CHAPTER 11

Pressing the Case: Case Studies in the Use of Poetry in Sculptural Competition in Washington, D.C.

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During the War of 1812, the British military succeeded in exacting the ultimate indignity on the young United States when they set fire to the United States Capitol and the White House (then called the President's House). Although not yet completed, these structures were integral to the purpose-built capital city and crucial investments in the belief that the experimental nation could survive. After considering the abandonment of Washington, D.C., governmental leaders instead decided to double down on their investment. They pressed for the repair and completion of the buildings and began a campaign of construction, decoration, and embellishment that would last (with some interruptions) until after the Civil War. The history of the construction and decoration of these federal buildings has been the subject of extensive study and most of the works of art that were commissioned to adorn the Capitol and White House have become well-known backdrops of the nation's political pomp.[1] At least in theory, government officials sought to complete these buildings as quickly as possible, even authorizing the international recruitment of sculptors and stone-carvers.

Although Washington, D.C., did not have an existing reputation as a city of art (How could it, when it was founded merely a few decades earlier?), the word began to spread throughout the young United States and across the Atlantic Ocean, that it could be an auspicious destination for ambitious artists. That many artists travelled to, and sought commissions in, Washington, D.C. across these decades is well known. Less understood, to date, has been the structure through which they competed for commissions and how this process might have differed from the existing practices in European art centers. Lacking a Royal Academy of Art and an existing Salon exhibition culture, how could artists promote their work? How could viewers determine what was good and what merited a commission? Without any existing court and Academy infrastructure, which government official might have decision-making authority? While, of course, the structures of the art world in European capitals were neither immovable nor monolithic, the complete absence of any established procedure by which a democratic government would assess or commission art left the process open to any range of strategies that an artist could dream up. We can imagine the art world of Washington in these decades alternatively as a field of dreams or a minefield—but certainly not as an orderly, predictable process of calls for proposals, juries, and public comment.

As eager as government officials were to have completed structures in which to work, they often failed to allocate the necessary funds to keep the work moving forward and were perpetually distracted by issues more urgent than the sculptural and pictorial embellishment of governmental buildings. Catching the attention of these officials, guiding their decision-making, and ensuring the allocation of funds became a central concern of the artists who flocked to the

[1] Foundational texts include: Architect of the Capitol 1976; Brown 1900/1903 (also available in a reprinted edition with preface and updated annotations in Architect of the Capitol 2007); Fryd 2001; Kennon 2000; Reed 2005.

city, eager to work for the government. As they pressed their case, artists seeking high-profile commissions needed to walk a fine line between being perceived as caring for the public good and appearing to be wholly self-serving.

Records confirm that many strategies were employed for getting the attention of government officials. Artists would call on an official in his place of residence. They and their advocates would write letters of inquiry. They would participate actively in the social life of the city, attending social events hosted by government officials or cultural events in the city. They would spend as much time as possible in the public buildings—if they were lucky, they might be granted an improvised studio space in the Capitol or on its grounds. They would offer works for exhibition in the public spaces of the Capitol—frequently being allocated space in the Library of Congress (which was then inside the Capitol itself) and sometimes even in the Rotunda. They would offer to make portraits of government officials and, more generally, they would cultivate these relationships over many years' time. And, as will be the focus of this article, artists would seek to have their work promoted in the local and national press.

Of all the strategies employed by artists who competed for work in Washington, the use of press coverage has left the most substantial paper trail, producing overwhelming numbers of articles, issued in multiple regional publications.[2] In the case of Horatio Greenough, one of three sculptors discussed in greater detail here, many hundreds of newspaper articles mentioned the artist, with numerous featuring lengthy discussions of individual works, his studio, his travels, and other details of his career.[3] In seeking press coverage, artists took advantage of another reality in Washington—the free press was able to comment without fear of official repression, which differed substantially from many other global regions at the time.[4] Though its role in artistic competition has been only minimally explored, and the full weight of its influence remains to be more completely studied, newspaper coverage was a prominent factor in the jockeying among artists for government commissions.[5] For all artists, a principal challenge of these decades was opposing the commonly-held notion that art was a tool of monarchs and aristocracies and that patronage was, therefore, unnecessary or even unwise for a democratic republic.[6] Well-placed newspaper articles likely played a key role in swaying government officials on these matters as they deliberated, whether behind closed doors in committee rooms in the Capitol or in the White House, if a commission should be awarded and which artist(s) should produce the work.

The existence of a free press posed an alluring field of opportunity for artists. It also risked uncertain negative consequences, as the great degree of press freedom, coupled with the lack of official structures in the art world, meant that there were not many precedents to weigh in deciding how to engage with one's professional image or attack competitors' reputations.

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[2] Once published, an article was often recirculated across numerous outlets throughout the United States, sometimes with reference to the periodical of origin and sometimes not.

[3] My research archive on Greenough alone includes more than three hundred newspaper citations.

[4] On the Italian peninsula in the same period, for example, the circulation of periodicals and the content they contained was highly correlated to the government structure in each area. Different cities were subject to varying levels of permissiveness or scrutiny and this could also change rapidly, depending on political events.

[5] The most complete recent source that touches on this topic is Katz 2020. No similar source exists for art in the Washington, D.C. context. For historical context of art criticism in periodicals, see, *inter alia*: Ames 1972, Huntzicker 1999, Ratner and Teeter 2003, and Smith 1977.

[6] For a discussion of these issues see, for example, Latrobe 1811: 16.

Through newspaper articles, artists faced the possibility of angering a crucial government official, being the subject of commentary that was damaging (or even fatal) to an artist's ambitions or stepping into a pitfall that could sour public opinion. Artists became public figures through extensive press coverage, a reality that came with pressures of its own. While artists might have some control over the positive coverage that they and their allies placed in the newspapers, they had little ability to anticipate or prevent negative articles that might emerge in the service of their competitors. Of course, rebuttals and counter-articles could be somewhat effective, but they might not erase the advantage achieved by certain accusations.[7] In the years under consideration, increasing nativism and the 'know nothing' spirit of Jacksonian populism raised the hazards of press coverage for immigrant artists. Even if highly trained and eager to serve the young Republic, a foreign-born artist faced increasing challenges in a cultural moment in which native-born artists could manipulate identity politics and nativist tendencies, even if they lacked the artistic training and record to readily complete commissions.

For historians seeking to trace the activities of artists in the nineteenth-century, newspaper sources play an increasingly accessible role. While digitization is still ongoing, numerous periodicals have become available through free online platforms and paid databases that allow the collection of sources from home or office, reducing the need for the review of microfilm/microfiche or lengthy travel to archives of periodicals in distant cities. A topic as prominent as federal art commissions can yield a trove of hundreds of pertinent newspaper references, making this research abundance a bit of a mixed blessing due to challenges in organization, analysis, and synthesis of information.

If finding relevant articles is, increasingly, a straightforward process, analyzing them is more complex. Newspapers provide a rich set of sources and data-points, but through interpretation and analysis, historians must weigh the veracity and weight of the evidence and arguments presented in these sources. Many newspaper articles are anonymous, a fact that leaves open the question of whether they might have been authored by, or at the immediate request of, an artist mentioned in the story. Given the complex politics of Washington, and the close association of newspaper editors and contributors to members of the political class, the political allegiances of authors also linger just beneath the surface of the facts and arguments contained, sometimes obscuring, rather than clarifying, the basic information. Further, the tenor of periodical accounts must be assessed through the specific *politesse* of their period eye—compliments, offenses, and veiled attacks could be readily evident to the competing artists involved, but not always so clear to scholars. Close study of newspaper accounts in relation to one another in a short span of time, across the breadth of a specific commission competition, and / or across a single artist's career can allow deeper understanding of how periodicals were used by artists to serve their career aspirations, to settle accounts with one another, or to seek to move the needle on the public's assessment of art in service of democracy.

Among the many press strategies employed by artists and their supporters, one type of press coverage will be explored in this article: newspaper publication of poems about individual artists or their works. This article analyzes three poems, each about a different sculptor. The sculptors were each active with, or seeking, federal commissions. All three poems use ties to

[7] In this period, artists could also not be certain of the same protections under the law that exist today. Articles could contain completely false information or even libelous statements, often without true repercussions.

Europe and allusions to antiquity, perhaps in an attempt to advance the career of the artist-subject. As a sub-set of press coverage about artists in Washington, D.C., poems were rare. These three examples, then, represent exceptional, rather than typical, instances in the relationship between artists and the press. In particular, this subset of materials represents the pinnacle of highbrow coverage for these artists. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought, poetry was considered to be the highest art form, exceeding painting and sculpture. The close relationship between poetry and visual art, first conceptualized by Horace through the concept of *ut pictura poesis* ("as is painting so is poetry"),[8] meant that poetry was also considered a valuable genre for interpreting and elevating the visual arts.[9] Yet, since poetry was an elite art form, it could also pose certain pitfalls in a society where populist tendencies were on the rise and education would not necessarily hold sway. Despite the obvious risks, none of the three poems considered in this article attempts to address this wider populist audience. This article analyzes the themes raised in each poem and the comparisons and contexts put forward for each artist or work of art discussed. Considering the poems alongside one another, some reflections are also made concerning the possibilities and limitations of poetry as a promotional form of art-writing in Washington, D.C. periodicals of the 1830s and early 1840s.

The three poems considered here—each published and circulated in *The National Intelligencer*, the premiere newspaper of Washington—will serve as comparative examples of the role of poetry in competitions among sculptors. The work of an unnamed poet (credited solely as "A. P.") was used to promote Luigi Persico (1781–1860), as he returned to Washington, D.C. from Naples, Italy in 1834 with two federal commissions in tow (allegorical figures of *War* and *Peace*), and launched a campaign to secure an additional commission [Fig. 11.4].[10] Interestingly, the featured poem was published in French, a language that would have been familiar to many readers, but would inevitably have struck a foreign and, perhaps, elitist tone for American readers. Published only in this venue, the poem may have been composed, as Persico's statues were shown in Naples, where they were modelled and carved, before being shipped to Washington. G. Hood, a poet about whom I have uncovered no further information, offered a "Sonnet to Pettrich, the Sculptor" in 1840 –[Fig. 11.5].[11] Rather than praising a particular work by the sculptor Ferdinand Pettrich (1798–1872), the verses were centered on telling some aspects of his life story, and calling readers to support commissions from the sculptor. Lastly, H[enry] T. Tuckerman's verses on Horatio Greenough's *George Washington*, published in 1842 after the work was installed, to mixed reviews, in the United States Capitol, highlights the patriotic role the sculpture will play in the Rotunda, while also emphasizing the sculpture's roots in Europe

[8] Horace, *Ars Poetica* 361.

[9] There is a long art historical tradition of analyzing *ut picture poesis* and the associated concept of *ekphrasis*, though this has long been more closely associated with the generation of paintings, rather than sculpture. Of particular interest to considering the relationship of sculpture to poetry in the early nineteenth century is Hamrick and Nash 2006.

[10] "A. P." 1834. Published in the *National Intelligencer*, Issue 6818, Column E, on December 17. 1834. English translation by Anne W. Sienkewicz and Julia A. Sienkewicz.

[11] Hood 1840.

[Fig.11.7].[12] The publication of a poem by Tuckerman, a prominent art critic, would associate the sculptor and his work with Tuckerman's professional reputation. Each of these three poetic examples offered endorsement and support of a sculptor engaged in, or seeking, work for the United States Capitol. Far from presenting straightforward criticism of the sculptors' works, these poems are each clearly intended to press the case of the sculptor's merit with an audience that had the power to endorse or decline future attempts to secure commissions. Overall, analysis and comparison of these poems indicates that their authors have little interest in a wider, populist audience and are, instead, directing their verses purely toward a more elite readership, probably consisting primarily of those politicians and other public officials who upheld the standards of taste.

This article is drawn from a much larger *corpus* of research for an in-progress book manuscript, currently titled *Modelling Civilization: Transnational Sculpture and the United States Capitol, 1825*–1865. This book studies the three commissions for sculptural "adornment" of the ceremonial east entrance of the United States Capitol [Fig. 11.1]. Each commission was justified as a work of architectural sculpture that would contribute to the completion of the building.

Figure 11.1: Persico completed three commissions on the Capitol's East front: *The Genius of America* (in the pediment), *Peace* and *War* (in niches behind the colonnade) and *The Discovery Group* (visible flanking the stairs). John Plumbe, *United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., east front elevation, ca. 1846*.

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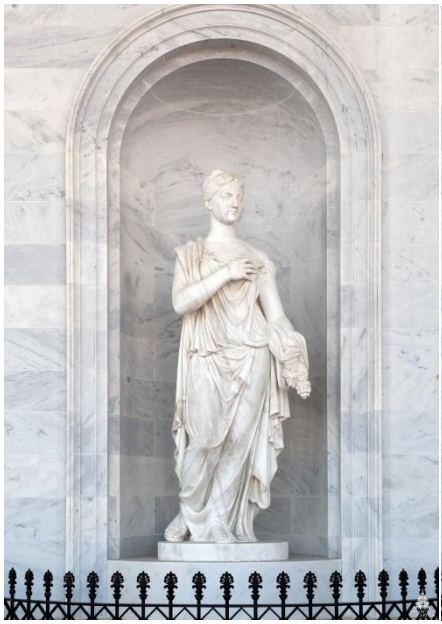
[12] These verses were published in Watterston 1842: 53–54 along with Watterston's description of Greenough's statue of Washington. While Watterston's book was still in press, the description of the statue and Tuckerman's verses appeared, with editorial comments, in *The National Intelligencer*. *The North American* 1842 reprinted the article from *The National Intelligencer.*




Figures 11.2 & 11.3: Marble replica of Luigi Persico, *Peace*, 1829-1835 (l.). Marble replica of Luigi Persico, *War*, 1829-1835 (r.). Re-carved 1958-1960 from the original statues under supervision of Paul Manship, with the work carried out by Carl Schmitz, George Giannetti and the Vermont Marble Company, *viz* https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/war-and-peace [last accessed May 20, 2025]. Photographs courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol https://www.flickr.com/photos/uscapitol/albums/.

Persico completed the commission for *Peace* and *War*, designed for niches flanking the east entrance of the United States Capitol [Figs. 11.2 and 11.3][13] in 1834, but wound up in fierce competition with Greenough and Pettrich for another commission. This competitive process unfolded in Washington, D.C. between 1835 and 1837. Ultimately, the final commission was divided between Persico and Greenough, each of whom was responsible for a monumental sculpture group to flank the east staircase. The three poems discussed here were identified while gathering a large body of newspaper sources concerning these federal commissions.

In praising the work of Persico, poet A. P. focuses on responding to the allegorical works of *Peace* and *War*. At the time of the poem's publication, Persico had recently returned to Washington from Naples after an absence of five years during which he had conceptualized, modelled and carved the works.[14] Although Persico seems to have taken pride in promoting his sculptural technique as based on realism, rather than on the classical tradition, the poem's opening lines praise him as a "rival to Canova" and as a "new Praxiteles." Antonio Canova (1757–1822) was the best-known name in sculpture in the young United States. Staging Persico as a rival of Canova would present him as worthy of the latter's legacy and therefore deserving of federal commissions. Positioning Persico as the inheritor of the legacy of Praxiteles, meanwhile, made a direct connection between the contemporary sculptor's work and the most renowned sculptures

[13] The heavily-damaged original sculptures by Persico were placed in storage during renovations made to the Capitol façade in the 1950s. Recreations of the sculptures were made. These works were carved based on plaster models taken from the originals but also edited by the 20th-century sculptural team, who set out to make repairs and return the works to their original appearance.

[14] Persico's studio practice remains undocumented. It is not known whether he carved the works himself or with the assistance of stone carvers in Naples

A.P.
"Á Persico"

Rival de Canova! Praxitele nouveau,
Mars et Vénus sont nés sous tes coups de ciseau!
L'on admire dans Mars, la force et le courage;
Il est pret à marcher, à frayer son passage
Autravers des guerriers, des morts et des mourants;
A vaincre, à pardoner ses ennemis tremblants!
Dans Vénus, ou la Paix, éclate de nobles;
Le marbre est amolé, l'on y voit la souplesse,
La grace et la beauté qui font naître l'amour;
Ces deux Divinités te doivent donc le jour!

Translation:
Canova's Rival! New Praxiteles,
Mars and Venus are born beneath your chisel blows!
One admires the strength and courage in Mars;
He is ready to march, to forge his pathway
Through warriors, dead and dying men;
To conquer, to pardon his trembling enemies!
In Venus, or Peace, noble things burst forth;
Marble becomes soft, suppleness is seen in it;
Grace and beauty cause love to be born;
These two Divinities, thus owe you their life!

Figure 11.4: A.P. (1834) "Á Persico," *National Intelligencer,* December 1, 1834, Issue 6818, Column E.

from the ancient Greek tradition. With four quick words, the poet ambitiously pronounced Persico as equal to, or exceeding, the greatest artists of the ancient and modern traditions.

While these references to Canova and Praxiteles bring art historical context to the poet's praise of Persico, they also could have more specific meaning for claims about the artist's identity and worth. Canova was an Italian sculptor—and to an American audience Canova's name was associated with the most desirable characteristics of the Italian sculptural tradition. Canova represented Italy and the key qualities of Italian artists to Americans at this time. Praxiteles, by contrast, would be a tie to the Classical past and, specifically, to the Ancient Greek artistic heritage with which the American public associated itself through the form of its public buildings and, frequently, in political rhetoric.[15] Conveniently enough, Southern Italy was *Magna Graecia*, the area of the Greek colonies on the Italian peninsula. Hailing Persico as the "new Praxiteles" could draw a direct line between the Neapolitan sculptor and his ancient Greek predecessor, both in terms of artistic traditions and racial heritage.[16]

The remaining nine lines speak directly of the sculptural works as if they are living divinities to which Persico has given life—another poetic strategy to elevate the sculptor's work. Both *War* (referred to by the poet as *Mars*) and *Peace* (referred to variously as *Venus* and *Peace*) are described in evocative, lifelike terms. Mars is described as prepared to charge forward powerfully in defense of his country and the certain defeat of his enemies. *Peace*, meanwhile, is characterized with the sensualized language typical of descriptions of *Venus*. The figure is "soft" and "supple" and inspires "love" in her viewers.

The poet's iconographic confusion between whether the statue presented an allegory of Peace or of Venus is interesting, as mischaracterizing the meaning of the figure surely lessens the conceptual power of the works. More sensitive art critics, including an anonymous author known only as "E," viewed the success of the pair as lying in the moderating and calming force of *Peace*,

[15] For American identity with its Greco-Roman heritage, see, for example, Reinhold 1984.
[16] That people thought in this manner can be seen by the fact that a fierce critic of Persico's also sought to damage him by using a phrase from Horace to criticize the artist's possible Persian heritage—an ancestral origin implied by his last name. See *Boston Courier* 1835.

who could ensure that *War* did not spring into action unless his power was truly needed.[17] Together, flanking the ceremonial entrance of the Capitol, the pair could reassure the American public that the country had the power and strength to act if necessary, but that the government would be guided by peace, not war. Misunderstood as Venus, rather than as Peace, the allegorical figure loses her ethical power. She becomes, instead, a seductress. Indeed, she risks provoking associations with beauty and lust as the instigators of war, such as in the role of Helen (and Venus) in setting the Trojan war in motion. This slippage of meaning, and the dangers of association with Venus, can be seen in an article critical of Persico, wherein his female allegorical figure is, in fact, criticized as sensual.[18] Persico and his supporters should have been quick to correct this misperception of the work—but no corrective response to the poem was made.

Given its fundamental misunderstanding of the sculpture, it seems important to question whether this poem was put forward in the press at the request of Persico or by another source with less direct knowledge of the sculptor and his intent. While it is impossible to know the origins of the piece with any certainty and the actual identity of its poet remains unknown, I expect it is likely that Persico either placed the poem in the newspaper himself or encouraged its publication. Across the history of his work in Washington, Persico was consistently pragmatic and adaptable. When faced with political pressure and obstacles, he would take criticism with magnanimity—even changing the subjects of proposed works in order to conform to the preferences of his politically powerful interlocutors. The sculptor, who came from humble family origins and whose educational background had prepared him in *disegno* ("drawing"), but not in marble carving, may have felt the need to not only prove his worth by completing his commissions responsibly and in a timely fashion, but also to try to elevate his own reputation in the press.[19] Although inaccurate in its understanding of the sculptor's allegory, the poem presented strong praise for Persico by characterizing him as in the company of Praxiteles and Canova. Furthermore, even for readers who were not able to read the French text, this association of Persico with Canova and Praxiteles was easily understandable from the straightforward vocabulary of the title and first line of the poem. A monolingual English speaker could skim no further than the first line and receive the message of Persico's grand company with sculpture's greatest figures. So, it seems likely that Persico would have been pleased with the positive associations conveyed by this poem and perhaps not too concerned with the poet's mixing of allegorical associations, as this message would only have reached those readers who were conversant in French and who might also be ready to quibble with iconographic misattributions.

That said, the French language of the poem posed its own risks—which Persico may have been ill-equipped to judge at the time that it was published. Persico, who had received consistent support and patronage from John Quincy Adams during his presidency, had been in Naples for most of Andrew Jackson's presidency. He had no personal experience with the increasingly nativist populism that Jackson ushered into American politics. He, himself, had been educated in Naples during the time of French rule and he may have spoken French with greater mastery than English. While he had, perhaps, some warning of the shifting perspective toward immigrants (a self-identification that Persico might also have discounted given the fact that sources indicate he

[17] "E" 1834.

[18] *Boston Courier* 1835.

[19] For biographical information on Persico, see Irollo 2015 and Vecchi 1847.

became a U. S. citizen in the 1820s), he may not have considered how the publication of a French language poem risked presenting himself as a foreigner. Persico had lived and worked in Washington for an extended period. He had numerous acquaintances—and probably friends—in Washington, which he considered his adoptive home. He may have believed that this poem would underline his credentials and reputation as a poet in an international context, without realizing that this foreign (or at least, foreign language) approbation could be met with both skepticism and disdain.

Jacksonian populism not only cultivated nativist tendencies but also privileged a more home-grown and less-educated demeanor. Thus, while the poem *"Á Persico"* might have appealed to Quincy Adams and his associates, it is unlikely that it gained Persico any new friends in Washington among the circle of Jackson. Indeed, as he struggled over the ensuing three years to secure his next federal commission, he would learn the hard way that the politics and preferences in Washington had shifted dramatically during his absence, requiring him to fight back aggressively in order to redefine himself as "American" and as passionately committed to the nation's principles. Direct evidence of the intertwined political and artistic stakes of A. P.'s poem can be found in a same-day response by a political correspondent to the poem:

> By the way, two figures of Peace and War have just taken their stand in the Rotunda—probably that our legislators may, upon the French question, have an opportunity of consulting their favorite oracle. Be this as it may, the statues are very creditable to the artist, Persico, but not such models of perfection as to warrant a French poetical correspondent, in this morning's Intelligence, in his adulatory exclamation, ' Rival de Canova! Praxiteles nouveau!'[20]

Amid international tensions between the Jackson administration and the nation of France, Persico's statues of Peace and War had arrived just in time to guide the deliberations of Congress. Yet, the political commentator takes a jab at the "French poetical correspondent" and laughingly dismisses the notion that Persico's sculptures put him on par with Canova and Praxiteles. The joke and the association of the poem with a foreign, French author, did not bode well for Persico's chances of competitive success in a heated political climate.

Six years later, in 1840, G. Hood published "Sonnet to Pettrich, the Sculptor," written for *The National Intelligencer*, in praise of Ferdinand Pettrich.[21] Pettrich, who was the son of a sculptor and born in Dresden, had completed formal training in sculpture in the Roman studio of Bertel Thorvaldsen (1797–1838). He arrived in Washington in late 1835 and was already established in the city when this poem was published in 1840, having completed a number of prominent works since moving to the United States, including a bust of Andrew Jackson [Fig. 11 6]. Although he had a studio and had made some prominent friends, including the editors of *The National Intelligencer*, Pettrich had been unsuccessful in obtaining the federal commissions

[20] *Baltimore Gazette* 1834.

[21] To date, I have not uncovered information about the author of this poem.

necessary to keep himself financially stable.[22] In publishing this poem, the newspaper was advancing a years-long attempt to further Pettrich's career by shining a positive light on his education and abilities.

Like A.P. in his treatment of Persico, Hood elevates Pettrich's ties to Italy, beginning his sonnet with a reference to Rome as "that old city, whose imperial form / Yet awes the world, throned mid the wrecks of Art". Seemingly uncertain that his audience will be able to identify the place to which he refers, the newspaper includes a referential asterisk and names the city below. It is Rome, the poem states, that has "warmed" the "genius" of Pettrich through the "inspiring imagery" of the city's "wrecks of Art". If the ruins of empire have lit the flame of genius in the artist, the poet praises Pettrich for shrugging off the patronage of kings due to having been inspired by "Works by those proud old trophies of the free." The reference here to Pettrich's ready regal patronage is accurate, while Hood's reference to "trophies of the free" that would have inspired Pettrich is much more ambiguous. Is this a reference to Ancient Greek art of Periclean Athens? In such a case, the connections drawn would be similar to those in reference by A. P. to Praxiteles (though without any possible connection for Pettrich with Magna Graecia). Or, could Hood be referring to Pettrich's admiration of Republican Rome? This latter idea seems less likely, given the poem's allusion to the city as having an "imperial form." While the identity of the art objects that supposedly inspired Pettrich is unclear, their social importance is not. These works have inspired his travel across the Atlantic and led him to Washington, D.C.—the modern city most closely associated with the idea of "freedom." The poet concludes by welcoming Pettrich to the city and wishing him timely and free-flowing wealth. It ends with the phrase "and not *too late*" with the last words italicized to emphasize for

G. Hood. "Sonnet to Pettrich, the Sculptor; For the *National Intelligencer*"

From that old city,* whose imperial form
Yet awes the world, throned mid the wrecks of Art,
Not unregretted did thy genius, warm
From their inspiring imagery, depart;
Stored, like the pictured halls thou long hadst paced,
With dreams of beauty, and empowered to give
--Moulded in stone or on the canvass traced—
Them outward shape and bid them all but live.
Kings were thy patrons: but the impulse strong,
Woke by those proud old trophies of the free,
The objects of thy deep-felt wonder long,
Has borne thee here. A welcome, then, to thee!
Nor that alone—wealth, glory on thee wait,
Poured in no refluent tide and not *too late!*

*Rome.

Figure 11.5: Hood, G. (1840) "Sonnet to Pettrich, the Sculptor; For the *National Intelligencer*," *The National Intelligencer*, February 17, 1840.

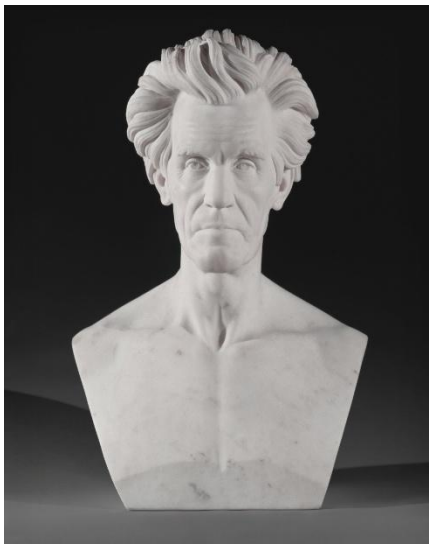


Figure 11.6: Ferdinand Pettrich, *Andrew Jackson*, later copy of original 1836 bust. Marble. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, NPG.91.45.

[22] Judging by the multiple comments in the press, it seems that Pettrich's financial situation was even more limited than that of the average artists. He travelled to Washington with a large family and commentators mentioned his financial exigency with respect to needing to support his family on various occasions.

the readers that Pettrich's need for financial support is substantial and urgent. Without spelling out the sculptor's challenging personal situation, Hood attempts to use wording and typography to spur readers into acts of patronage.

Hood's poem seeks to position the sculptor as someone motivated by the cause of "freedom" and desirous of using his high level of training in sculpture to advance freedom. The argument would seem a powerful one for an audience of politicians serving the founding vision of the young democratic republic. In praising Pettrich's decision to shrug off the patronage of kings, Hood is inviting his readers to see Pettrich as thoroughly committed to the American experiment. His words could even invite them to see the sculptor as the art world's answer to the great heroes of the Revolutionary generation, a connection that would be tantalizing to national leaders who needed to find appropriate artistic offerings for the nation's federal buildings through which to remember and celebrate the founding generation while also celebrate the nation's founding principles.

Importantly, Hood's promotion of Pettrich on these points is, in broad strokes at least, truthful. The sculptor came to the United States despite a job offer from King Otto of Greece to move to Athens and work there. Prior to the opportunity to work in Athens, Pettrich had been employed at Valhalla in Germany. He had also contributed works to the Catholic church in Rome and been noticed by the Vatican. It would be fair to say that multiple "kings" (including in that number the Pope, who had both religious and civic powers at this time) were interested in Pettrich before his departure for Washington. Despite this professional momentum, it is true that Pettrich chose to leave Europe and travel to Washington, D.C., perhaps under the inspiration of Thorvaldsen, who encouraged his protégé to believe that the young United States would have more opportunity to reward him for his efforts. Hood is by no means "puffing" Pettrich inaccurately with the assertion that his work attracted the interest of multiple monarchs.

That said, though, the depth of Pettrich's interest in "freedom" as a motivating concept is historically unclear. He was definitely motivated to serve the United States government, but, while he sought the financial security and public visibility of government patronage, his commitments to one form of government over another are murky. Indeed, after leaving the United States he worked from 1843 to 1858 for Emperor Don Pedro II of Brazil, then returned to Rome where he again offered his services quite willingly to Pope Pius IX, a world leader who was at the time aggressively engaged in fending off the unification of Italy and maintaining his temporal power. Of course, Hood would not have known that Pettrich would pursue these career options in the later 1840s and 1850s. Still, Pettrich's loose investment in the democratic principles of the United States government may have been evident in other aspects of the decisions he made during his years in Washington, D.C. Would readers of *The National Intelligencer* have found Hood's poem convincing in how it described this aspect of Pettrich's motivations?

In some level of tension with Hood's assertion of Pettrich's commitment to freedom was the fact that the artist was a well-known member of the Roman Catholic Church. His first major commissions in the region were in 1837 for St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church in Frederick, Maryland. In 1840, there was a high-level of suspicion of Catholics, and especially of German Catholic immigrants, among the American public. In politics and elsewhere in American life, hateful attacks were voiced against this religion and ethnic community, which was accused of having greater loyalty to the power of the Roman Catholic Church than to the United States.

Allegiance to the Pope was seen by many as antithetical to allegiance to the United States. Although Pettrich had left Germany decades earlier and was more truly a citizen of Rome than of Germany, his ethnic origin and limited English mastery would surely have made some members of the Washington community suspicious of his political allegiances. As a poet, Hood certainly had no obligation to provide evidence to the contrary, but he could have made his praise of Pettrich on this point more convincing if he had offered a description of a completed or proposed work of art by Pettrich that spoke to the principles of freedom and/or the structure of the U. S. government.

"The following appropriate lines on this statue, by Mr. H. T. Tuckerman, will be found interesting:

The quarry whence thy form majestic sprung
Has peopled earth with grace,
Heroes and gods that elder bards have sung—
A bright and peerless race.
But from its sleeping veins ne'er rose before
A shape of loftier name
Than his who glory's wreath with meekness wore—
The noblest son of fame.

And it is well to place his image there,
Beneath the dome he blest.
Let meaner spirits, who in council share,
Revere that silent guest.
Let us go up with high and sacred love,
To look on his pure brow,
And as with solemn grace he points above,
Renew the patriot's vow."

Figure 11.7: "The following appropriate lines on this statue, by Mr. H. T. Tuckerman, will be found interesting" in Watterston, George (1842) *A New Guide to Washington*. Washington, D.C.: Robert Farnham.: 53–54.

Though Hood's poem was written in English rather than French, it seems no more likely than A.P.'s poem to have connected with a broad American reading audience. Those readers who would be drawn to Hood's discussion of the old city with "imperial form" and the reference to "old trophies of the free" would be put off by the assumption that they could not even identify the city of Rome. They might also be unimpressed by Hood's lack of actual engagement with any of Pettrich's works. Worse, though, would be the reaction of an audience committed to a more populist mentality. Hood's poem is hardly written in a style to connect with a common reader. Realistically, the poetic offering probably did at least as much damage as good to Pettrich's public image. Given the artist's limited mastery of English, it seems likely that the poem was solicited and promoted by the editors of *The National Intelligencer* rather than by the sculptor himself, though likely the effort could have come about due to the sculptor requesting additional support from them.

Lastly, the poem by Henry T. Tuckerman (1813–1871), written in honor of Horatio Greenough's *George Washington* [Figure 11.8], offers intriguing comparisons with the poems published in support of Pettrich and Persico. At the time of the poem's publication, Tuckerman was a well-known art critic and writer. He is also known to have been closely associated with Greenough. After the sculptor's death, Tuckerman published a memorial volume honoring Greenough's life and work.[23] Publishing the poem under his own name ensured its wide circulation in periodicals and emphasized his support for Greenough in a moment when the sculptor's work was receiving acrimonious, mixed responses.[24] Tuckerman's poem, like that dedicated to Persico, discusses a work of art that has already been commissioned and completed

[23] Tuckerman 1853.

[24] *Inter alia*, see Rand 2020 for an overview of the press coverage.

for the U. S. government. Greenough was still actively at work on a second government commission and surely would have thrown his hat in the ring for other opportunities, so even as this poem focuses on a completed work of art, it actively engages with promoting the sculptor for ongoing and future commissions.

Figure 11.8: Horatio Greenough, *George Washington*, 1832–1841. Marble. Collection of the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution.

Tuckerman begins his poem in Italy, invoking the quarries of Carrara from which the large block of stone for Greenough's *Washington* was removed.[25] From these quarries, Tuckerman intones, "earlier bards" have produced "a bright and peerless race" of divinities and heroes, but the quarries had been "sleeping" for some time until Greenough's "form majestic sprung" from them, surpassing the earlier sculptures because of the nobility of its subject. This first stanza of Tuckerman's poem, in broad strokes, positions ff's *Washington* in dialog with sculptures from an ancient past. Unlike the previous poems, however, he does not specifically invoke the sculptural traditions of Greece or Rome and, instead, refers to earlier "bards"—a term more readily used in the literary tradition than in visual art criticism. Washington exceeds the figures of these ancient bards due to the "meekness" of his leadership. Likewise, Greenough, may, by implication, surpass the ancient sculptors.

If the first stanza links Greenough's work with the ancient world, the second stanza concentrates on the present. The reader is brought directly into the Rotunda of the Capitol to reflect on the cultural and political impact of the sculpture installed in this site of civic pilgrimage. The statue is found "beneath the dome he [Washington] blest" where the honored legacy of the nation's first president is in contrast with the "meaner spirits" of the nation's contemporary politicians. The current inhabitants of the Capitol are expected to "revere" Washington. The legislators will be joined in this reverence by the rest of the American populace ("us") whom Tuckerman encourages to approach the statue with "high and sacred love" and "renew the patriot's vow," even as Washington "points above," redirecting their reverence from him to God. Through this stanza, Tuckerman highlights the key functions that the statue was commissioned to serve: to inspire legislators via the memory of Washington and to offer a destination of public memory and commemoration for American citizens when they visited the Capitol. For both public servants and members of the public, a visit to the statue would help to reinforce their feelings of patriotism and guide them to recommit to the nation's principles.

Interestingly, Tuckerman's poem says almost nothing about the appearance of the statue, other than its reference to the figure's gesture upward. Unlike the poems to Persico and Pettrich, which both take pains to emphasize the artistic prowess of the sculptors, this poem promotes

[25] That Tuckerman led his poem with European allusions is no surprise, as his most popular publication was his *The Italian Sketchbook*, first published in 1835, and republished in multiple editions.

the worth of the sculpture's subject while sidelining its aesthetics and, largely, its maker. In the 1830s and 1840s, Washington's legacy was peerless among the founders and Tuckerman clearly believed that readers would enjoy his poem (and the statue it discusses) most if they were focused on the persona of Washington. Perhaps he also hoped that his own authority as an art critic and writer would persuade readers of the worth of the statue without him needing to argue the case for its aesthetic merits. Yet, it was precisely the aesthetic attributes, not the subject, of the sculpture that caused it to be a hotly contested work and so Tuckerman's poem failed to address the aspects of the work that mattered most to the viewers. Commentators were upset by Greenough's decision to show Washington as a draped Classical nude, with many noting that the nation's first president would have been uncomfortable with such an immodest representation. Consequently, if Tuckerman's poem was published in an attempt to defend the reputation of his sculpture and increase the public reception of his work, it likely did little to move the needle.

In its appearance in the *National Intelligencer*, the poem was published along with the description of the statue from George Watterston's *A New Guide to Washington* (which was then in press). The editors of the *National Intelligencer* took note of the text's agnostic assessment of the statue itself, including the following editorializing comment: "The author has confined himself to a description of this work of art alone, and avoided any criticism of its merits or defects, as out of place in such a work. It is brief, and we think correct."[26] The editors' comment refers explicitly to Watterston's guidebook description, but it is also salient to Tuckerman's verses. While supportive and complimentary about the statue, both the prose description in the guidebook text and the accompanying poetic dedication sidestep a rigorous interpretation of the statue from the perspective of art criticism. Tuckerman's reputation and publication platform was such that he surely did not need to couple the publication of his poem with Watterston's guide, but there may have been financial or other reasons to do so. This publication venue could, in turn, have impacted the contents of the poem. Perhaps Watterston might have declined to publish the poem if it took a different, more opinionated, approach in its discussion of the statue. By sticking to the facts of the work with respect to Washington's legacy, Tuckerman composed a poem that could be circulated broadly in a variety of contexts without objection or uproar.

Equally interesting to consider from a public press perspective is Tuckerman's decision to ignore Greenough's identity as a native-born artist and focus, instead, on the connection of Greenough's statue to Europe and European history. Commentators who supported Greenough over immigrant artists generally did so on the basis of his identity as the first U. S.-born and professionally trained sculptor. Yet, Tuckerman's poem is completely silent about the identity of the artist. Instead, it speaks of Carrara and the bards of ancient Europe, putting the "noblest son of fame" in the company of these European ancestors, rather than firmly in the hands of this "Yankee stonecutter" (a label Greenough used to refer to himself).[27] In taking this approach, Tuckerman made a similar mistake to Greenough's own defenses of the work, in which he often tried to educate the American public about why they should align their tastes with European appreciation of neoclassical form. Tuckerman likely believed that associating the sculpture with Carrara and asserting its superiority to earlier sculptural precedents were two important prestige

[26] *The North American* 1842.
[27] Greenough 1852.

aspects of the work; yet, American readers may have seen it otherwise. Readers who might have been inclined to appreciate a poem celebrating the first major public sculpture by the nation's first native-born professional sculptor may well have been left frustrated that fifty percent of the poem focused on the European origins of the sculpture. Even the sculptor's upbringing in Massachusetts went unmentioned.

As a subset of newspaper coverage about artists in Washington, D.C., poems make up a very small part. None of these artists was first introduced to the readership through poetry and each had extensive coverage over years of publications, including both positive and negative press. Consequently, broader conclusions about the impact and intricacies of press coverage on artists' careers cannot be drawn from this small subset of materials. Still, this close reading of three verse contributions yields some interesting points of comparison across these examples. First, each of these poems foregrounds Europe and European connections—especially ties to the traditions of the ancient world. Only the Hood poem about Pettrich seems to imply a moral or political inferiority of the ancient world and European context, while foregrounding the artist's commitments to the principles of the young democratic republic. As already discussed, Hood's assertions are not coupled with mentions of objects or actions that would verify his claims. Second, none of the poems attempts to speak directly to a broad, public audience. Instead, they take a high-brow tone, clearly speaking from an elite perspective and seeking to reach a more elite audience. They engage with the artist's careers, objects, and subjects on an elevated level. One poem is published in French, another speaks grandiosely about the history of empires, ruins, and forms of government, and the third leads with vague allusions to the quarries at Carrara and the objects that have emerged from them. Third, none of the three poems speaks strongly to the identity-based issues that drove arguments about artistic commissions on the floor of Congress and in numerous other newspaper articles. Neither Tuckerman nor A.P. mention a word about the artist's backgrounds or socio-political commitments. Hood comes close to weighing in on these issues. He mentions aspects of Pettrich's life that point to the artist's origins (Rome, after all, warmed the sculptor's genius) and he claims that Pettrich has turned a cold shoulder to the patronage of kings because he is inspired by "old trophies of the free." But Hood's passive language and oblique references make these points hard to parse. Further, he does not clarify how these vague connections to "old trophies of the free" might be tied to identity or governance in the contemporary United States. Lastly, current issues of American society and politics barely enter into these poems. Of the three, only Tuckerman speaks directly to the contemporary American context and his clearest reference is to the "meaner spirits" of current politics who do not rise to the standard set by Washington. Hood urges readers to commission work from Pettrich before it is "too late," but the reference lacks specific context and comes only in the final two lines of the poem. While it is clear that each poet speaks of public sculpture and that their contributions were intended to gain interest due to current commissions, or due to arguments over the work of the sculptor in question, none of these issues were directly discussed.

Why would poets sidestep issues and arguments of such significance to current discourse? Why would they be content with speaking to a limited audience? Why are they clear in their praise of European heritage and history, but relatively silent on the contemporary issues and priorities of their contemporary, American context? Likely, these commonalities can be understood as the result of the genre itself. Poetry, as the highest of the literary arts, was expected to communicate with its audience at a different level from other, more mundane, forms

of writing. Overtly addressing current arguments in politics and the press about specific commissions would likely limit the perceived value of a poem. Instead, these poets sought to engage with overarching, more timeless, themes about art and artists.

Even if the poets sought to stay above the fray and sidestepped current arguments of art and politics in the content of their contributions, these poems remain significant aspects of the historical record in artistic competitions in Washington, D.C. It seems that the quality and content of each of these poems was, ultimately, less important than their existence and circulation; these poems were prestige pieces. Clearly, none of these poems were written to convince an audience on a single point. The highbrow language, vague allusions to history, and general pretension of these poems notwithstanding, their most important job was to elevate the sculptor's status. Indeed, the poets' decision to ignore ongoing arguments about the artists and their works reflects the pretension of their genre and claims their elite position above the pettiness of such disputes.

Since poetry was a relatively-rare contribution in the large body of writings about artists, and since it held a position of prestige in the history of art criticism, these poems could easily bring attention to their artist-subjects—especially when circulated broadly in a daily newspaper. Whether they read the poem or not, and whether they thought about its meaning or not, readers of *The National Intelligencer* would rapidly connect the sculptor with the poem (indeed, the contributions by both A.P. and Hood have the artist's name in the title). Few artists were so lucky as to have poems dedicated to their work, so this fact alone was likely to elevate the attention and appreciation for their work. Additionally, given the elite circles with which poetry was associated, the publication of these poems ensured that their subjects would be perceived as artists of a certain, elevated stature, perhaps increasing their value in the eyes of politicians and public servants who controlled the distribution of future, public commissions.

In the ongoing work of pressing the case for an artist's career, the publication of poetry in newspapers had a transactional role to play that was far more important than the ideas of the poet or the literary value of the poem itself. Scanning the page of a daily periodical, the different typeset of the lines of poetry stood out prominently. Certainly, some readers with literary or artistic pretensions might review the poem carefully, parsing its arguments and allusions with care. But many more readers might glance quickly at the text before moving on to the other news (whether political, society, financial, real estate, or otherwise) of greater interest and importance to them. While written in verse that targeted the more literary audience, these poems were likely equally important for the information they conveyed to the scanning reader. Having taken note of the different block of text, the newspaper's reader would quickly see the poem was about "Persico," "Pettrich" or the "Statue of Washington". In the end, that was all the information that most readers really needed. From this brief recognition and association with poetry, the statue or the artist could rise in name value and prestige, perhaps increasing the chance of favorable reviews and future patronage.

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