HIRAM POWERS AND "THE HERO"

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"Make me as I am, Mr. Powers."—Andrew Jackson

Among the most notable works of art lent to the Museum for its first loan exhibition of modern sculpture in December 1874 was a marble bust of Andrew Jackson by Hiram Powers. From that time forward, except for a brief interval, this remarkable portrait has been on exhibition in the Museum. Sheldon I. Kellogg, who lent the Jackson bust in 1874, deposited it at the Museum until he sold it to another private collector in New York about 1889. The bust was returned to take its place in the permanent collection of the Museum as a gift from Mrs. Frances V. Nash in 1894.

The bust of Jackson is certainly one of Powers's best works in the field of male portraiture—a field in which he excelled. Perhaps today the unfashionable neoclassic style in which he worked somewhat obscures its sculptural qualities. However, the historical interest of the bust remains undiminished. Fortunately, through circumstances not common in the history of American sculpture, an entertaining record has been preserved of the conversations that took place between sculptor and President while Powers was modeling the bust at the White House.

It was modeled in 1835, before Powers left the United States to settle permanently in Italy, when he was just establishing his reputation as a portrait sculptor. Mr. Kellogg, who purchased the bust in 1849, had the unusual opportunity of comparing it with the noble man himself at the White House soon after the bust was completed. In a signed statement in the Museum's files he says: "I saw the plaster model of this bust . . . standing on a side table in the White House and the Hero President by its side, and, scrutinizing both critically [I] can say it is a remarkable likeness of the Great Man." Jackson is represented at the age of 68, his shoulders draped in the Roman toga prescribed by the prevailing neoclassic fashion as the suitable garb for statesmen. At the time Jackson was in the midst of his second term as President (1832-1837) and the financial complications raised by his triumph over Nicholas Biddle and the Bank of the United States.

No other American President has ever enjoyed such unbounded personal popularity as Andrew Jackson did. Among American Presidents Jackson is the only one whose name has become the name of an era. His popularity made him the despair of his political opponents. One of them, William Wirt, after the Presidential campaign of 1832, wrote, "He can be President for life if he chooses." It is also said that Jackson, sharing the notions of his backwoods neighbors, was the only President to believe that the world was flat; an opinion that in no way detracted from his fascination for his contemporaries; nor did the General's old-fashioned ideas of world geography prevent him from planning and executing a number of military campaigns to lead the nation through the perils of the War of 1812 to a brilliant and decisive victory at New Orleans in 1815.

Though his memory is today a bit faded, and historians are inclined to place him in the lesser company of American worthies rather than with more exalted national figures, Jackson still retains full claim to being one of the most vigorous and colorful men of his day. Some measure of Jackson's tremendous popularity may be gathered from the number of portraits that were made of him. In the days before the invention of the camera and rapid mechanical means for the reproduction of pictures, posing for one's portrait was one of the penalties imposed on popular heroes by their admirers. If at first it was a flattering duty, it soon became, especially for Andrew Jackson, a tedious and often repeated chore. His official household included a portrait painter in
Bust of Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) by Hiram Powers (1805-1873). White marble, height 34¼ inches. Gift of Mrs. Frances V. Nash, 1894. Photograph by Charles Sheeler
permanent residence. Ralph E. W. Earl, a relative of Rachel Jackson’s, lived at the Hermitage for seventeen years and during that time he painted dozens of portraits of the General to satisfy the steady demand for likenesses from patriotic societies and individual admirers. Jackson’s portrait seemed to many Americans to possess the virtues of a talisman.

Almost every American painter of his time seems to have essayed at least one portrait of Jackson. Thomas Sully painted him at least thirteen times. Besides the many portraits painted in oil, “Old Hickory’s” noble face and commanding figure appear in many varied forms: as paperweights or ships’ figureheads; molded into the sides of glass whiskey flasks; painted upon the elegant shells of imported Sévres vases; as medals; in silhouette; in engravings; and in sheaves of political cartoons. He had such a strong fascination appeal for the American public that it reflected honor and fame upon the artists who depicted him.

In the 1830’s any young American artist who wished to get on in the world directed his steps to Washington City to take the likenesses of the national figures who gathered there when Congress was in session. Needless to say, Andrew Jackson always headed the list as the most desirable subject. Among the artists who proceeded to the Capital in search of fame and fortune was the young sculptor Hiram Powers journeying from the frontier metropolis of Cincinnati to pause in Washington and other Eastern cities on his way to Italy and success. Powers, thirty years of age at the time, had only recently taken up sculpture as a life work. He had attained sufficient local success in Cincinnati to encourage Nicholas Longworth (one of the first of a long line of Midwestern art patrons) to stake him to a trip to Europe. Sculpture was a daring and exotic choice of career, in itself a claim, at least, to a certain amount of notoriety in frontier circles at that time. Powers felt that to add to this distinction a successfully executed bust of President Jackson would be the most likely means of spreading his name and getting commissions to assist him on his way to the fountainhead of the sculptural arts in Italy.

Fortunately a detailed report of Powers’s encounter with President Jackson has been preserved—taken down almost word for word from the lips of the sculptor by C. Edwards Lester. From this point we can let Mr. Powers speak for himself. The occasion was to be, throughout Powers’s career, a treasured memory and an anecdote often repeated with varying embellishments and improvements for the entertainment of dozing tycoons who, seeking marble immortality, ascended the model’s dais in his Florentine studio.

“[I] reached Washington just before Congress met in 1835, taking with me letters of introduction to several distinguished gentlemen.

“I did not expect any commissions immediately. All I hoped for was to obtain a reputation as an artist; and I began with a bust of General Jackson, who consented in the kindest manner to sit. He took the precaution, however, first of all, to ask me if it was my practice to put plaster on the face to get an impression of the features. On my replying in the negative, he said he was very glad, for he had heard of the manner in which Mr. Jefferson had been taken by Mr. Browere. ‘And for my part,’ said he, ‘I should not like to be tortured or have my ears pulled off, as was the case with that great man when he was obliged to go through that dreadful process.’

“He showed me an apartment next to his sitting-room, where he said I might arrange my materials. In two days my clay was prepared. The old General entered and going to a shelf at one end of the room he took down a longtailed pipe from one box, and charged it with cut tobacco from another. Pipe in order, he took his seat, and remained with me for about an hour, and during most of the time he smoked and said but little. He was sitting before a window which fronted the Capitol, and I noticed he took off his spectacles and held them some distance from his face and looked some time in the direction of Capitol Hill. At last with an expression of impatience he exclaimed:

‘I thought so!—Boys, Mr. Powers, boys!—they are going to have a holiday.’
“I did not understand this, and perceiving it, he pointed to a flagstaff on the Capitol.

"'Don't you see,' said he, 'the flag is down. They have adjourned over till Tuesday or Wednesday. Congress has just met. That's the way they do. They are all leisure now, and they neglect the public business; but you'll find when the session is drawing to a close all will be hurry and confusion, and Congress will break up leaving much important business undone.'

"He then knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and laying it on the mantle-piece, he wished me good-day, without taking the slightest notice of my work. I was glad for this for I had yet done but little, and certainly in its then state it had no very promising appearance.
“The next day he was engaged, and could not come. ’It was not intentional, Mr. Powers,’ he remarked, ’but business prevented me from coming. I’m very sorry for I know your time is precious.’

I was deeply struck with this remark; for how true it is, that none but men who have made the most of their time know what time is worth!

Again he charged his pipe, and smoked till he almost fell asleep notwithstanding frequent efforts to rally himself. He appeared exhausted, but he would have sat the whole time, I doubt not, had I not told him I could proceed without him.

‘I’m glad,’ he replied, ’for I am not well today, but I will try to sit better for you tomorrow.’

The day following, as he laid down his pipe on the mantle-piece as he was leaving, I asked him if he would give me the pipe he had been using. It was a common clay pipe, although it would have been esteemed a Jackson pipe, perhaps.

‘Why, Mr. Powers,’ said he with a smile, ’it is a valueless thing, and not worth your taking; but I have a very beautiful pipe in the other room, made by an Indian, and I would give it to you with great satisfaction if you would take it.’

I replied that it was not the Indian’s pipe, but General Jackson’s pipe I wanted.

‘Ah, well, Sir,’ he replied with a laugh, ’you shall have it with all my heart.’ He then took it from the mantle-piece, and stepping forward, presented it to me with all that dignity and elegant courtesy of manner, of which he was so perfect a master when the occasion called for it.

Just before I finished the bust Major Donaldson [Donelson] paid me a visit, as he had done often before during the progress of the work, and he remarked that perhaps I had copied the peculiarities of the mouth too faithfully; alleging that the General had lost his teeth, or rather, laid them aside, and that his mouth had fallen in, which left him, in that respect, unlike his former self. But I liked the expression of his mouth, even as it was; for it’s a remarkable fact, that when nature is defeated by age, accident or infirmity, of her original design, she will still find some means of reproducing it, and such is particularly the case with General Jackson. The same firmness and inflexibility of character his mouth expressed in the prime of life, is to be found there still, though the forms are entirely changed. It is an error to suppose that features are accidental, and nature makes them up at hap-hazard; for the face is the true index of the soul, where everything is written had we the wisdom to read it. . . .

“The suggestion of Major Donaldson was kind, but I did not think it advisable to act upon it. I determined however to mention it to General Jackson, and ascertain what he thought about it.

‘Make me as I am, Mr. Powers,’ he replied, ’and be true to nature always, and in everything. It’s the only safe rule to follow. I have no desire to look young as long as I feel old: and then it seems to me, although I don’t know much about sculpture, that the only object in making a bust is to get a representation of the man who sits, that it be as nearly as possible a perfect likeness. If he has no teeth why then make him with teeth?

This was his last sitting, and he stood before the bust and examined it for the first time.

‘But after all I’ve said,’ he continued, ’of course I’m no judge, I don’t profess to understand these things—I can’t judge either, perhaps, so well of my own likeness as I could of another’s. But Colonel Earl [the portrait painter] can tell you more about it, and I advise you to get him to look at it.’

He then bade me adieu, wishing me every success with my picture [sic].

“I have never had a more striking subject for a bust than General Jackson; and I doubt if the whole range of subjects would furnish another like it.”

The Reverend Henry Bellows records another conversation about the bust of Jackson, in which Powers says: “After I had finished it, Mr. Edward Everett brought Baron Krudener, Minister from Prussia [the Baron was actually
“Major Donaldson . . . remarked that perhaps I had copied the peculiarities of the mouth too faithfully. . . . But I liked the expression of his mouth, even as it was.”

Photograph by Charles Sheeler
Afinister from Russia], to see it. The Baron had a great reputation as a critic of art. He looked at the bust, deliberately, and said: ‘You have got the General completely: his head, his face, his courage, his firmness, his identical self; and yet it will not do! You have also got all his wrinkles, all his age and decay. You forget that he is President of the United States, and the idol of the People. You should have given him a dignity and elegance he does not possess. You should have employed your art sir, and not merely your nature.’ I did not dare in my humility and reverence for these two great men, to say what I wanted to in reply; to tell the Baron (for Mr. Everett was silent) that my ‘art’ consisted in concealing art, and that my ‘nature’ was the highest art I knew or could conceive of. I was content that the truth of my work had been so fully acknowledged, and the Baron only confirmed my resolution to make truth my model and guide in all my future undertakings. . . . If I have since done anything in my art . . . it is due to my steady resistance to all attempts to drive me from my love and pursuit of the truth. . . . People think I am needlessly anxious and careful about the small and fine lines in human faces. It is because I know how much each line represents, and what great distinctions dwell in the smallest hiding places.”

When Powers came to Washington, he doubtless was a Jackson partisan, coming as he did from the West, but after meeting and talking with the Hero he fell completely under his spell as almost everyone did who came in personal contact with Jackson. He says, “Jackson seemed to me, then, a man of the finest manners, and the most fascinating gentleman I had ever known.”

After Powers settled in Italy he proceeded to copy his clay bust of Jackson in white marble. According to Mr. Kellogg’s statement he believed this to be the only marble bust carved in the stone entirely by Hiram Powers’s own hand. However, the sculptor himself says, according to Bellows: “I found labor cheap enough [in Italy], but laborers, used to or capable of reproducing my kind of modeling, absolutely unobtainable. After trying many, I had to go to work and cut four of the busts with my own hands, at a ruinous cost of time and money.” In all probability Jackson’s bust was one of these four. Shortly after this, fortunately for him, Powers discovered a competent but unsuccessful sculptor who became the chief workman of his studio, remaining with him for over thirty years.

Until Jackson died in 1845 this bust was one of the chief ornaments of Powers’s studio. C. Edward Lester reports: “Thorwaldsen declared it superior to any he ever saw. . . . A large number of individuals have desired to purchase the bust of General Jackson, but the Sculptor assured me he would not allow it to leave his studio while the old Hero lived. That great and good man has been taken from us, and the bust will soon be sent to this country. Many individuals in different parts of the Union are desirous to have it. It will come to New York, and probably the city, or society, or State, will have it that will pay best for it.” According to Kellogg the bust was sold to a Democratic club in New York for $2500 and he bought it from them in 1849.

In addition to Mr. Kellogg’s statement the quotations here are taken from two other sources. The first is a rather obscure book by C. Edwards Lester (1815-1890), a once popular author who became a friend of Powers while serving as American consul at Genoa during the Polk administration. In spite of its all-inclusive title, The Artist, the Merchant, and the Statesman of the Age of the Medici and of Our Own Time (New York, 1845), it is principally concerned with recording the conversations of Hiram Powers. The second is a series of articles titled Seven Sittings with Powers the Sculptor, which appeared in Appleton’s Journal during 1869, written by the Reverend Henry W. Bellows (1814-1882), a very prominent Unitarian clergyman of New York City, famed for organizing the United States Sanitary Commission. While he was posing for Powers in 1868 he purposely “pumped” information out of the famous sculptor in order to record his words for the benefit of American art lovers.