

Virtue in Gold Leaf

Civic Fame was collapsing and corroded. Civic Virtue was dingy and ignored. Civic Fame was exposed to the elements on top of the Municipal Building and Civic Virtue was somewhat snigger on a bas-relief inside. Both statue and stonework have been restored as part of a top-to-bottom refurbishing of McKim, Mead and White's neoclassical skyscraper.

Easy does it—for \$300,000. Except that any sophisticated city watcher knows that civic fame, civic virtue and neoclassical architecture are all hopelessly out of date. The symbolism is about as subtle as a lead pipe. Old-fashioned public virtues and old-fashioned public buildings have had their day. No one can afford the luxury of ideals or quality anymore; they have been eliminated by a mix of contemporary mores and economics.

It was only a fancy dress ball, of course—skyscrapers masquerading as palazzi; tunics and togas, cornices and pediments implying values that were never there at all. There were no crowning allegories of hypocrisy or expedience. It was believed that art and virtue were desirable commodities. The former may have misrepresented the latter, but it did so with solid stone and gold leaf. Politics at least had 23-carat style.