



Governor Engler

Nelson Shanks, John Engler

Governor

Date

2005

Medium

oil paint

Dimensions

93 1/2 x 62 in. (237.5 x 157.5 cm)

Paintings

Object number

CA.2025.03.023

Michigan State Capitol Building (100 N. Capitol Ave), Floor 2, Rotunda, Northeast Quadrant

This portrait of Governor John Engler, painted by Nelson Shanks, strikes a careful balance between casual and controlled. Engler stands in a relaxed, comfortable pose beside a table filled with undeniably symbolic objects, his

hand resting on a stack of carefully chosen volumes. His clothing, though formal, has a looser fit, and he gazes out at the viewer with a confident, self-assured ease. Unlike many official portraits, Engler is not painted in an overly idealized fashion; instead, Shanks allows for uneven coloring on the man's face and paints each wrinkle truthfully. Shanks was influential in the revival of classical realism in the United States. This movement places an emphasis on order and beauty along with the artist's observation of reality. This explains why this painting may feel like a controlled view of what is real. While the fringe along the bottom of the couch behind the governor seems haphazardly arranged, other features like his pose and the objects that surround him are placed in a way that communicates a specific or idealized message. The brass elephant and the bust of Lincoln symbolize the Republican party, while the books reflect his political and personal interests: for example, the biography of Pope John Paul II acknowledges Engler's practice of Catholicism. His tie features the image of Adam Smith, an economist associated with conservative politics. On top of the biography, a photo of Engler's wife and three daughters tells viewers that he is a family man – an idea reinforced by the gilded frame of the painting, featuring a rose in each corner for each of the family members pictured. By employing such blatant symbolism in his portrait, Engler instructs the viewer on how they should see him, directly opposing the relaxed, self-assured persona offered by his painted likeness.

