

# BUILDING AS A COAT OF ARMS

## MEDICAL SYMBOLS FROM AN ILLUSTRIOUS PAST

Jean Yawkey Place is a renovation of the former Boston City Hospital's Mallory Institute of Pathology built in 1933. While most of the building's interior is entirely new, the architects have retained the Mallory historical lobby, the marquee Mallory and Boston City Hospital names, the bas-reliefs, and decorative cast aluminum panels. Two replica sphinxes guard what used to be the building's mortuary in the basement. Icons that include the radiant head of Apollo adorn the building's exterior as fitting symbols of medicine in the past.



**HEAD OF APOLLO**  
Apollo was considered the god of healing in Greek mythology, although he was well known for his many other powers. He was a paragon of order, harmony, and civilization. His visage is also part of the coat of arms of the Physicians of London. Look for the bas-relief of the staff of Aesclepius, Apollo's son, elsewhere on the façade of Jean Yawkey Place.



**STAFF OF AESCLEPIUS**  
Aesclepius was the Greco-Roman god of medicine. Mythical and heroic references to him date from about 1,200 B.C. to 500 A.D. First he was the mortal Greek surgeon and herbalist who appeared in Homer's *Iliad*. Later he became deified as the son of Apollo with extraordinary healing powers.

By legend, Aesclepius encountered and killed a snake one day and then watched as another snake brought its dead companion back to life. Thereafter the snake became Aesclepius's

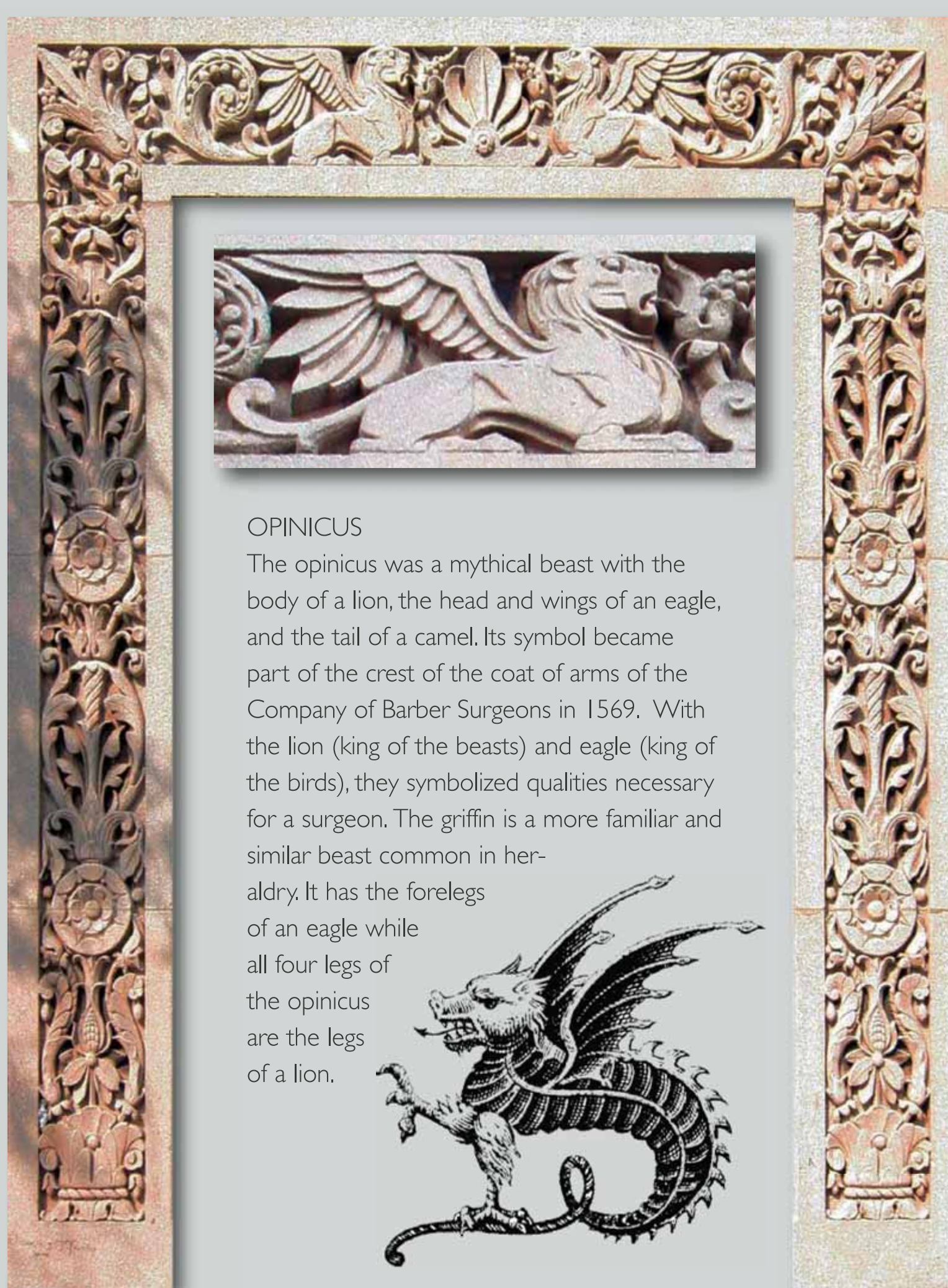


**FLEAMS**  
The figures that look like fancy 7s are called fleams in heraldry. They represent bloodletting lancets (above) —surgical knives—used in the early days of medicine to open a vein and remove disease, fevers, and other noxious humours in the blood. Arranged in the circular shape of a roundel separated by a v-shaped pattern called a chevron, this bas-relief (right) was part of coat of arms of London's Company of Surgeons in 1451.



The Barber Surgeons coat of arms with fleams and Bishop's cap and rose.

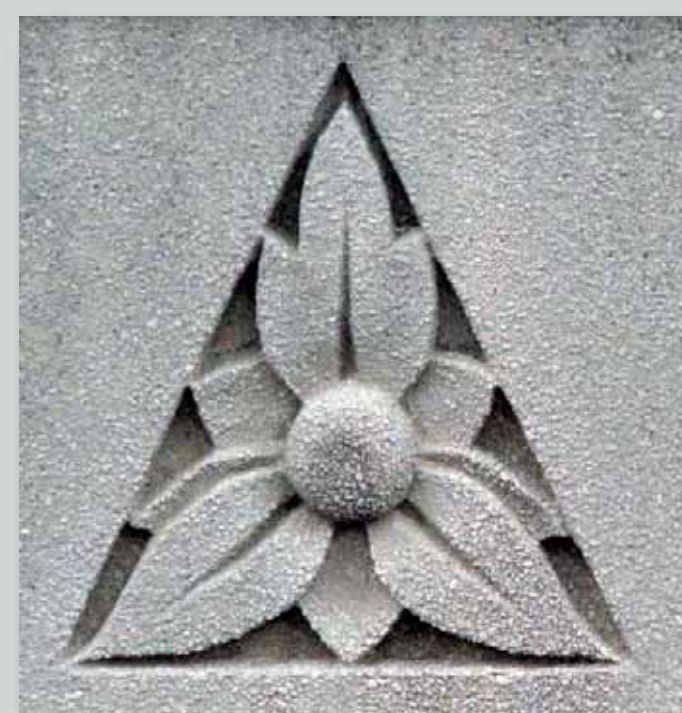
One way to think about the building's many decorative icons is to understand them as elements in a coat of arms. The staff of Aesclepius, the mythical griffin-like opinicus, and the fleur-de-lis designs, for example, appear on shields, flags, and architectural sculptures in European heraldry. Many are drawn from English heritage that include the Company of Barber Surgeons and the Royal College of Surgeons.



**OPINICUS**  
The opinicus was a mythical beast with the body of a lion, the head and wings of an eagle, and the tail of a camel. Its symbol became part of the crest of the coat of arms of the Company of Barber Surgeons in 1569. With the lion (king of the beasts) and eagle (king of the birds), they symbolized qualities necessary for a surgeon. The griffin is a more familiar and similar beast common in heraldry. It has the forelegs of an eagle while all four legs of the opinicus are the legs of a lion.



**FLEUR-DE-LIS**  
The fleur-de-lis (flower of lily) design represents either a lily or an iris. It is repeated in many of the cast stone icons that appear on the outside of Jean Yawkey Place, just as they were in the original Mallory Institute of Pathology. The fleur-de-lis is a popular fixture in heraldry and may be considered a symbol of purity and light, also associated with the Holy Trinity. Historically the fleur-de-lis motif was associated with the French and later Spanish monarchies.



**PINECONES**  
These highly stylized images of decorative vegetation may represent pinecones. Popular in pathology institutes such as the Case Western Reserve in Cleveland, Ohio, pinecones are associated with Aesclepius, the mythical Greek god of medicine (see the staff of Aesclepius). Medicine derived from the pinecone was used to treat various illnesses, and it was a symbol for healing and regeneration.



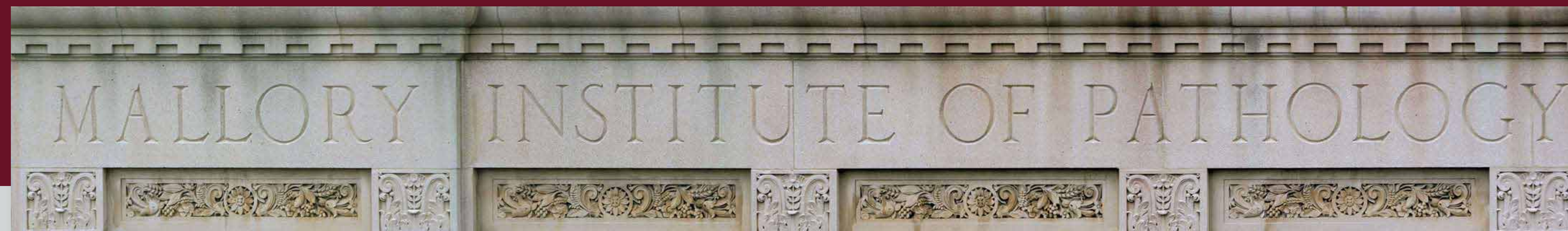
**BISHOP'S CAP AND ROSE**  
The Bishop's cap and rose are featured in the Company of Barber Surgeons. The cap may stand for authority while the red rose may represent grace, beauty, and martyrdom.



**PELICANS**  
The image of a pelican in European heraldry is thought to represent piety, self-sacrifice, and maternity. A pelican is said to be "vulning" (wounding herself) with her beak pecking her chest to provide nourishing blood to her young in the nest below.



**DECORATIVE VEGETATION**  
**THISTLES AND GRAPES**  
Although it is difficult to identify many of the decorative vegetation seen on the exterior of Jean Yawkey Place because they are so stylized, grapes and thistles appear to be part of this collection. Milk thistle seeds were thought to treat liver disease and are used in modern herb products. Grapes may have represented peace and felicity. The architects may have intended these plants as simple decoration with no medical significance.



The main entrance to Jean Yawkey Place (right) faces west. The south façade of the building containing the historic lobby is framed in a stand of trees.



constant companion, a single snake entwined around his staff. The image of two snakes is called a "caduceus." It is often used as an alternative symbol for modern medicine, but its origins are based on the Greek god Hermes, the messenger for the gods.



Look for the stone sculptures along Massachusetts Avenue and Albany Street. They adorn the faces of the building, form decorative edges at the roof, and frame the doorway entrances.

The historical lobby's entrance faces Massachusetts Avenue. It contains the sphinxes, window and door decorations, and an ancient clock with bas-relief sculptures.



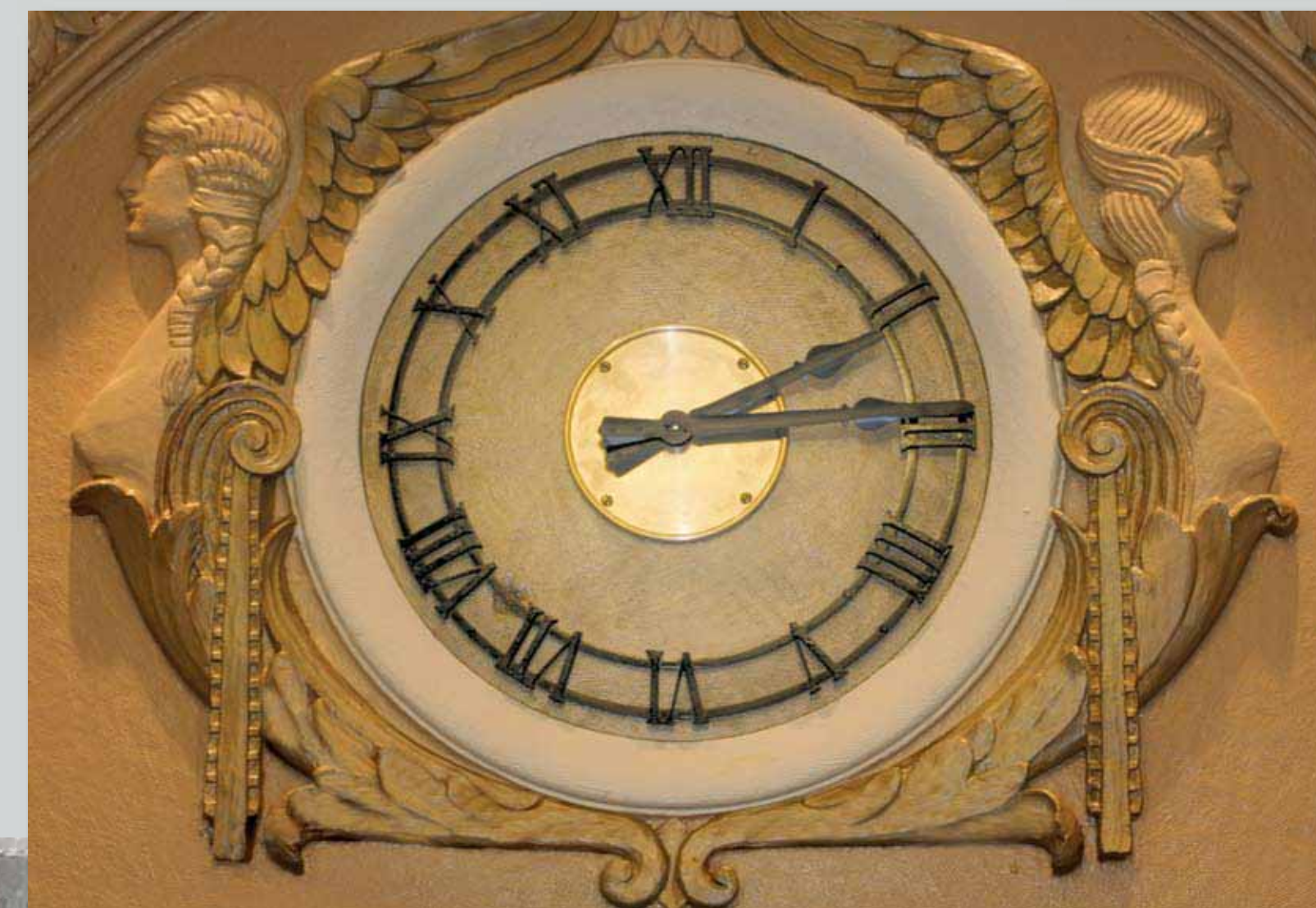
**SPHINXES**  
Two sphinxes guard the basement entrance to the former Mallory Institute of Pathology mortuary. They appear to represent the Egyptian Old Kingdom sphinxes with the face of a man (perhaps a Pharaoh or the sun god), the head cloth known as "nemes," and the body of a lion. There is even a royal cobra called a "uraeus" on his brow. In the Mallory, the sphinxes were probably considered guardians to protect the deceased, similar to the Great Sphinx of Giza in Egypt. These sphinxes are different from the Greek sphinx of myth, which had the head and breasts of a woman and challenged travelers such as Oedipus with the famous riddle, "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?"



All images by Kenneth Mallory unless otherwise noted.

Icons that represent an hourglass and a harvest of grains, framed by the wings of some mythic bird, stand above the entrance to the former mortuary in the Mallory Institute of Pathology. They may represent the fleeting of time and the metaphorical need to gather the harvest before the dead of winter.

The two maidens that form bookends at either side of the large clock may represent mythical harpies from Greek mythology. The harpies threatened to carry off people to the underworld where they might be punished and killed.



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