

The Courthouse

Welcome to Osgoode Hall. My name is Elise Brunet. I'm the Curator at the Law Society of Upper Canada and I'll be your guide for this visit of the courthouse part of Osgoode Hall.

If you're listening to this, you've obviously decided to be brave and go through the security check. Good for you. You're in for a treat. Move right in.

The atrium, the area with the statue of the woman holding a baby, is a good place to start. Now I should warn you: Osgoode Hall may look like a museum but it's a real courthouse and a busy office building. You're allowed to take photographs of the architecture but not of the people in the courthouse. The courts may be sitting so you want to avoid making excessive noise. The proceedings in the courtrooms are usually open to the public, but unless you are planning on staying for a while, I would discourage it. It's disruptive if people are coming and going while the courts are sitting.

Osgoode Hall is home to the highest courts of the province, the Court of Appeal for Ontario and the Divisional Court, a branch of the Superior Court of Justice. Neither is a trial court: these courts review decisions that have been made by lower courts. You'll notice that the lawyers here wear the traditional legal costume of the British Commonwealth. If there isn't a live lawyer within sight, take a look at the portraits on the wall. The portraits near the back courtrooms are more recent. The traditional court attire includes the waistcoat, the robe, the wing collar shirt, and the tabs (the odd split white tie). Lawyers and judges don't wear wigs in Canada, at least not the legal wig. If you see a person wearing a red sash on top of their robe, they're a judge. The direction of the sash (whether it's on the left or the right shoulder), indicates to what court they belong.

Let's get back to the atrium, at the foot of the statue. Speaking of feet, you can't miss hers – they're huge! The statue is a memorial for the lawyers and law students who lost their lives during World War Two. The sculpture, by artist Cleeve Horne, represents hope in the future. The artist was worried that people would be offended by the representation of a naked woman but the statue was well received. As for her big feet, I don't know anything about them.

The atrium itself officially opened in 1860. This area, including courtrooms 3 and 4, and the Great Library on the second floor, were all built at the same time under the supervision of Toronto architects Cumberland and Storm.

The stone surrounding you is Caen stone, a type of limestone from Northern France, which was used extensively in Great Britain in buildings such as the Tower of London and Westminster Abbey. The carved keystones, at the top of the arches, are thought to represent the various arts and trades. For example, the ship and oars on your left when you face the statue, represent commerce.

The tiles under your feet are called "geometric tiles" and were produced by compressing nearly dry ceramic powder in a mould, producing very durable tiles, which could be produced

industrially. Maw & Co., the manufacturer, was one of the earliest and largest producers of this type of tiles and Osgoode Hall was one of their first large projects. Tiles from the same company can be found at University College at the University of Toronto and at St. James Cathedral. Some of their more recent work can be seen in the Capitol and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. Should you be tempted to get one of these floors for your own home, you'll be happy to hear that Maw & Co. is still in business.

The skylight above your head was part of the original design of the atrium but it was modified slightly around 1960 when its glass started to fall out. Light pink glass replaced the original etched glass and the metal framework was simplified. You can get a sense of it if you take a look at the black and white photos in the corner of the atrium.

Almost all the portraits in the atrium are of former chief justices of the province, except the portrait of Queen Victoria. The painting of the Queen is also the only one that doesn't belong to the Law Society. The City of Toronto probably thought that Osgoode Hall would be a more appropriate setting for the Queen than the futuristic looking New City Hall next door. By the way, if you've heard that this painting shows that Queen Victoria had an atrophied arm, I'm sorry to say that there's no evidence to support that. Her grandson had a disability, but it stemmed from an incident at birth, not from genetic causes.

Let's go upstairs. You can use either side of the blue-carpeted stairwell. There is also an elevator in the hall behind the atrium. You may want to pause the tour until you get to the top of the stairs.

Osgoode Hall was built over almost two centuries and it shows – in a good way. Its layout can defy logic at times but the amazing collection of architecture makes up for it. Not only is it thoroughly enjoyable to look at but it also communicates something about the values associated with Osgoode Hall. Take the atrium, its scale; the noble materials that suggest that justice is important. Even the way sound carries in this space speaks to the need to behave properly.

Our next stop is the Great Library. The tour starts just outside the Library's doors on this floor.