Among the more startling exhibits at the New York Crystal Palace in 1853 was a ceramic monument ten feet high, said to have been designed by Christopher Webber Fenton and modeled by Daniel Greatbach of the United States Pottery at Bennington, Vermont. The first section of this unique piece was composed of Lava ware, and the second of Flint ware, while a large bust of Fenton, enclosed by a series of open columns, surmounted this variegated base. At the top of the monument, as if to emphasize the importance of the material, stood a female figure in Parian ware.

Contemporary critics reacted to this monstrous total with extraordinary good sense, but they were none the less impressed with the industrial possibilities of Parian ware. A reporter for Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion, for example, described the piece with conspicuous absence of comment about aesthetic merit and proceeded to praise Parian ware pitchers shortly thereafter. The monument was ignored altogether by Professor Silliman and Mr. Goodrich in The World of Science, Art, and Industry, but they spoke of “purity of materials and excellence of manufacture” when illustrating a Bennington Parian ware pitcher.

In truth, the chief advantages of Parian ware were the economy and speed with which it could be produced. It was a medium that made porcelain objects available at reasonable prices to middle-class people for the first time. As a step between the porcelain made by Tucker and Hemphill in the 1830's and that of the Lenox Pottery today, it assumes its true stature and importance.

Parian ware is hard porcelain which contains an unusually high proportion of feldspar. It was called Parian ware because it closely resembled marble from the island of Paros in the Aegean Sea, and because, like Parian marble, it was first used for statuary. Soon, however, the same material was employed in the production of pitchers, tea sets, and ornaments, and these changes of form were accompanied by changes in decorative methods. The plain white surface of Parian ware was enriched with color, while the use of glaze added luster to many pieces. Some writers prefer to exclude such examples from the classification of Parian ware, since they no longer resemble Parian marble. But glaze and color do not alter the basic structure of a piece; it seems more reasonable to adopt chemical composition as a criterion.

The manufacture of Parian ware originated at the Copeland Factory in Stoke-on-Trent, England, in 1842. Other concerns were quick to imitate a promising line of goods, and Minton, Wedgwood, and Jones and Walley were three of the many English factories producing Parian ware before 1850. Much of this material reached the United States, so that it is no surprise to find John Harrison, a Copeland designer, at work in Bennington, Vermont, by 1846.

Christopher Webber Fenton, partner in the firm by which Harrison was employed, had been much interested in the manufacture of porcelain. In 1847 this interest contributed to the dissolution of a partnership with his conservative brother-in-law, Julius Norton. Fenton established a second factory in Bennington, and entered upon the first of a series of financial partnerships which enabled him to continue his experiments. By 1850 a new pottery was needed and built, and five years later Fenton’s small firm had come of age as the United States Pottery Company, employing some two hundred men. The factory seemed outwardly prosperous for eight years, at the end of which it was forced to close, owing to high costs and a lack of sound management. Several attempts were made to revive the business, but none was successful.
Through the generous gift of Dr. and Mrs. Charles W. Green, the Museum has recently acquired a large collection of Parian ware manufactured by the Bennington potteries just mentioned. It is a representative selection of material, the fruit of long years of experienced collecting, and contains items with rare marks and matching pairs which are not available today. Composed of more than a hundred and ninety pieces, the collection is a convincing demonstration of the great variety of form and decorative technique current in the compara-
White Parian ware ornaments: a match or spill holder and two vases. All the pieces illustrated were given to the Museum by Dr. and Mrs. Charles W. Green.

tively short period when Parian ware was made at Bennington.

Among many outstanding pieces, a pair of poodle dogs carrying baskets of flowers probably takes precedence (see ill.). They are complete except for the handle of one basket and display a marked contrast of surface in their sleek, shaven backs and rough, “coleslaw” coats. We may well wonder what whimsy prompted the potter to adorn them with whiskers so thick that they look like moustaches! Other important pieces are a pair of blue and white vases, on which eagles bearing olive branches silently protest the Mexican War, and a single vase, manufactured shortly after fire destroyed a major portion of the Norton and Fenton Works in 1845, which is appropriately decorated with the phoenix, symbol of rebirth. A pair of large blue and white vases embelished with morning glories were doubtless designed by Harrison, while a blue and white Cupid and Psyche pitcher in a rare large size and a small blue and white box with a well-modeled babe asleep on the cover seem to represent his designs also. Several vases, decorated in polychrome, resemble pieces manufactured at the Sèvres Factory in France, and these were probably designed by Theophile Frey, who came to Bennington from that concern.

Two vases with portrait medallions of Victoria and Albert afford an interesting commentary on the fate of a Bennington pattern that was unpopular. One of these illustrates the design just as it was intended for the Canadian market. This did not sell, and Victoria and Albert were apparently blamed; for, directly over the medallions on the second vase, regardless of royalty, are large bunches of grapes! A third design in the series is known, from which their majesties have been eliminated altogether.

Thus, while a few statuary pieces like the patriotic bust of Lafayette (ill. p. 172) were sold by factory wagon from door to door, Bennington designers seem to have preferred other ornamental or serviceable wares. Sometimes outright copies of English models were used, proving that the unpopularity of the Victoria and Albert design was an exceptional instance. The pattern for the Love and War pitcher (see ill.) has been credited to Alcock and Company, but the base of this example is clearly marked Fenton’s Works.

On the other hand, Bennington designs display a good deal of originality, especially in the
White Parian ware bust of Lafayette

use of naturalistic motifs. The seemingly impossible task of creating Niagara Falls on the surface of a pitcher is quite neatly done, whether one happens to admire the design or not, and the adaptation of sheaves of wheat to form a vase makes a novel composition with delicate, interesting detail (see pp. 170 and 171). The collection contains marked examples of pitchers in other designs long known to have originated at Bennington, such as the Pond Lily, Paul and Virginia, Charter Oak, Rose Vine, Daisy, and Windflower patterns.

Bennington Parian ware was cast or pressed in two-section molds. These molds were prepared from a plaster block to which various parts of the raised plaster design, formed from oiled plaster stamps, had been applied individually. In the casting process, liquid slip was poured directly into the mold and allowed to stand, until enough water had been absorbed from the slip by the porous plaster to leave a deposit in the mold. The pressing process was quicker once the slip had been reduced to the consistency of clay, since it was simply pressed by hand against the mold.

Indeed, as much work as possible was done in the mold; stippled backgrounds were created on the original plaster models by a wheel studded with sharp points, and thereafter through molds. Backgrounds in blue were also applied in the mold, by coating the necessary area with a solution containing cobalt. Other colors, such as pink, buff, and green, were hand-painted, because these required a lower firing temperature than that used for finishing Parian ware. The leaf and grape decoration, of course, so characteristic of late Bennington ware, was molded and applied by hand. Some Parian ware was dip-glazed, but the majority of pieces have a smear glaze, achieved by throwing salt into the kiln.

From what has been said, it seems obvious that the Parian ware made at Bennington was an important industrial development. Individual pieces are significant from the artistic point of view as well, but sentimentality and dubious imitation are serious limitations to aesthetic success on the whole. Still, we, like the nineteenth century critics, should be able to overlook the awkwardness exemplified by the Crystal Palace Monument. The Bennington potteries achieved real “purity of materials and excellence of manufacture” in making Parian ware.