THE STATUARY GALLERY OF 1870

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In 1870 many of the most famous and successful of modern artists were sculptors—and of these sculptors not a few were Americans. Then every connoisseur adorned his private gallery, library, or parlor with some elegant production of the chisel. In the gloom of the fashionably dark interiors of the day these white figures and portrait busts loomed up stark and cold with a whiteness of polar purity in dramatic contrast to the surrounding red plush portieres and ebonized woodwork. The white marble itself was one of the most important and desirable qualities of sculpture, linking modern works with the ancient glory of Greece and the grandeur of Rome. The sentiment for the stone was perhaps only slightly outweighed by the heavy indulgence in sentimentalism and melodrama in the subjects chosen to be represented. Victims of all kinds imprisoned in Carrara marble fed the insatiable Victorian appetite for pathetics. The Infant Corpse, the Shipwrecked Mother, the Wounded Indian, and the White Captive were all rewarded with ready tears. The “breathing marble” preserved in countless portrait busts memories of departed friends. The sculptors were perhaps the favorite artists of the time because their works were so suitable for those twin Victorian sanctums the Parlor and the Cemetery.

The 1870's were the years in which the sculptors of the neo-classic school reached their highest popularity. In 1873 Hiram Powers, the most famous American sculptor, died in Florence, where he had lived and worked for almost forty years. In 1876 the Art Gallery of the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia was heavily populated with marble effigies, but here and there were less pretentious works in bronze by such young men as Daniel Chester French and Augustus Saint Gaudens, whose works presaged a new day for sculpture. Then began the sharp decline to the present for the marbles of the neo-classic school. They have now, in the main, ceased to be seriously considered as masterpieces, but they have taken on a new importance as historical documents recording the tastes and enthusiasms of their heyday.

The attractions which took so many American sculptors to Italy to live were a potent mixture of economic and romantic elements, the most significant factor of all being the army of trained Italian marble-cutters whose skill translated the clay and plaster creations of the sculptors into enduring marble. The wages of these artisans were astonishingly low; the cost of living in general was low, and it allowed popular sculptors like Hiram Powers, Randolph Rogers, and William Story to live in princely style with a minimum of effort. The trick was to produce a figure with popular appeal and have it repeated over and over again in marble for as many customers as could be found. These copies, selling for substantial sums, provided fat profits. The production of statuary became a lucrative business when placed on this mass-production basis. With low overhead, cheap labor, and many customers eager for sentiment and Carrara marble the sculptors were in an enviable economic position. Very few had the strength to resist the pitfalls of easy success and place the serious pursuit of their art before all other considerations. In this they were victims, one likes to believe, of the current notions of their time rather than of personal predilection. It was imperative to succeed, and success appeared to be a matter of sales volume. However, these artists are not to be entirely condemned; some of them managed to rise above the level of their fellows, and one at least (Horatio Greenough) managed to rediscover the principles of functionalism, which we like to consider as a modern idea.
California, by Hiram Powers (1805-1873), made in 1857 for William B. Astor and presented to the Museum by him in 1872
The Veiled Lady, by Raffaello Monti. Italian, 1818-1881.
Gift of Mrs. Brinkman, 1887
The Three Loves, by Lorenzo Bartolini. Italian, 1777-1850. From the collection of Prince Demidoff. Gift of the Duc de Loubat, 1903
Bust of Henry Clay, by Shobal Vail Clevenger (1812-1843). Gift of the Empire Trust Co., Trustee for the Estate of J. Hampden Robb, 1936
The Genius of Mirth, by Thomas Crawford (1813-1857), specially designed for Henry Hicks, New York art patron. Gift of Mrs. Annette W. Hicks-Lord, 1897.