SCULPTURE SURVEY, 1872-1951

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The Museum’s present exhibition of modern American sculpture, now being shown in the Great Hall, affords a most interesting view of the present state of American sculpture here and now. Judging from the works in the exhibition, no matter what one’s preferences may be, they convey a strong impression of the bouncing vigor and vitality, the variety and liveliness of sculpture today. It is perhaps possible for the discerning critic to discover here some indications of the trends or tendencies that the art will take, at least in the near future. This exhibition also provides a convenient point from which to cast a backward glance at the American sculpture of the past, especially at the American sculpture now in the Museum’s permanent collection.

This collection has been accumulating and building up over a long period—eighty years. It has become a monument to the history of sculpture in America. In some respects it affords us as good a survey of certain aspects of what has been going on in the world of sculpture as can be found anywhere. Since 1872 there has been gathered, by gift or by purchase, a collection now numbering three hundred and fifty-five pieces of sculpture, the work of a hundred and seventy-two American sculptors. This monumental aggregation, so large and so varied, the work of so many hands, containing as it does sculpture ranging in scale from miniature cabinet bronzes to heroic groups, and ranging in style from the rigid neoclassic formula of the early nineteenth century to the abstract formula of the present, naturally contains some works that aspired to but never quite attained the permanent status of great works of the art of sculpture. However, in the main the collection contains a good number of substantial works which have found their place in the history of American sculpture. Many pieces in the collection are of sufficiently high quality to have at one time seemed like masterpieces even though some of them have not survived the slow passage of time nor the swift changes in taste and critical temper well enough to remain in that extremely rare category. Much of the sculpture of the past has, it would seem, a naturally strong historical and memorial cast. The passage of a mere fifty years (or less) can, and often does, transform a grand sculptural ornament into a historical curio. But time also works the other way round too, changing the historical curio into a first-class monument.

The first piece of American sculpture to enter the Museum’s collection, and the first work by an American artist acquired by the Museum, was the marble statue California by Hiram Powers. It is, and very appropriately too, the foundation stone of our collection of American art. It is appropriate because Hiram Powers was the first American sculptor to win wide international fame, and his fame had a lot to do with encouraging other Americans to try their hand as sculptors in the first half of the nineteenth century. This work was presented to the Museum in 1872 by William B. Astor.

Viewed as a whole the collection falls into three distinct (if unequally large) groups. First are the marbles made by the mid-nineteenth-century sculptors who followed Powers to Italy; second come the bronzes made by the sculptors who studied in Paris in the 1870’s, 80’s, and 90’s. This group far outnumbers the first group and it equally overshadows the third group, the works of contemporary men and women. It may be truthfully said that most of the sculpture in our American collection was made between 1870 and 1920 by sculptors who were trained in Paris under the masters of the École des Beaux Arts. The tastes and sculptural ideas of these masters were formed during the heyday of the Second Empire of Napoleon III. Their standards admitted no higher honor than the medals and honorable mentions awarded at the annual Paris Salon. These standards were readily ac-

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Andrew Jackson, by Hiram Powers (1805-1873). Gift of Mrs. Frances V. Nash, 1894
cepted by most of their American pupils, and between 1855 and 1914 no less than a hundred and sixty-one American sculptors won the privilege of showing their work at the Paris Salon. Thirty-two pieces of sculpture now in the Museum's collection were first exhibited at the Salon; ten of these were winners of honorable mentions there, and one of them was awarded the higher honor of a medal of the third class. The piece so honored was at that time considered the best work in the collection. This medal was given to Daniel Chester French at the Salon of 1892 for his tomb monument The Milmore Memorial, familiarly known under its second-
The Mountain Man, by Frederic Remington (1861-1909). Rogers Fund, 1907

Perhaps the most interesting of this lot is The Bather by Stewardson, a young Philadelphia sculptor whose promising career was cut short by his death in 1892. The most curious work on the list is the Tomb Effigy of Mrs. Duveneck by her husband, whose fame as an artist rests on his work as a painter. The strange thing about this tomb was its extraordinary popularity. In addition to the gilt-bronze replica in our collection and the original monument in the Allori Cemetery in Florence, Italy, there are no less than seven copies in American art museums in the following cities: Boston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, San Francisco, Indianapolis, and Lincoln, Nebraska. This work was designed by Duveneck in collaboration with his friend the Cincinnati sculptor Clement J. Barnhorn.

In collecting data for a survey of this kind certain facts come to light that have been generally overlooked—some of them very curious. For instance, most sculptors are represented in the collection by only one or two examples of their work, but there are contained in it several large groups of works by one man. Strangely enough the largest of these groups is the collection of works by Olin Levi Warner, a comparatively obscure man and by no means the best sculptor of his time. We have no less than twenty-two pieces of his work. Some of his portrait medallions of Western Indians, made in the 1880's, are interesting documents.

The next largest group by one man is the col-

Percheron Mare and Foal, by Herbert Haseltine. Gift of Mrs. Florence Blumenthal, 1926
lection of twenty-one pieces by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, who for so many years (1880-1907) held a sort of semiofficial position in the American art world as “the greatest American sculptor.”

The Saint-Gaudens collection consists of ten profile portraits modeled in low relief. Perhaps the most notable among these is the portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson. Of his public monuments we have a copy of the head of Farragut from the Farragut statue in Madison Square; a copy of the head of Sherman, the head of Victory, and the figure of Victory, all from the Sherman Monument in Central Park; and a small copy of The Puritan. We also have a copy in reduced scale of his famous Diana, which formerly graced the tower of the old Madison Square Garden. The Amor Caritas, a gilt-bronze angel modeled in high relief, is a study for a tomb monument. Perhaps the most interesting piece in the collection is the elaborate mantelpiece designed by John LaFarge and executed by Saint-Gaudens for the mansion of Cornelius Vanderbilt built in 1882 at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street.

Another large group of works by one artist is the collection of fourteen bronzes by Frederic Remington. Remington was at his best as an
illustrator and painter of the wild West, and interest in his work has been sustained by the widespread enthusiasm for Western Americana.

We have eight pieces by Frederick MacMonnies, and most notable among these is his famous Bacchante, which was banished from the pure precincts of the Boston Public Library in 1897. The storm of protest which drove this piece of sculpture out of Boston seems to have been engineered in large part by the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union—the ladies, it seems, were not so shocked by the nudity of the Bacchante as they were by her spirited tipsiness, that and the fact that she held an infant in her arm. The whole thing was considered an outrageous insult to pure American womanhood.

On the other hand, MacMonnies’ monument to Nathan Hale (of which we have a small copy) appears to please everyone and to be a model public monument.

Paul Bartlett is represented in the collection by seven pieces of sculpture, notable among them his Bohemian Bear-Tamer, already mentioned. Paul Manship and Malvina Hoffman are also represented by seven works. There are six sculptures each by Anna Vaughan Hyatt Huntington and Evelyn Longman; five pieces by Gaston Lachaise; four pieces by Charles Calverley, an almost forgotten New York portrait sculptor; and four pieces by Daniel Chester French, Hermon MacNeil, Bessie Potter Vonnah, and J. Q. A. Ward; and finally three pieces each by the following, Thomas Crawford, Hiram Powers, William Rimmer, William Rinehart, William Story, Launt Thompson, and Herbert Haseltine.

An analysis of the collection by the subjects represented in sculpture throws an interesting side light on the kind of things that interested sculptors, their patrons, and the Museum. It is natural, significant, and not surprising to discover that the most interesting thing in sculpture is human beings and that about a third of the collection consists of portraits. There are about a hundred and ten portraits in all—the majority of them studied from living persons. Two thirds of our portraits are of men. There are thirteen portraits of artists, most interesting of these being the bust of John LaFarge by Edith Burroughs. There are, of course, all sorts of prominent political, social, and historical personages, ranging, among the women, from
Susan B. Anthony to Anna Pavlova; among the men, from George Washington to Elihu Root, from Henry Ward Beecher to Jules S. Bache. There are some prominent old New Yorkers: Mary dePeyster, John Watts, Marshall O. Roberts, J. Insley Blair, Samuel Gray Ward (not to be confused with Sam Ward), and William Tilden Blodgett, a founder of this Museum. There are naturally more portraits (four of them) of Abraham Lincoln than anyone else—the best of these being the marble by George Grey Barnard. Of portraits of Civil War heroes we have only four, Generals Sherman and Hancock, Major General Philip Kearny, and Admiral Farragut. In this group of portraits one finds the most important historical document in the collection—and perhaps it is also the best portrait. This is the bust of President Andrew Jackson by Hiram Powers, done from life studies modeled in the White House in 1835. This is an American monument of the first order both artistically and historically. The largest portrait we have is a semicolossal bronze bust by Launt Thompson of William Cullen Bryant; the smallest is a tiny golden bronze miniature statuette of Pavlova by Alfred Lenz.

The other large group of subjects is that of animals, again about a third of the total collection—with the horse the natural winner in the animal sweepstakes. Many of the animal sculptures are small bronzes; fortunately for us none of the horses are life size. Perhaps the most interesting animal sculptures are the Mares of Diomedes, a large group by Gutzon Borglum, made in 1904, the prize percheron by Herbert Haseltine, the Python of India by Grace Turnbull, the Goat by Flanagan, and the Cat by Zorach. Though we do not have many fountain or garden sculptures there are a few large pieces that could very appropriately be displayed out of doors. For example, The Vine, by Harriet Frishmuth; The Young Sophocles, by Donoghue; the MacMonnies Bacchante; the Panther and Jaguar, by Anna Vaughn Hyatt Huntington; and The Sun Vow, by Hermon MacNeil.

Curiously enough, among the monumental works in the collection we find both the worst and the best of nineteenth-century American sculpture represented. The most imposing monument in the collection, a romantic sculptural
tour de force, colossal in scale, is the strange and powerful Struggle of the Two Natures in Man by George Grey Barnard (made in 1891-1894). One of the most interesting features of this work is the fact that the sculptor himself designed and cut the entire work in the stone, unaided by professional marble-cutters—a feat that few of his contemporaries ever dared to attempt. Perhaps the worst monument in the collection is the work of an obscure New York sculptor known as Professor Richard Park—a monument to Edgar Allan Poe made in Florence in 1883 and unveiled in the Museum in 1885 with the most elaborate dedicatory ceremonies, with hymns, recitations, and speeches. The actual unveiling was managed by an electric telegraph signal dotted out by the hand of that old matinee idol John Gilbert, the speech of presentation was made by Edwin Booth before an audience of about five thousand people.

Other monumental sculpture in the collection is the Milmore Memorial, the Melvin Memorial, and Memory, works by Daniel Chester French, and the bronze monument Universal Peace by Butensky.

Of the rare works of William Rimmer we are fortunate in having three examples—of all the mid-nineteenth century sculptors his work alone had qualities that appeal to modern critics, and in recent years his reputation has been reviewed and his importance re-estimated.

The collection is, of course, well supplied with marble masterpieces by the early American sculptors who went to Italy to work in the 1840’s. Among these might be specially mentioned Babes in the Wood, by Thomas Crawford; Cleopatra, by William Story; and the Nydia by Randolph Rogers. In the same style is The White Captive, by Erastus Dow Palmer. Of works of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century worthy of special mention there is the historically important portrait bust of Ralph Waldo Emerson, an early work by Daniel Chester French (1879), the statuettes by Bessie Potter Vonnoh with their “period piece” charm, and the oddly individual art nouveau work titled Medieval Art, by the Brooklyn metalcraftsman and designer Henry Linder.

In the past few years the collection has been enlivened by the addition of a number of works by modern sculptors, among them Lachaise, de Creeft, Calder, der Harootian, Milles, Nadelman, Laurent, Robus, Ferber, Gross, and many others.

The present exhibition is the second of three large competitive exhibitions being carried out in accordance with the Museum’s policy of increasing its activities in the contemporary American field. In view of the Trustees’ appropriation of a fund of $100,000 to be devoted to the purchase of American sculpture within the next five years for addition to the permanent collection and in view of the lively state of sculpture today as demonstrated in this exhibition, we may say that the future of the collection looks particularly promising.

*Mobile, by Alexander Calder. Rogers Fund, 1942*