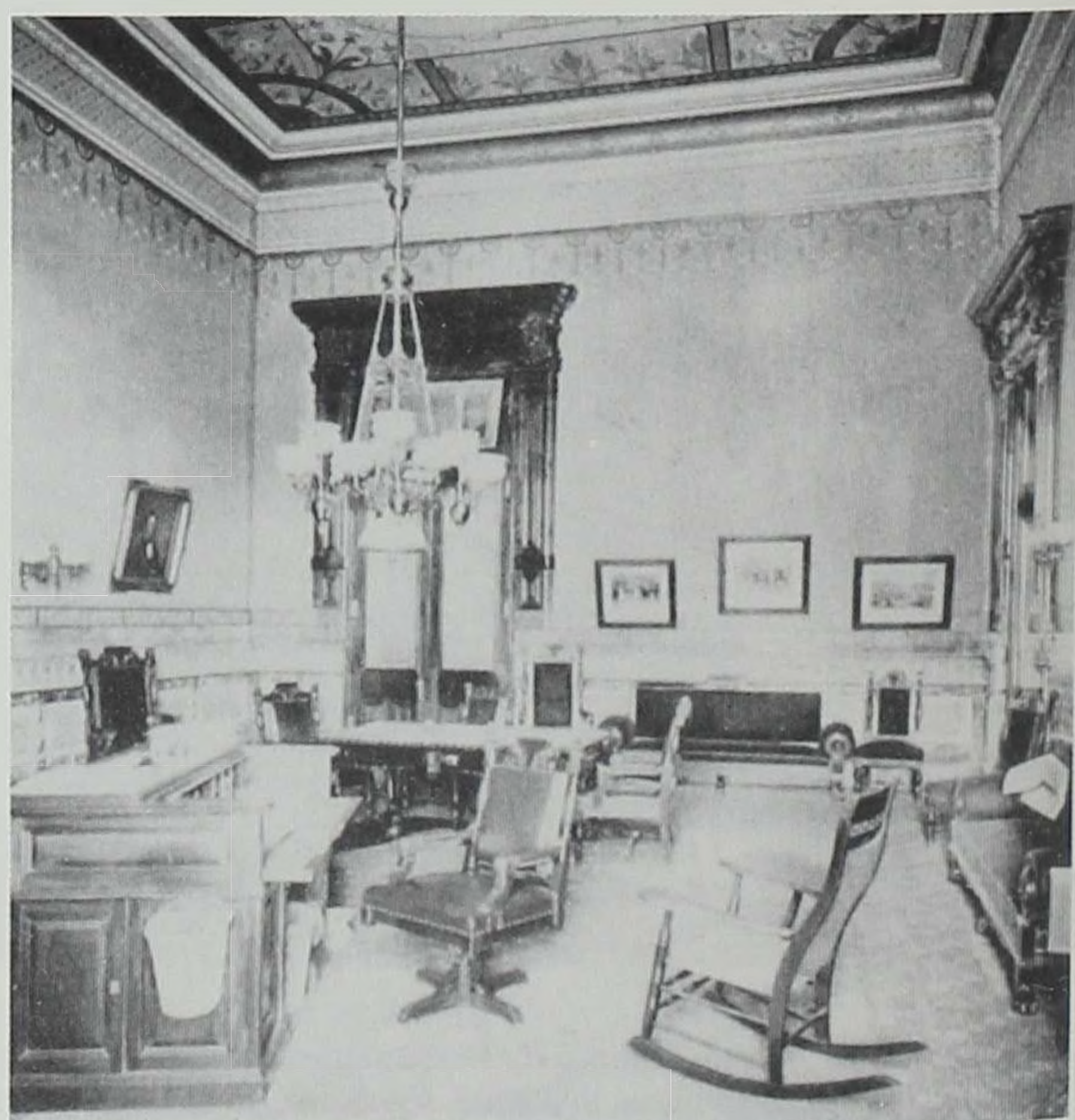
A portion of the Senate ceiling, by E. S. Mirgoli (1882/83), frames the stained-glass skylight. Stylized by the Greeks and Romans, the large swirling acanthus leaves in the corner constitute a basic ornamentation called *rinceau*.



At an evening public reception, January 5, 1885, gas jets and chandeliers lit up the oil frescoes on the ceilings and walls of the governor's suite, painted by Albert, Noxon, and Toomey Studios of St. Louis. Above: A trompe l'oeil frame surrounds the state seal on the ceiling of the governor's private office (originally the reception room). Careful shading on the leaves and thin shadows behind the circular frame are actually painted, masterfully creating a three-dimensional effect that deceives the eye.

"A vast amount of pains has been taken with [the governor's suite], some of the best judges of this class of work in the country have been consulted, and the result is a marvel of taste, elegance, richness and beauty that can hardly be told in words."

Iowa State Register, Jan. 2, 1885



"Once it is done, you stand back to see it . . . and then go on to the next one. This will be here for my kids, and for my kids' kids."

Dick Labertew, restoration painter

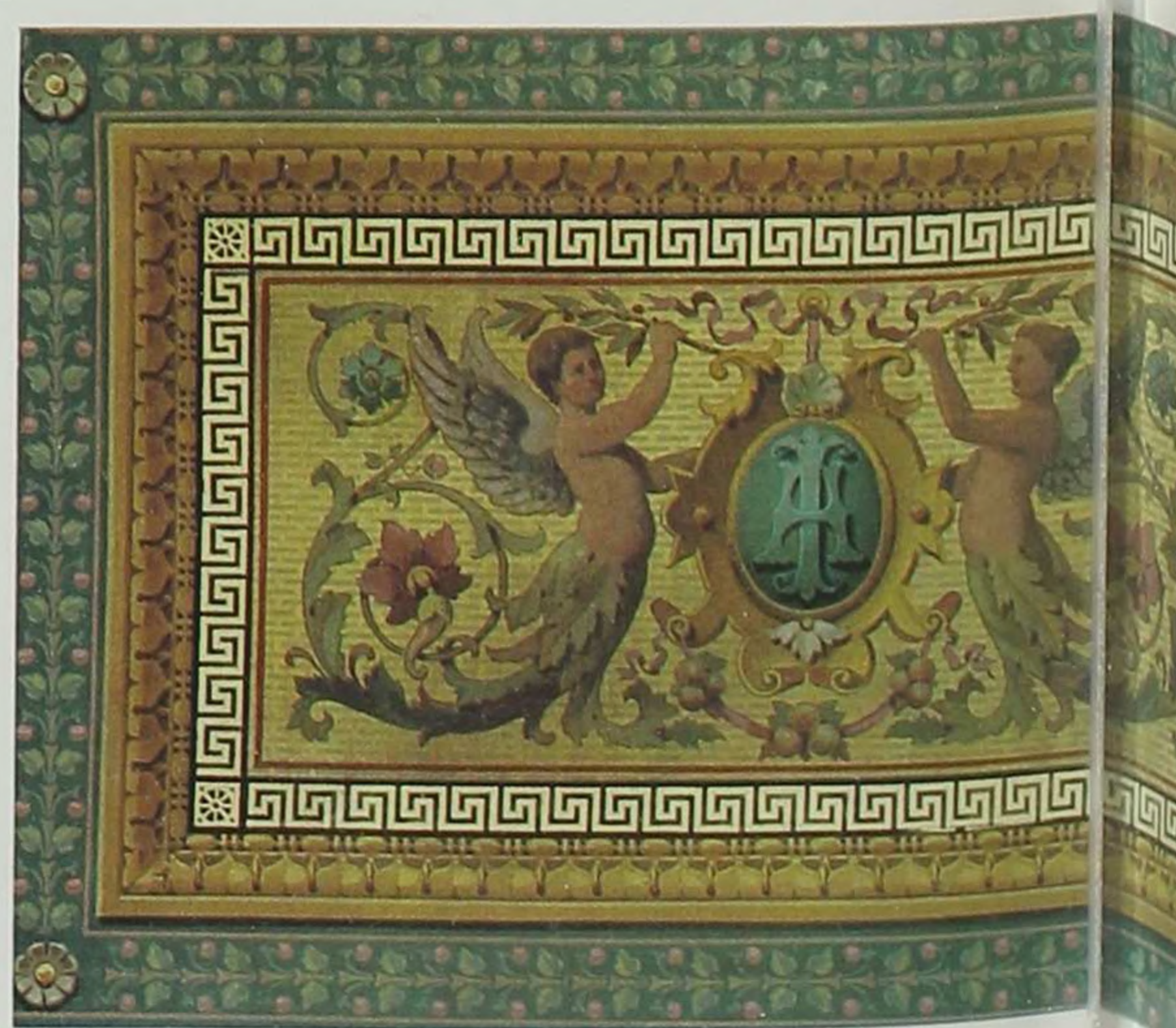


Egyptian motifs (by Albert, Noxon, and Toomey) grace the ceiling of what was originally the governor's private office (see black and white photograph) and is now the reception room. The walls have recently been restored.



"Beauty of form is produced by lines growing out of one from the other in gradual undulations; . . . nothing could be removed and leave the design equally good or better."

Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*





Above: Sunlight washes across the elaborate vaulted ceiling in the secretary of state's private office, painted by Danish artist Andreas Hansen. Lower left, two details from ceiling: Mythological arabesque figures, bordered by Greek key or fret; and triangular floral design, topped by Greek honeysuckle, repeated on restored walls (see cover). Upper left: Portion of ceiling in outer business office, designed by (William) August Knorr.



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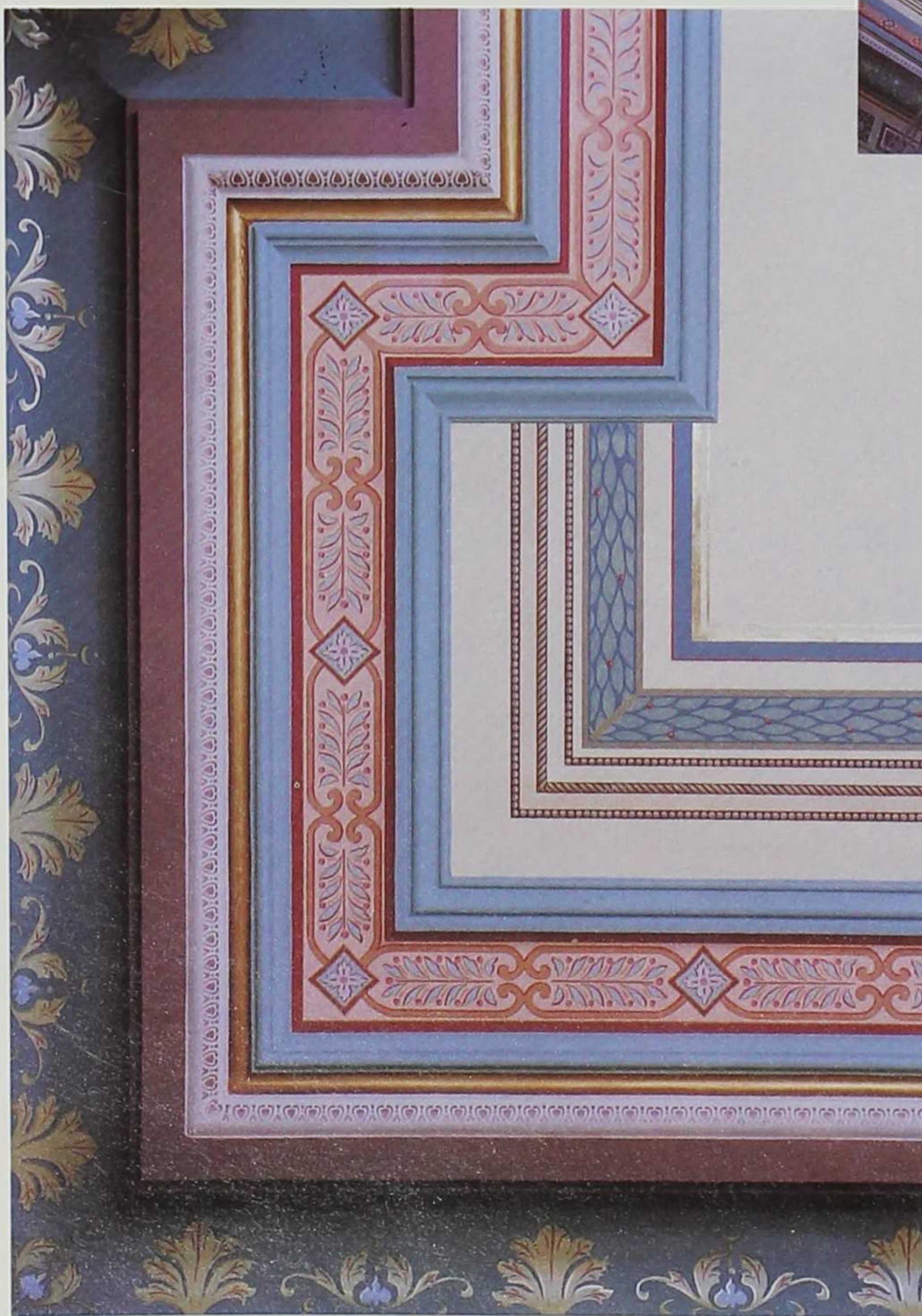
Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*



Above: Sunlight washes across the elaborate vaulted ceiling in the secretary of state's private office, painted by Danish artist Andreas Hansen. Lower left, two details from ceiling: Mythological arabesque figures, bordered by Greek key or fret; and triangular floral design, topped by Greek honey-suckle, repeated on restored walls (see cover). Upper left: Portion of ceiling in outer business office, designed by (William) August Knorr.

"What an explosion of color!"

Young actor, touring the capitol, 1970s



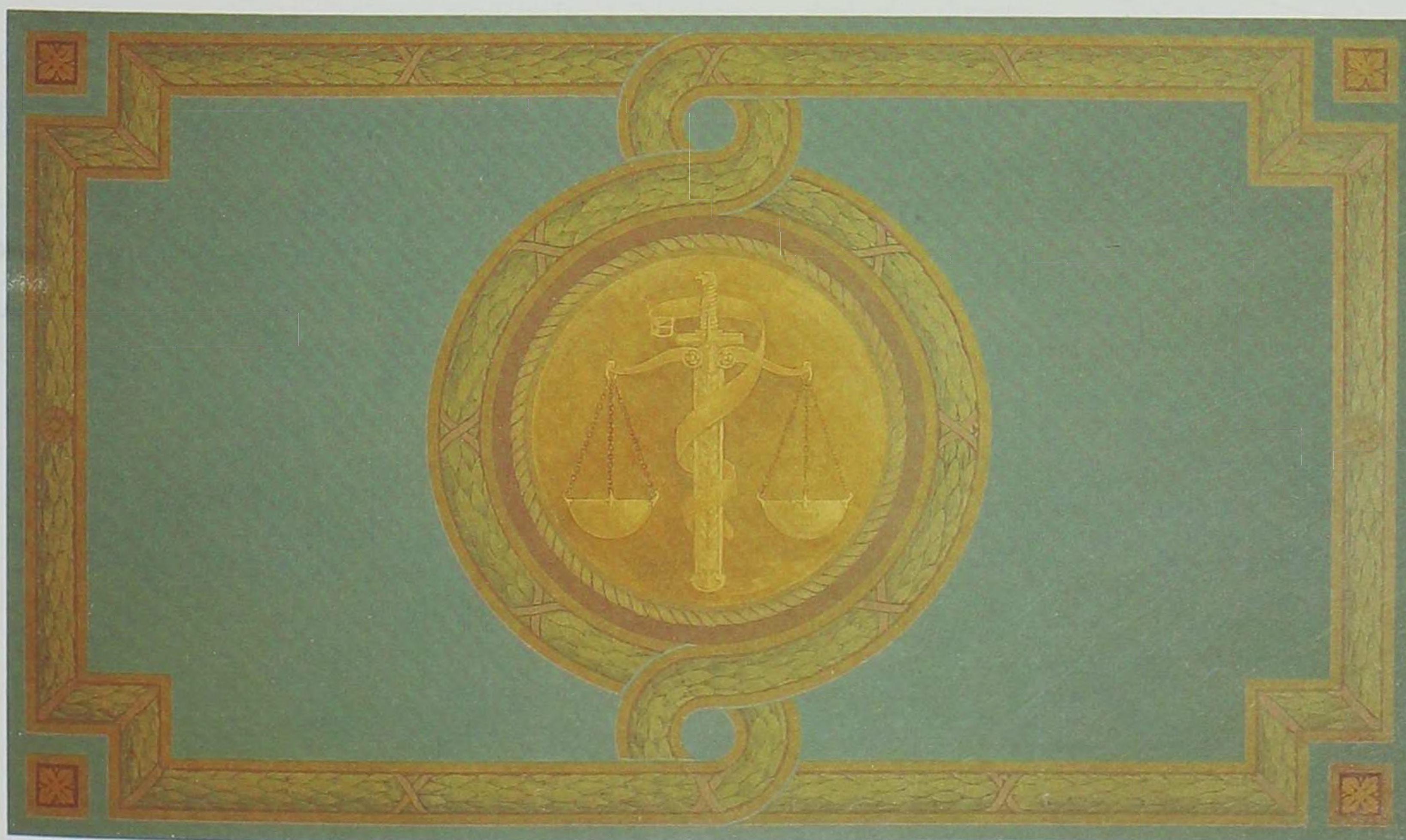
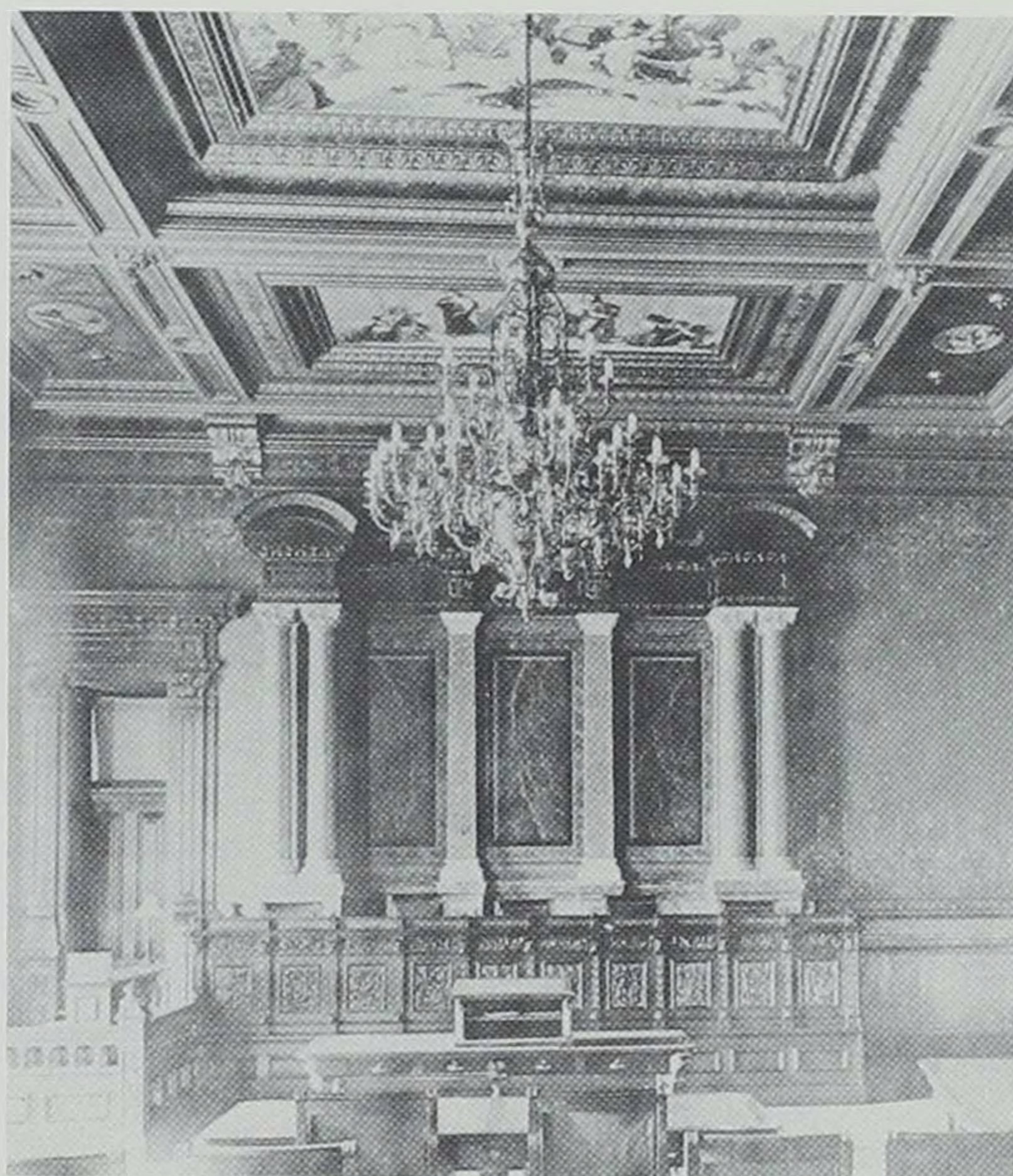
Left: Elegant corner detail from ceiling of Room 118, the House's conference room. Restoration of the room's enormous star pattern (above) was based on a photograph. (Because the ceiling was once replastered, the original colors and designs could not be uncovered through scraping.)

"Successful stenciled decoration follows the predominant architectural details and blends motifs and interior architecture into a cohesive whole."

Linda Nelson Johnson

"The most important consideration . . . is that the character and use of the building, as the visible heart and brain of the State, receive constant consideration; and that the efforts of the decorative artist be concentrated upon the unifying and beautifying of the architectural design, and not upon ostentatious display or meaningless ornamentation."

Elmer E. Garnsey



A close look at the black and white photograph reveals that stenciling originally covered the walls of the Supreme Court chambers. The 1904 fire destroyed much of the ornamentation, including the walls stenciled by August Knorr. (Fritz Melzer's ceiling murals, based on Greek mythology were rescued.) Above: One panel of the greatly simplified ceiling ornamentation, after the fire; ropes of banded greenery link together around the scales of justice.



The Horticultural Society originally occupied Room 116 (now the Senate's conference room). The room was later partitioned into two rooms. Removal of the partition in 1980 allowed restoration painters to scrape down to samples of the original stenciling so as to restore the delicate borders of wild roses, grape leaves, and wildflowers. Nineteenth-century woodcarvers had continued the theme of nature's glory; fruits and vegetables adorn the woodwork.

"The various colours should be so blended that the objects coloured, when viewed at a distance, should present a neutralised bloom."

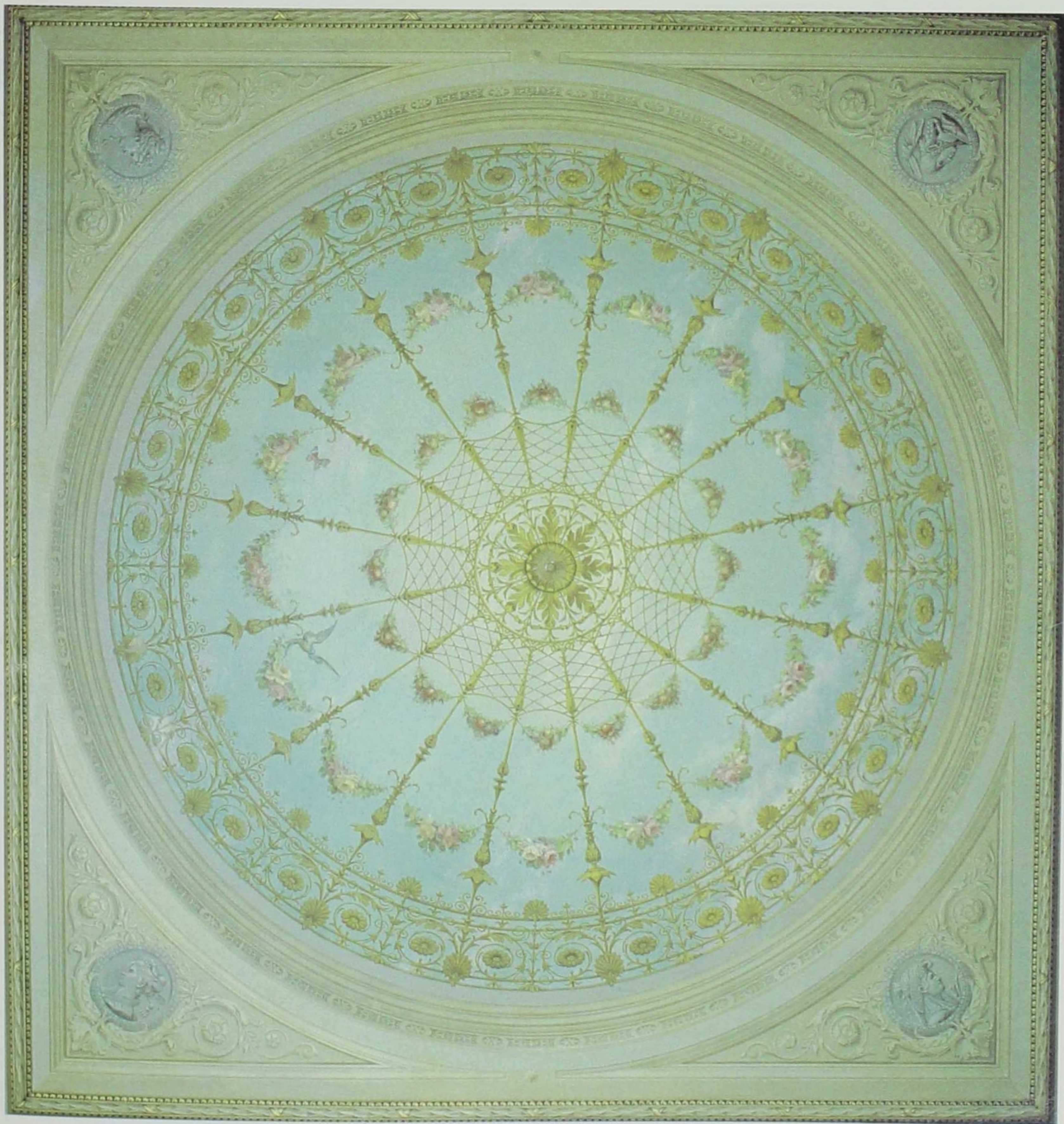
Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*

*"This room, more so than any of the others, tells a story.
... We're putting history back on the walls and ceilings."*

Jerry C. Miller, restoration painter

"The greater portion of the mural decoration has been done by artists employed by the day and working under the immediate supervision of Mr. August Knorr, who is a master in his profession. . . . It is very much to be desired that you continue the fresco work until the whole of the office story, including the corridors, is completed."

Architect's report, Feb. 1886



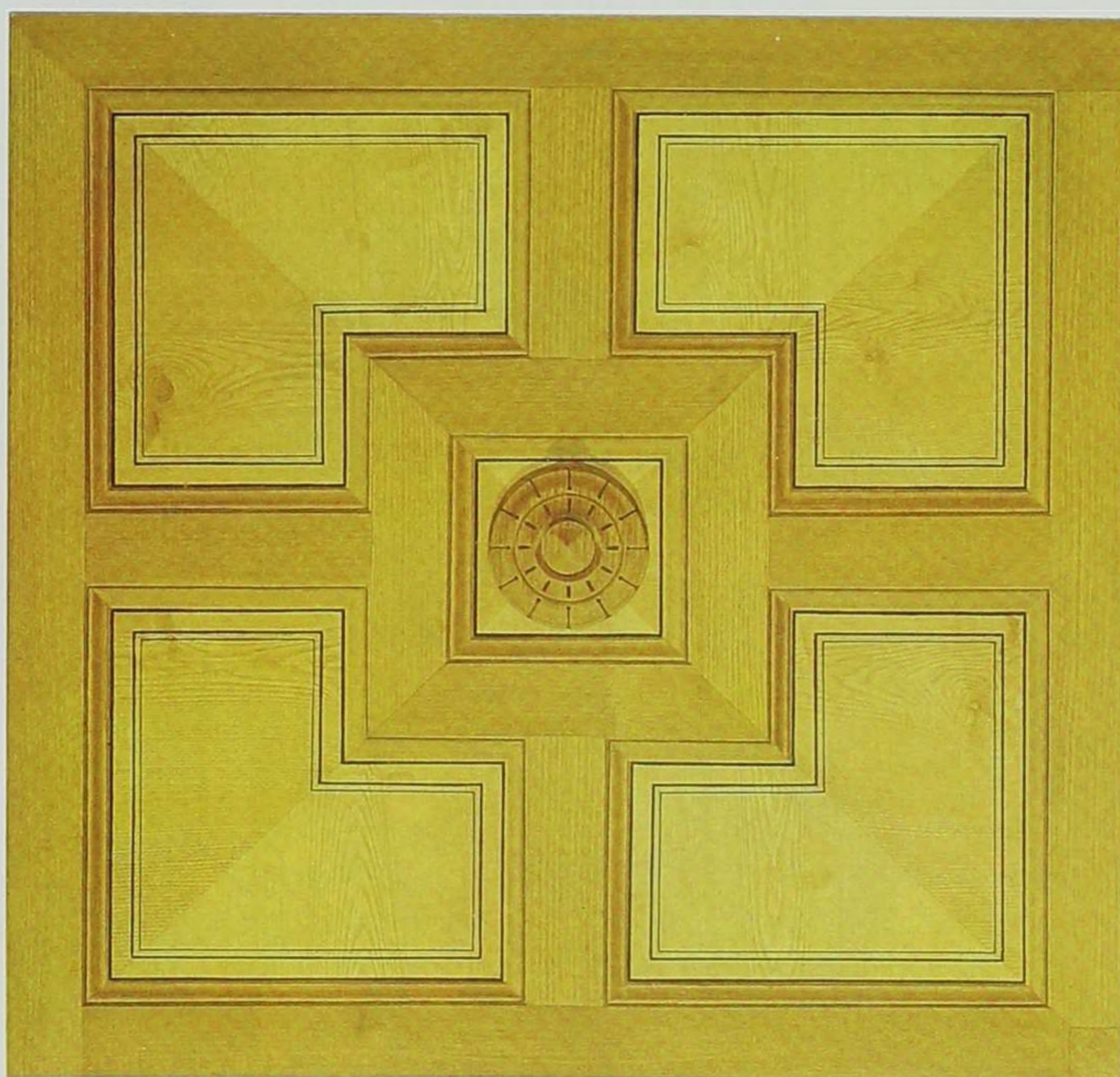
Fresco artist August Knorr created this celestial ceiling, webbed with gold and festooned with roses. Originally the office of the superintendent of public instruction, the room is now part of the auditor's suite.



"The graining of woods, and the imitation of hard woods — so perfect that no one could hardly tell the imitation from the genuine, are all work worthy of artists — for these gentlemen are indeed artists in this line of work."

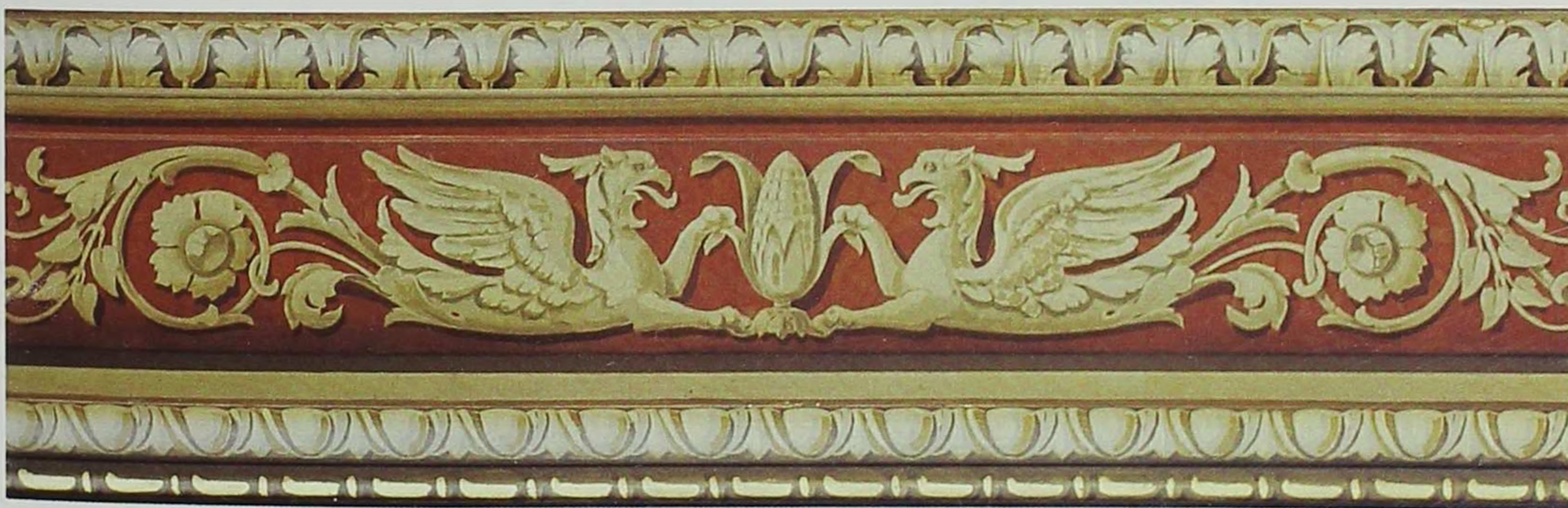
Iowa State Register, Jan. 21, 1883

Upper right: A masterpiece of wood-graining. Note the knots and the "shadow" cast by the center rosette. Detail is from ceiling of west office, auditor's suite. Artist unknown.



Opposite: The ceiling of the auditor's private office showcases classical stencil elements: numerous trompe l'oeil moldings, swirling *rincaux*, Greek honeysuckles, small rosettes. Creator of this tour de force is unknown.

Below: Mythological griffins guard an ear of corn, high above the staff workers in the treasurer's outer office.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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