

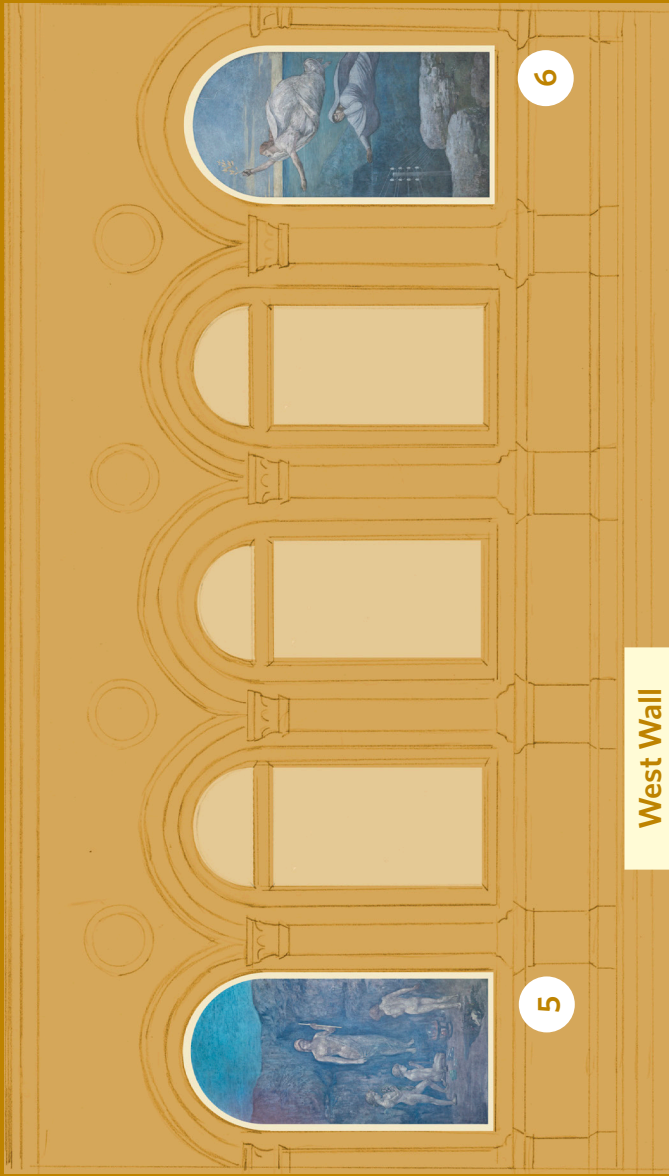
Chavannes Gallery Murals

The Muses of Inspiration

Works by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, installed 1895-1896



North Wall



West Wall

7 **Pastoral Poetry:** Virgil stands in a grove by a stream.

8 **Dramatic Poetry:** Aeschylus sits on a rocky outcrop; the Oceanides, sea nymphs, are pictured in the distance.

9 **Epic Poetry:** Homer is crowned by the Iliad and the Odyssey.

5 **Chemistry:** A fairy waves her wand over elements undergoing "mysterious change" as spirits look on.

6 **Physics:** Two figures representing forms of speech (good news, in white; bad news, in gray) travel across wires, illustrating electricity.

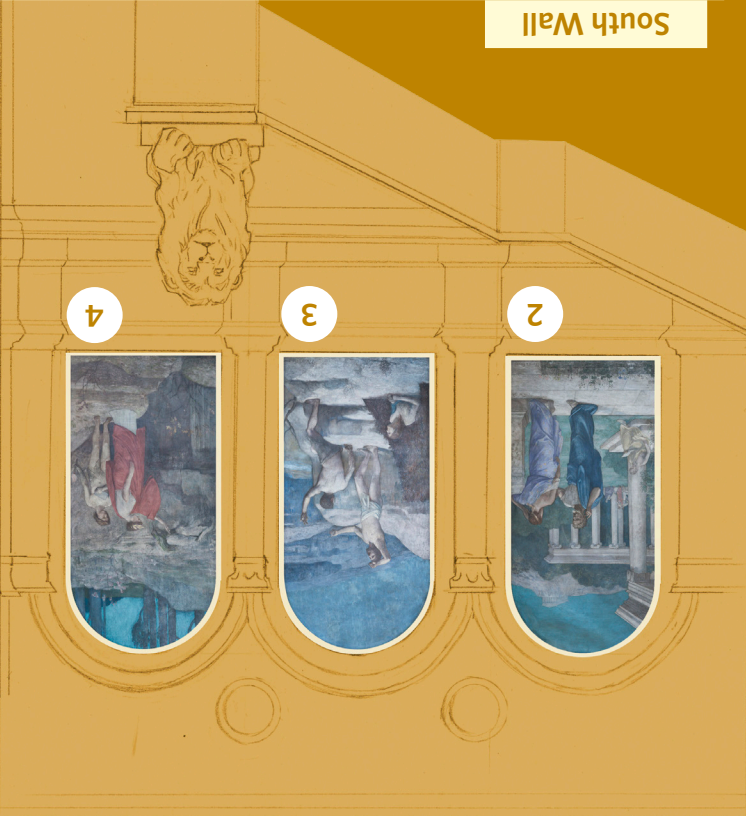
1 **The Muses of Inspiration Hail the Spirit, the Harbinger of Light:** Nine muses robed in white regard Enlightenment, who crests the doorway to Bates Hall.

2 **Philosophy:** Plato discusses the conflict between spirit and matter.

3 **Astronomy:** The Chaldean Shepherds regard the stars.

4 **History:** A red-robed spirit calls up the past from caves below.

South Wall



East Wall

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PUVIS AND THE COMMISSION

The Boston Public Library is fortunate to have the only mural by artist Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898) in America. At the end of the 19th century, Puvis was regarded as the most notable muralist in France, and arguably in all of Europe.

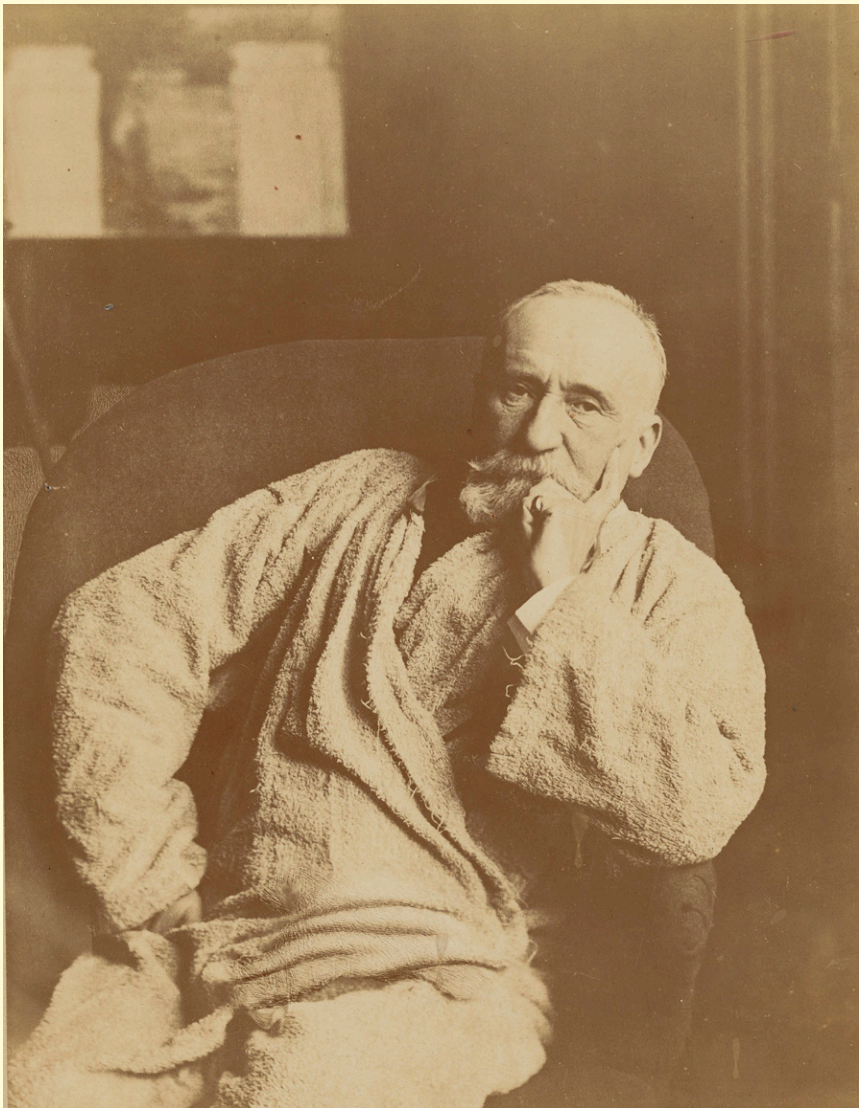
When he agreed to the library project, Puvis was 72 years old and reluctant to travel the long distance to Boston. Instead, he completed the mural on canvas in his studio in France, using dimensions sent by architect Charles Follen McKim to make a scale model of the staircase enclosure. McKim also sent Puvis a sample of the yellow Sienna marble used in the building so that the artist could key his palette off of the striking colors and tones in the material. The murals were then shipped to Boston and installed under the watch of one of the artist’s assistants. Workers adhered the panels to the wall using a technique called “marouflage,” in which lead white paint and linseed oil are mixed to form a paste that attaches canvas to wall—a method not dissimilar from applying wallpaper.

THE MUSES OF INSPIRATION

The long panel flanking the entrance to Bates Hall is titled *The Muses of Inspiration Hail the Spirit, the Messenger of Light*. This panel was executed on two massive pieces of canvas joined above the right side of the doorway lintel, where the seam is just barely visible. In this scene, nine muses in white robes are set against a pastoral backdrop of field and sea. The nine women welcome the Spirit of Enlightenment, represented by the small figure cresting the doorway to Bates Hall. It is thought that an assistant added the white swath of fabric to Enlightenment after the panels arrived in Boston, as the local community balked at his state of undress. Flanking the door is the figure of Study, holding a tablet (at left), and Contemplation, with her fingers held to her head in thought (at right). With this trio, Puvis suggests that through study and contemplation, once can reach enlightenment.

PHILOSOPHY, ASTRONOMY, AND HISTORY

The eight panels surrounding the staircase represent subjects that patrons could find within the Library. As you stand with your back to Bates Hall and face the staircase windows, the first three of these panels adorn the left wall. At far left is *Philosophy*, with two figures shown in conversation. Notably, the seated figure behind them is reading a bound codex, a form of the book that didn’t exist in Classical times. At center on this left wall, Puvis placed *Astronomy*, with the Chaldean Shepherds regarding the stars. At far right, *History* is represented by a red-robed figure, calling up the spirits of the past from the caves below.



Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, c. 1895

CHEMISTRY AND PHYSICS

As you face the wall above the staircase landing, two more panels flank the central windows. At left is *Chemistry*, in which a fairy waves her wand over elements undergoing “mysterious change,” watched closely by the crouching spirits. To the far right of the windows is the panel representing *Physics*. Here, Puvis inserted a nod to what was modern technology at the end of the 19th century: a telegraph wire bearing what he called “The wondrous agency of Electricity.” Two figures are shown traveling across the wires representing communication; the gray figure below, with her hand to her face, bears bad news, and the white-robed figure above calls of good news.

POETRIES

The three panels along the far right wall depict the three poetries. On the left side of this wall is *Pastoral Poetry*, with Virgil, author of *The Aeneid*, standing in a grove of trees by a stream. At center is *Dramatic Poetry*, with Aeschylus in the foreground, backed by sea nymphs, the Oceanides. Finally, on the right side of this wall, Puvis included *Epic Poetry*, with Homer crowned by the Iliad and the Odyssey.

Please return the mural guide to its holder when finished.