



## “LADY” JUSTICE

*James R. Fox*

**A** HUNDRED YEARS AGO most educated people would have recognized a number of allegorical figures based on their accompanying symbols. Temperance carried a bridle symbolizing restraint. Rectitude held a carpenter’s square; Fame a trumpet; Prosperity a horn of plenty. Law held a book with the word “Law” or the Roman numerals I thru X for the Ten Commandments. Mercy might stand between the penitent and Lady Justice’s sword. Today, only one allegorical figure thrives in our iconography and popular culture: Justice with her sword, scales and blindfold. The others have lost relevance and been relegated to the dustbin of art history.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most interesting paintings I have uncovered hangs behind the bench in the main courtroom of the Hancock County Courthouse in Findley, Ohio. Lady Justice is portrayed as a young woman with black curly hair, dark – perhaps seductive – eyes (without a blindfold), and a sexy pout. In her right hand she holds a scroll, no doubt symbolizing the written law, but it does not interest her. Her left hand appears to have just dropped something, and, indeed, in the lower left a baby is trying to hand the scales of justice (back) to her. At her feet lies a sword (now hidden by a railing behind the bench).

The Lady’s presence is formidable but her message and meaning for those gathered in the courtroom to receive justice is, at best,

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*James Fox is a professor of law at the Dickinson School of Law, Penn State University.*

<sup>1</sup> For an elaborate treatment of Justitia and her possible role in pedagogy see Dennis E. Curtis and Judith Resnick, *Images of Justice*, 96 *Yale L.J.* 1726 (1987).



ambiguous. Is she bored with the parade of supplicants? Would she rather be doing something else? Does she have her eye on that handsome defense attorney who just approached the bench? Will he ask her to the cotillion?

The Hancock County Courthouse was completed in 1888<sup>2</sup> and presumably the painting dates from about that time. The artist is unknown but local lore tells that the model was a lady of the evening. With this bit of intelligence we may view her expression in a different light. She looks at the courtroom scene with cool disdain. Does she see clients in the room? Has she found herself in the position to judge those who in the past have judged her? In the Gilded Age and before, prostitution was somewhat more “respectable” than in our time, a more accepted, though always illicit, part of society. The model simply may have been the Judges’ favorite.

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<sup>2</sup> The building, containing beautiful interior stained glass, was restored in 1998.