MEMORIALS OF AN AMERICAN ROMANTIC

By ALBERT T. GARDNER

Research Fellow

“. . . he, who returning
Rich in praise to his native shores,
hath left a remembrance
Long to be honour’d and loved
on the banks of the Thames and the Tiber:
So may America,
prizing in time the worth she possesses,
Give to that hand free scope,
and boast hereafter of Allston.”

Robert Southey, A Vision of Judgement
(1821)

“Good Heavens! that such a man with such a
Heart and such Genius should be—not an
American, but downright American.”—Samuel
Taylor Coleridge, in a letter to John Morgan
(1814)

Over a period of years a small group of works
of art related to Washington Allston has been
gathering in the Museum. Three of these are
paintings by the artist, one of which has been
deposited in our care by the Allston Trust.
The other three are portraits of him. The por-
traits place before us the very features of the
man as his friends saw him; his paintings give
us clues to his mysterious character and to the
interior life that went on behind the mask he
turned upon the world.

Allston was without question one of the
foremost American artists of his day. Though
the esteem in which his paintings were once
held has somewhat declined, the growing re-
vival of interest in American artists of the
early nineteenth century brings him again into
considerable prominence. While we may never
hold him to be an unparalleled genius in
poetry and painting, our renewed interest
finds him in that small group of men who had
great influence on their contemporaries in the
first half of the nineteenth century.

Allston was born in South Carolina and
educated in Newport and at Harvard. On his
graduation, according to some accounts, he
had already “gained laurels both in poetry
and painting,” in spite of strong parental ob-
jections to his choice of a career as an artist.
In 1801, in company with the miniature
painter Malbone, he sailed for England; there
he spent three years as a pupil of Benjamin
West at the Royal Academy. In 1803 he visited
Paris and saw the Louvre in all its Napoleonic
glory. Traveling on at a leisurely pace through
Switzerland and Italy, he paused for extended
periods in Venice, Siena, and Florence before
reaching Rome early in 1805. Here he spent
the happiest and most fruitful years of his
life, painting, wandering among the grand
ruins, and talking over great plans at the Café
Greco with his friends Washington Irving,
Samuel Coleridge, Thorwaldsen, and other
members of the small foreign colony.

In 1808 Allston returned to Boston and mar-
rried Ann Channing. Shortly afterwards, with
his wife and his pupil, Samuel F. B. Morse, he
set out for England, where he had many
friends among artists and literary men. His res-
didence in England (1810 to 1818), however, was
marred by two events that affected him phys-
ically and mentally—a serious illness and the
sudden death of his wife. From these afflictions
he sought refuge in the pleasures of painting
and the practice of extreme piety.

In 1818 homesickness, coupled with the
alarming condition of his financial affairs,
called him back to America, and over the
strong protests of his English friends he re-
turned to Boston. It was hinted that by leaving
England Allston deprived himself of the op-
portunity of becoming the successor to Ben-
jamin West as President of the Royal Acad-
emy. If, however, Allston’s return was unfor-
tunate for him, it was an event of the greatest
An unfinished portrait of Washington Allston by Gilbert Stuart

importance to the young artists in Boston whom he befriended. Their many tributes to his benign influence as a teacher, friend, and guide are touching evidences of his qualities.

It is perhaps in the capacity of friend that Allston's real importance lies. His paintings may have had some influence on romantically inclined young painters, but his chief contribution to the development of American art is in the use that was made of his weighty European reputation to lend substantial encouragement to young artists. It was Allston who plotted the careers of the sculptors Horatio Greenough and Thomas Crawford and who won them their most remunerative commissions from the Government by whispering a word at the right time into the ears of such sympathetic statesmen as Charles Sumner and Daniel Webster.

For over twenty years Allston was one of the chief cultural ornaments of Boston society, and his presence lent a Gothic air of impractical romance to the otherwise pragmatic atmosphere of the Athens of America. At the end of his life his name was revered as was that of no other American artist. He seemed to his many friends to be a model of the Christian virtues and the embodiment of poetic and artistic genius.

During his lifetime Allston seemed to mark the beginning of a new era in American art, but from the perspective of the present he seems rather to mark the end of the first flourishing of American painting. Though he lived in the heyday of American portraiture, when marble busts, miniatures, and life-size portraits in oil formed the principal occupation of most artists, and though he himself painted occasional portraits, this field was not his chief concern. His interests were in the ideal, the anecdotal, and the high style of historical painting. His position, however, as one of the most famous American artists of his day made him a favorite subject with contemporary painters and sculptors. For one who is reputed to have refused to sit for a portrait with the remark that he was pleased to have his works seen and admired but had no wish to be seen himself, Allston's face has been preserved for our inspection by an unusually large number of painted portraits and at least two marble busts. It is doubtful whether any other American artist was so frequently portrayed. Of the fifteen recorded portraits of him the Museum owns an unfinished sketch by Gilbert Stuart, painted in 1828, a miniature by Richard Morrell Staigg painted in 1841, and a marble bust made from a death mask by Edward Augustus Brackett.

Stuart's sketch, one of the last paintings on which he worked, shows Allston at forty-nine, just before his second marriage (to Martha Dana), and before his trials with The Feast of Belshazaar, his most ambitious painting, and financial worries had transformed him into the pale, spectral figure recorded in the Staigg miniature. Stuart's portrait prompted Allston's brother-in-law to remark, "It is a mere head, but such a head, and so like the man!" It would be difficult to find a more perfect representation of the early nineteenth-century ideal of romantic genius. Staigg's miniature shows Allston at the age of sixty-two, white-haired, wan, and genteel, a living legend. In 1842, the year after this miniature was painted, Rufus
Griswold's *Poets and Poetry of America* was published, with a dedication in these words: "To Washington Allston, The Eldest of the Living Poets of America, and the Most Illustrious of Her Painters. . . ." Allston's poems duplicate the countless other odes and elegies that flowed so freely in those days from a thousand quills, but they won the praise of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey. "The Spanish Maid," companion to the painting of the same title and called by one enthusiastic admirer "this little heart-epic," typifies the commonplace versifying that passed so easily for poetry in 1830.

On Allston's death in the summer of 1843 Brackett, the young poet-sculptor, was given the "melancholy task" of taking "a cast from the distinguished painter's countenance. . . . From this he afterwards executed several busts in marble. . . ." The work inspired him to write a poem entitled: "Lines Suggested on Finishing a Bust of Washington Allston." Its admiring sentiments are balanced by Allston's written statement that he had "a high opinion" of Brackett's talents and thought that "his busts show, that in the rare power of expressing character and intellect he had few equals."

The bust now in the Museum was formerly a part of the private collection of Jonathan Sturges, a notable patron of art and one of the principal financial backers of the New York Gallery of Fine Arts, which flourished briefly from 1845 until 1854.

The two principal types of subject matter that occupied Allston's brush are represented in the Museum's collection of paintings. The Deluge, a large historical canvas, is probably an early work painted under the influence of Benjamin West. The Spanish Maid and the Portrait of a Woman exemplify Allston's later paintings of imaginary women.

To appreciate such works as The Deluge and, as Horatio Greenough says, "to feel Allston's unwavering adherence to the neglected poetry of the Bible," one "should know how extensively Roman history occupied public attention as a subject of art." The ideas that Allston tries to express in this painting, both in the choice of subject and in its treatment, typify the romantic interest of the time in
melodramatic scenes of dark and morbid events, suffused with a mollifying tone of Christian morality. But in translating these interests into paint Allston has grandiloquently inflated them to such a degree that the resulting picture is an almost empty canvas. In an effort to achieve an effect of majestic violence, doom, and punishment he has refined his picture to vacuous shadow. This remarkable monument of American painting was presented to the Museum by William Merritt Chase.

The Feast of Belshazaar, which is now in the Boston Museum, caused Allston for many years to guard the door of his studio against inquisitive visitors who wondered what had become of the masterpiece that he had brought back from England and sold for ten thousand dollars but never delivered. This picture, subjected to endless revision, seemed to baffle the artist, and its baleful and frustrating influence cast a blight over his later years. He was never able to bring it to a successful completion, though he worked on it almost to the hour of his death.

Allston's second type of subject, his "ideal Female heads," has been analyzed by a contemporary critic, Professor William Ware. In a paragraph that is a little masterpiece of negative praise, written in 1852, he explains how the curious impression these ghostly sisters make was interpreted in Allston's day. Here again we find the romantic straining after sublimity that resulted in an eviscerate and bloodless placidity, which then seemed to be the essence of metaphysical refinement.

Ware says: "There was no subject, perhaps, of which he was so fond, (and it agreed with the delicacy and refinement of this mind,) and repeated so often, as ideal female heads; not exactly repetitious, of course; but, while all the accidents of the picture varied, the main thought was one and the same; the type was the same, the individual differences, at the same time, such as to give an air of newness, if not of originality, to each particular subject. It is what would be called an inexpressive countenance, or at most, a ruminating, introspective one; but, . . . really one without expression. . . . The merit of this class of pictures, and it is very great,—they are his greatest
works, I suppose,—is that of objects of still life, in a state of such absolute repose, silence, abstractedness, do they live. Life seems almost dead . . . as if stiffened into a sort of living death, the very possibility of motion gone, . . . but otherwise beautiful . . . they are miracles of beauty and grace,—the very perfection of the art of painting.”

Allston’s career after his final return to Boston dragged out for a quarter of a century. It was a double exile: his European years made it impossible for him to regain any real contact with his native land; his return deprived him of the life-giving encouragement everyone believed could be found only in Europe. His career appeared to his younger contemporaries to sum up completely the dilemma of the artist in America. Both Henry James and William Wetmore Story pondered the tragedy of Allston’s life. Story, in a now classic and often quoted letter to Lowell, states the sad facts as they appeared to him, facts that were of course colored by Story’s own unhappy and costly experiences as an expatriate artist. He says: “Allston starved spiritually in Cambridgeport; he fed upon himself. There was nothing congenial without, and he turned all his powers inward and drained his memory dry. His works grew thinner and vaguer every day, and in his old age he ruined his great picture. I know no more melancholy sight than he was, so rich and beautiful a nature, in whose veins the south ran warm, which was born to have grown to such a height . . . stunted on the scant soil and withered by the cold winds of that fearful Cambridgeport. . . . We love nothing, we criticize everything. Even the very atmosphere is critical. . . . The heart grows into stone. The devil-side of enthusiasm (irritability) possesses us. There is no hearty love of anything, for we are afraid of making a mistake. . . ."