

JOEL T. HART'S EXECUTORS:
GEORGE SAUL AND EDWARD SILSBEE

CLIFFORD AMYX

The Kentucky sculptor Joel Tanner Hart suffered any number of misfortunes during his lifetime and then was doubly unfortunate in the manner in which his works, both his sculpture and his poetry, were handled by his executors. He designated the English sculptor George H. Saul, his sometime assistant, as his principal executor, with the important task of completing his ideal group *Woman Triumphant* after his death. The literary adventurer Edward A. Silsbee from Massachusetts, a longtime resident of foreign parts, may have been intended by Hart to be his principal executor for his poetry and was designated in Hart's will as joint executor with Saul. On both counts the executors proved unequal to their task.

Hart, long known and admired in Kentucky as its greatest sculptor, had a native talent for stone-carving, but when he saw Shobal Clevenger of Ohio modeling a bust of Henry Clay he decided to turn to sculpture.¹ He was encouraged by Cassius M. Clay, his first patron, to study sculpture in Cincinnati. In Lexington he received a commission to model President Andrew Jackson, then at the Hermitage, and Jackson was pleased with the bust. In Lexington he also modeled and carved a bust of Henry Clay. After exhibiting his work in Virginia and Philadelphia he was commissioned by the Ladies' Clay Association of Richmond, Virginia, to carve a full-length statue of Henry Clay.

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¹ For the documents relating to Hart's early career as a mason and sculptor, see J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Three Kentucky Artists: Hart, Price, Troye* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974). The most thorough study of Hart's life and work is by David B. Dearing, "Joel Tanner Hart: Kentucky's Neo-Classic Sculptor," *Kentucky Review* 8 (Spring, 1988): 3-32. Dearing has made a close study of Hart's work in the eastern United States before he departed for Europe. See "The Diary of Joel Tanner Hart, Kentucky Sculptor," *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 64 (1990): 5-13.

Hart determined to follow Hiram Powers, Shobal Clevenger, and Henry Kirke Brown, who had learned their craft principally in Cincinnati, to Italy and to carve the statue of Henry Clay there.² The lure of "pure white marble" for the American sculptors of the time was enough to make it, as Michelangelo said of Tuscan marble, "mother's milk."

Before Hart left for Italy he made careful measurements of Henry Clay, made casts of his hands and a face mask, and had daguerreotypes made by a Cincinnati photographer, beginning a passion for accuracy which he possessed throughout his life. He worked three years on the models of Clay and on certain busts before departing for Italy. It was then Hart's great misfortune to lose all his models in the sinking of a vessel in the Bay of Biscay. He had traveled to Liverpool on a separate vessel, and he had saved only the photographs of Clay and his own personal effects.

On the way to Florence, Hart had stopped at London where he studied anatomy again, as he had at Transylvania, and measured models from the life; it was some two years before the second model of Clay, full-length, arrived in Florence. In the meantime he had set about perfecting his famous or infamous pointing machine, for which he had developed a primitive example in making his bust of Cassius M. Clay in 1844. Working to perfect the machine in Florence without the necessary Italian to work with Italian craftsmen in iron work, he was aided by the Massachusetts lawyer Frederick Gale who advised him to patent the machine.

In the meantime Hart had heard complaints, "imputations of laziness," from Richmond regarding his failure to complete the

² When Albert Ten Eyck Gardner sought to revive interest in the white marble sculptors in his *Yankee Stonecutters* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1945), he said that there was "something in the air" of Cincinnati which produced sculptors. This "something" was in fact Frederick Eckstein who sought to found an art academy in Cincinnati in the 1820s. Hiram Powers was directly indebted to Eckstein and others possibly indirectly, especially for knowledge of the process of making life masks and certain other sculptural processes.



Model for the Statues of Henry Clay

The Filson Club

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³ The letters of Gale and Read on behalf of Hart are among the Addison G. Foster Papers, Special Collections, University of Kentucky Libraries.



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These letters were handed to Hart himself for transmission to interested parties in both Richmond and Lexington who were concerned about Hart's delay. In Italy Read was turning away from sculpture to painting and poetry, and both he and Hart were studying at the Academy at Florence. But Read's letter, which detailed their study to improve their art, gave the case away by asking Hart directly to get on with the completion of the commissioned statue of Clay.

Leaving work on the full-length *Clay* to assistants, Hart went again to Britain, seeking a patent on his pointing machine. He also exhibited an ideal bust *La Penserosa* based on Milton's poem. The patent was granted in Britain, and Hart was to make busts in Britain, activity which brought him funds, but which he later regretted. Hart began to suspect a conspiracy in Florence among the Italian stone-carvers who regarded it as a device to rob them of employment and among the sculptors who mocked it and who could not use the complicated device. Hart began to suspect that even Hiram Powers, who had admired the fidelity of likeness in Hart's busts, despised his machine.

Thomas Crawford, the sculptor of the "Armed Freedom" atop the dome of the Capitol in Washington, referred privately to the machine as something dragged from a cell of the Inquisition: "I could not help but cheer the poor fellow up, though this work of his is really most melancholy for the arts."⁴ Thomas Ball, who witnessed Hart's will and was closer to Hart than Crawford, spoke similarly of some instrument of torture (the "scavenger's daughter") but gave perhaps the best actual description of the working of the machine. He added that no other sculptor would use the machine for life modelling, and Hart would not have used it had he not invented it.⁵

The letters were made available to me through the courtesy of James D. Birchfield, Assistant Director of Libraries for Collections Development, University of Kentucky.

⁴ Thomas Crawford to his wife, 8 January 1854, cited by Robert Gale, *Thomas Crawford, American Sculptor* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1964), 219, n. 9.

⁵ Thomas Ball, *My Threescore Years and Ten. An Autobiography* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891), 201.

Hart returned from London depressed and impoverished perhaps, but he had proved that he could work in haste to complete the heroic bronze of Clay for the city of New Orleans, a sound commission and a profitable one. The statue at Richmond and the one at New Orleans were dedicated the same year; Hart returned to America, but he did not go to Richmond, only to New Orleans. He failed to gain a commission for the Clay monument in the Lexington Cemetery but did obtain one for a life-size statue for the Jefferson County Courthouse in Louisville. He was conscious of criticisms directed against the Richmond statue and agreed to improve the Louisville statue.

Hart's attention was then transferred to his passion for the Ideal in sculpture. With funds from the New Orleans statue and the commission for the Louisville statue he was able to indulge this passion. He had seen that Hiram Powers had made nearly a fortune from Ideal sculpture, especially from the *Greek Slave* which was to be the most popular statue of the mid century. He wrote to Cassius M. Clay, then ambassador to Russia:

... it is to the ideal that I have mostly devoted myself for the past fifteen years; allowing only two or three busts to go out of my hands . . . and have at last gratified my passion in modelling a life-ideal Virgin and Child in a group: not the Christian Virgin and Child however . . . "Beauty's Triumph."⁶

"Fifteen years" is clearly an exaggeration. Hart had worked on the Richmond statue of Clay for most of this fifteen years. The heroic bronze for New Orleans had been completed, and the pointing machine had been an obsession of the middle 1850s. Hart had exhibited *La Penserosa* in London, a *Juno* had been noticed by James Jackson Jarves. But toward the end of the 1850s he made a *Cicero* for Centre College and a *Young Augustus* which is not now located. These were replicas of antique sculpture. The figural group which was to dominate the last years of Hart's life, mentioned to Cassius Clay as "Beauty's Triumph," was

⁶ Hart to Cassius M. Clay, 22 January 1865. Quoted in full in Clay's autobiographical *Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay* (Cincinnati: J. Fletcher Brennan, 1886), 225.

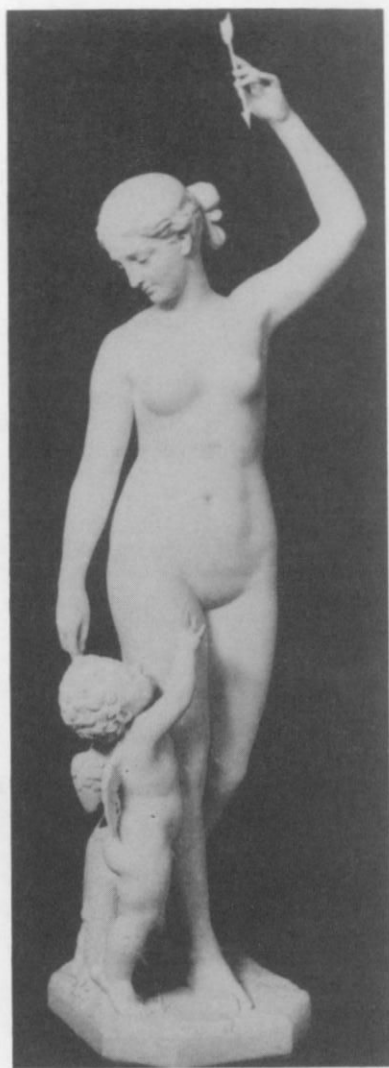


Woman Triumphant

Lisa Desha Breckinridge

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for busts was depressed. Hart may have had no other major commissions except the Louisville statue of Clay, in place by 1867, but he was continually improvident and was to move from his apartment into his studio at 8 Piazza Indipendenza. The Kentuckian's who visited Hart were surprised by his "sculptor's rig" and his studio's dirt floor. Hart was continually careful to keep his clay model wet and slept on a cot near the model so that he could inspect or wet it down again with his own invention, a spray gun, when moisture was needed.

In the middle 1870s Hart began to be ill with the "stone," for which surgery was unsuccessful. He went about Florence more grizzled and stooped, with a shawl about him in cold weather. He was referred to as "little Signor Hart" (usually with affection), though Hart was not in fact as small as the usual Florentine and had a strong body as he remarked in his will. George H. Saul, his assistant in Hart's last days, cared for the studio, but it was Hart's friend, the American sculptor Thomas Ball, who provided a poignant account of the Kentuckian's last days. He wrote to the young sculptor Daniel Chester French:

Poor old Hart has passed away without seeing his labour of so many years accomplished. After having half finished his figure in marble, he was obliged to give up and his friends succeeded in getting him out of that horrid den he had lived in upward of a quarter of a century. He lived about six weeks after as comfortable as we could make it for him. The poor old man was surprised to find he had so many friends outside of his studio. His figure is being finished with the hope of selling it and with the proceeds to carry out the twin idea of his life, of publishing to the world his book of poetry with his biography. This was his last request.⁷

Joel Tanner Hart passed away in Florence on 2 March 1877.

The English sculptor George H. Saul had been Hart's assistant at times, and Hart designated Saul as his executor, to complete *Woman Triumphant* which was being cast in plaster and at least partially carved in marble. From the correspondence it is fairly clear that Saul was willing to take on the completion of the ideal

⁷ Thomas Ball to Daniel Chester French, cited by Wayne Craven in *Sculpture in America* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), 200.

group and also the settling of certain affairs with respect to Hart's sculpture. But it is also clear that he had no head for the complex negotiations which were to ensue. Perhaps it was in some premonition that this might occur that Hart also designated Edward Silsbee as an executor. They signed themselves jointly at times. Saul referred to himself in a letter to Hart's niece Dian Weaver as the "art executor" and confessed that he had no aptitude for the settling of estates.⁸ But Hart was gullible in his acceptance of Silsbee, perhaps hoping he could see to his papers. Silsbee had a reputation in Florence for over-eager and flamboyant dealings.

In January 1878 H. C. Pindell of Louisville, a legatee in Hart's will, became concerned about the settlement of the estate and by March was in touch with J. Schuyler Crosby, the United States consul in Florence. Pindell had been in effect Hart's agent in Louisville. He had asked for a copy of the *Venus de Medici* for exhibition at the Louisville Exposition, had been instrumental in forwarding the commission for the statue of Clay for Louisville, and had assisted Hart in other matters. Hart bequeathed certain papers to Pindell, the pointing machine to be placed in a desirable museum — but not in Frankfort. (It is now at the Museum of History and Science in Louisville.)

In response to Pindell's request, Crosby initiated an inquiry, asking Saul and Silsbee to meet with him. He had formed an unfavorable impression of the executors before meeting them. He wrote to Pindell on 3 June 1878:

Mr. Silsbee is not an artist, not even a resident of Florence, but a general traveler, quite unsuited to the trust at hand. Mr. Saul is an English sculptor of indifferent reputation as an artist, and as I hear, the executorship is managed with the special aim of promoting the interest of his own studio.⁹

This initial unfavorable impression from inquiries in Florence

⁸ George Saul to Miss [Dian] Weaver, 18 July 1880. The Hart Papers, Special Collections, University of Kentucky Libraries.

⁹ Crosby to Pindell, 3 June 1878, Papers of Henry Clay Pindell, 1857-1882, Manuscript Department, The Filson Club, Louisville, Kentucky.

was reinforced the next day at the meeting he had requested. He wrote again to Pindell:

In strictest confidence, I am obliged to declare to you, I have no confidence whatever in Mr. Silsbee's word of integrity in this matter nor in Mr. Saul's management of the trust. As U. S. Consul it would not be my wish to enter into controversy with them. At the same time, their conduct in evading their plain duty repeated [equivocally?] is so palpable that I must confirm my request . . . that you send me full legal powers to do what is necessary to protect your rights . . .¹⁰

Crosby may not have told Saul and Silsbee that he had asked for authority from Pindell to act on his behalf, but he surely expressed himself firmly enough to produce action on the part of the executors. They soon left Florence. Saul wrote that he was to be addressed at Cumberland, Crosby upon Eden, Carlisle, England. Silsbee "traveled." Crosby complained that they had left without leaving funds for the shipment of Hart's papers to Pindell which they had given to the consul. Crosby may have queried Silsbee on his actual role in the executorship about which he was not clear. Silsbee was sufficiently stirred to write a letter to Pindell on 5 June 1878 explaining his long friendship with Hart:

I knew Hart in '54 and we grew to have a warm friendship. He had literary ambition and tastes. . . I met him in London in '58 . . . and I did not meet him again until '69. . . I was in Florence every winter but one after that. In his last year or so I came to know he was pinched for means & I persuaded him to let me help which I did . . . he urged me to become his executor, writing to me at Nice & I could not refuse him in his last illness.¹¹

Silsbee had actually traveled to America and was in Boston late in 1878, where he was corresponding with Pindell again.¹² He was still acting as an agent, hoping to find a purchaser for the group, *Woman Triumphant*. He had received an offer from Pindell for the group, but the offer was not sufficiently attractive and was refused. In another letter he said that he and Saul expected to realize \$7,000 for the group, which was the offering

¹⁰ Crosby to Pindell, 4 June 1878, *ibid.*

¹¹ Crosby to Pindell, 5 June 1878, *ibid.*

¹² Silsbee to Pindell, 8 and 15 November 1878, *ibid.*

price Hart had made to John O. Wilson in Lexington before his death.

Silsbee was also in touch with Rachel Pomeroy who had been bequeathed \$700 by Hart to see to the publication of his poems. She had aided Hart greatly in editing his poems for publication. Silsbee was impressed by her; he approved the decision by Hart, but there is no indication as to whether he provided the funds from Hart's estate for publication, nor is there any record that the poems were ever published.

Silsbee was back in Italy soon, and in March 1879 he and Saul were still seeking a better offer than that of Pindell. Saul was at the same time very disappointed that there were no orders for busts from Kentucky, and he was complaining that the Wilson group of Hart's admirers in Lexington had not paid for the bust of Hart made by Saul. He asked Pindell to intervene on his behalf and to remove his bust of Hart from the custody of Wilson.¹³ In December 1879 Saul heard nothing of Silsbee. Saul had all but decided to accept Pindell's offer for the group of *Woman Triumphant* but then reversed himself and accepted an offer from a well-known firm in New York. This was Tiffany and Company which was finally to offer the group to Lexington. The group was ready to be shipped to America by March 1880; it came to Tiffany's.¹⁴ Saul wrote at the same time that the shipment of the "blocking out machine" would be difficult and expensive.

The colorful Silsbee, who does not figure further in Hart's affairs, attained a strange "immortality" obliquely by becoming the central character in Henry James's *Aspern Papers*. Though James stated in his preface to the *Aspern Papers* that there is no "reflected glint" of him (the unnamed Silsbee), he heard anecdotes of much the same kind that Crosby must have heard when

13 Silsbee to Pindell, 5 March 1879, *ibid*.

14 The communications of Tiffany's agent to the Lexington group concerned with *Woman Triumphant* and other Hart works are noted in Issa Desha Breckinridge, "The Work Shall Praise the Master," *A Memorial to Joel T. Hart* (Cincinnati, 1886), 26.

he began inquiries into Hart's executors.¹⁵ The family of the American painter John Singer Sargent, and the young Sargent, knew Silsbee. It was Turner Sargent who wrote:

Yes, I know Silsbee, living a false life . . . after 2 or 3 voyages of great length, (he) pulled up at Trieste, sold the whole concern and "flew to Venice" . . . He had quite a gift of language, but as he had not been thoroughly educated he cannot become what his ambition desires, an Essayist, so he frets. . . Italy is the best place for him.¹⁶

It was Saul who was to continue the vital task of seeing to the disposition of Hart's sculpture. He hoped to profit in Kentucky from the great number of plaster casts left in the studio but apparently did not profit greatly. The expected return from *Woman Triumphant* was considerably less than he and Silsbee expected. Saul did not acquire any substantial reputation as a sculptor. In 1876 in the very midst of the settlement of Hart's estate, Saul exhibited a portrait bust *Imogen* at the Royal Academy in London and three ideal works — *Aristodemus*, *Sleep*, and *Despair*. There is no further notice of his work.¹⁷

The final disposition of the group, Hart's major work of his last years, is indicated in the conditions of sale to the Hart Memorial Association in Lexington by Mr. Gray of Tiffany's in New York.

. . . we have made but one serious attempt to sell the statue, as we think it sufficiently attractive in our establishment to hold it for its merit; but the object named [to place it in Lexington] now seems so appropriate we would gladly assist in the enterprise, and to that end will name — for this purpose alone — a price of \$5,000 . . . much less than the statue was held at by Mr. Hart. . .¹⁸

The fate of *Woman Triumphant* illustrates the misfortunes of Joel T. Hart. The proposal to place it in a gallery or museum

15 Leon Edel and Lyall Powers, eds., *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), entry of 12 January 1887.

16 Turner Sargent to George Bemis, 19 January 1877, cited in Stanley Olson, *John Singer Sargent* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 24.

17 A survey of the materials on Saul at the National Art Library (of Britain) at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, reveals only the information cited here.

18 Issa Breckinridge, *Memorial*, 26.

devoted to Hart in Lexington failed, and it was placed in the Fayette County Courthouse. In the Courthouse it was shown behind a glass screen; Hart's fear that any statue exhibited in a public place would be subject to spattering by tobacco juice in Kentucky was renewed after his death. The final tragedy was that this statue, to which Hart devoted obsessive attention in his last years, was destroyed by fire. Its fame locally, however, was shown by the enthusiasm with which fragments of the statue — some parts had not been reduced to lime — were sought by souvenir seekers.

Marble carvers were to decline in reputation toward the end of the 19th century. Lorado Taft repeated much of James Jackson Jarves's criticism of Hart, especially the "old clothes" criticism of Hart's Clay statues.¹⁹ Nathaniel Hawthorne had suspected that marble sculpture lacked a true mission even in mid century, though he was fascinated by the opinions and works of Hiram Powers. Toward the end of the century Henry James wrote a biography of William Wetmore Story and his friends and spoke of the "white marmorean flock" as if some of their life in Rome was empty.²⁰ It was only with Albert Ten Eyck Gardner's *Yankee Stonecutters* (1945) that the reputation of marble carvers was revived, but Gardner believed that Hart had dreamed away most of his life. Hart finally came to believe that his poetry was more important than his sculpture, but it is still unpublished.²¹ This is almost a parody of the weakness of the so-called "literary sculptors," who were unable to do what the Realists firmly believed in doing, justifying their subject as "real life."

19 Lorado Taft was in effect the "dean" of American sculpture in his time. He disapproved of "old clothes statuary" but found a certain honesty in the head of Clay carved by Hart in the Richmond statue. See *History of American Sculpture* (New York: Macmillan, 1924; first edition 1903), 103.

20 Henry James, *William Wetmore Story* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903).

21 Hart's poems have not been published. Some poems are in the Durrett Collection, University of Chicago Library; microfilm of Hart's papers in this collection are in Special Collections, University of Kentucky Libraries. Silsbee's instructions to Rachel Pomeroy, and any poems he may have conveyed to her, have not been located.

KENTUCKY

Joel Tanner Hart

Kentucky! my proud, native State,
 Home of the free, the fair, the great,
 I love thee, old Kentucky!
 Whate'er thy fortune or thy fate,
 I honor thee, Kentucky!

Mighty to conquer and to save
 And like thy hunters true and brave,
 Bold pioneers, Kentucky!
 Whose sons thy glorious banners wave,
 For Liberty, Kentucky!

The first few, knaves and fools for lust
 Of power, who trailed thy flag in dust
 And tore it, oh Kentucky,
 Thy warriors sweep with thunder-gust
 Like chaff away, Kentucky!

On Freedom, on! the thunder-cloud
 That thy fair future seems to shroud
 Will roll away, Kentucky!
 Brighter, with all its stars, thy proud
 Old Flag shall wave, Kentucky!

Strike for the "Union!" let it be
 Thy watchword—strike for liberty,
 Home, honor, fame, Kentucky,
 Eternal war on anarchy
 If severed, oh Kentucky!

Thy sisters all weep o'er the grave
 Of sons misled and freedom's brave,
 Be blasted, oh Kentucky,
 The vile who planted here the slave
 Or would despoil Kentucky!

The thrill of "Independence day,"
 Great Washington, and that array
 Of Patriots, oh Kentucky!
 Live, with the mighty voice of Clay,
 In thy brave heart, Kentucky!