
Hiram Powers' Paradise Lost

Called America's Michaelangelo, Cincinnati Hiram Powers was unquestionably the most famous American artist in the middle of the nineteenth century.

By April Kingsley

The most famous American artist in the middle of the nineteenth century was unquestionably former Cincinnati Hiram Powers, a neoclassical sculptor who lived abroad in Florence, Italy throughout much of his career. Although born in Woodstock, Vermont on July 29, 1805, Powers had lived in Cincinnati from the time he was a young boy. There he had worked in Dorfeuille's Western Museum, creating wax figures and the mechanical apparatus needed to make them move realistically, producing as his magnum opus a lurid tableaux from Dante's *Inferno*.

Called America's Michelangelo, Powers' marble nudes were compared favorably to those by the ancient Greeks, one enthusiastic reviewer arguing that the

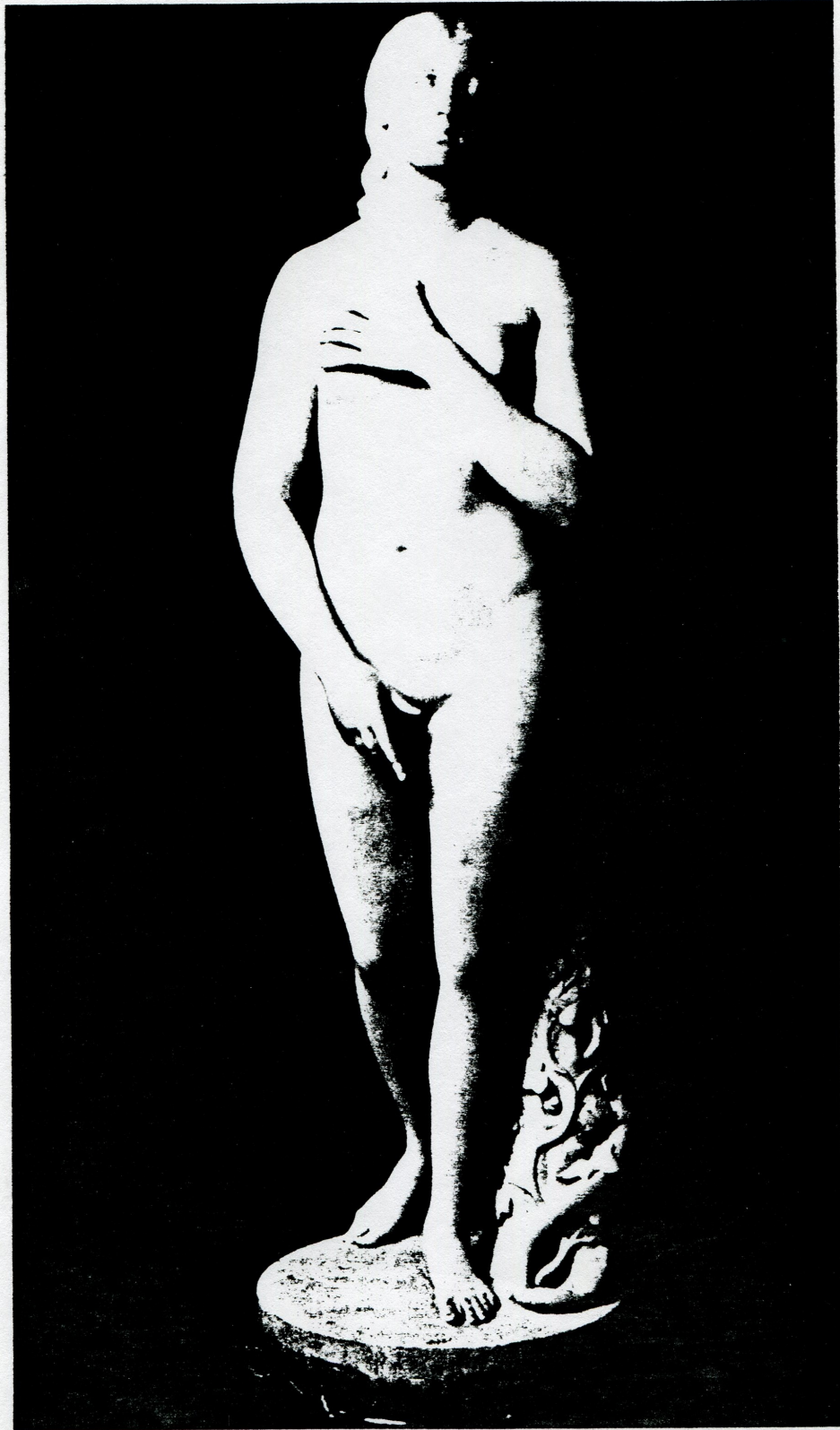
Venus de Medici sank into insignificance beside Powers' *Greek Slave*. Powers was not alone in his attraction to Italy as a place to live and work. All of the great contemporary European neoclassicists based themselves there and many of the major American sculptors of the period maintained studios in Italy, even though they might be working on public commissions or sculptures for the growing art collections of their "nouveau riche" countrymen. The availability of good marble and good craftsmen to carve it, as well as the omnipresence of the ancient classical sources of inspiration, made Italy "the" workplace for nineteenth-century sculptors of every nationality.

The "Yankee Stonecutters," as Albert Ten Eyck Gardner called them, were part of a thriving expatriate artistic community working for American patrons and American ideals. Many of the famous

writers of the day—Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, the Trollopes, and the Brownings, among others—were frequent visitors and occasional residents who formed tight circles along nationalistic and linguistic lines. The community's activities were closely monitored by a steady stream of visitors from home making the Grand Tour, many of whom wrote and published books on their travels.

Hiram Powers' career was bracketed by two works of a religious nature depicting Eve before and after the Fall. His first major "ideal" (as opposed to strictly realistic) sculpture, begun in 1839, was the exquisitely beautiful *Eve Tempted* now in the collection of the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. The last major work in which he himself took an active hand was *Eve Disconsolate*, otherwise known as *Paradise Lost*, finished in 1871, two years before his death,

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Eve
Disconsolate
ca. 1855.

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and now owned by The Hudson River Museum. During the three decades between these two dates, while Powers revised the first *Eve Tempted*, planned *Eve Disconsolate*, and executed numerous other works, the artist was at the center of a classical revival that re-emphasized earlier aesthetic concerns. The neoclassicists favored a return to the seriousness of the early Renaissance and to Greece itself, choosing in the process to reject Rococo frivolity and Baroque excess. In its purest form, this revival sought to restore and confirm the high standards and morals of an exalted period in world history, a period which Americans of intellect saw as a model for contemporary life.

Far from merely being an excuse to sculpt a nude, as some may have thought, the subject of Eve and her fall possessed enormous resonance for Hiram Powers; it was ideal for him stylistically, morally and personally. Aesthetically, it allied him with the canon of taste promoted by Antonio Canova and Bertel Thorvaldsen, the two leading members of the preceding generation of neoclassicists. Although pagan themes were far more common among neoclassical painters and sculptors, Thorvaldsen turned frequently to the Bible for his subjects. Like Powers, he was a Swedenborgian, and their religion undoubtedly played an important factor in their choice of subjects. Powers may have been an American newly arrived to the sophisticated and urbane culture that nineteenth-century Florence epitomized, but he had not left his moral and religious principles at home in Cincinnati.

Eve, rather than Venus or even Psyche, was the perfect choice for a first "ideal" work since it embodied the religious implications Powers evidently preferred to the paganism of purely mythological themes. The apparent source of the sculptor's thematic preference was an

amalgam of transcendentalism, Italian humanism, Swedenborgianism, and a loving relationship with his wife, Elizabeth. The last two of these were closely linked, for an emphasis on conjugal love was a fundamental tenet of Emanuel Swedenborg, who described it as "an image of heaven . . . represented by a maiden of inexpressible beauty, encompassed with a white cloud; so beautiful that it may be said she is beauty itself in essence and form."

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It is fascinating to note that Powers had a frequently repeated childhood dream of a "white female figure across the river" who appeared to him just below his cousin's house. "It stood upon a pillar, or pedestal," he related, and was "to my eyes very beautiful, but the water was between me and it, too deep to ford, and I had a strong desire to see it nearer, but was always prevented by the river, which was always too high." This nocturnal vision ceased to appear once he had begun carving marble

statues, which made Powers feel that it was not "entirely a phantom [since] at that time I had no wakeful thought of sculpture, nor had I ever seen anything likely to excite such a dream."

Powers' quest to capture an ideal of feminine beauty in stone shaped his entire artistic career. Although he made one male ideal statute—*The Fisher Boy* (1848)—and numerous portrait statues and busts of men, the remainder of his oeuvre was occupied with the female form and face.

Many of the neoclassicists were similarly obsessed with the nude female, although perhaps not always for such spiritual reasons. The work of many of Powers' contemporaries possessed a definite aura of voluptuous sensuality which overshadowed the high-seriousness of their subject matter. *Eve Tempted*, judged by most viewers his finest nude female sculpture, is Powers' most seductive work: we know she is about to sin by coming into knowledge of the senses, yet she can hardly be termed voluptuous. His conscious control of sensuality in sculpture is nowhere more evident and most of her viewers had little difficulty disregarding the prurient potential in her nudity and seeing her as an "unveiled soul," the way Powers intended.

In the nineteenth century, particularly in America where few examples of the types of nude figures so prevalent in European sculpture existed, people didn't take the subject of nudity lightly.

As William Gerdts has argued, "nudity was acceptable only as long as sensuality was sublimated." The whiteness of the marble was essential. The Prussian sculptor J.H. Dannecker had used pinkish-colored glass to light one of his most popular nudes, an effect which disturbed many Americans. John Gibson, the English neoclassicist, tinted parts of his marbles, leading Nathaniel Hawthorne to grumble that "Gibson robbed marble of its chastity by giving it an artificial warmth of hue."

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Powers himself felt that "an unclothed marble statue is, so to speak, a sentiment clothed in a spiritual body. Colored it becomes material and sensual. White marble," he maintained, "will remain the vehicle for spiritual expression." Accordingly, he never colored his works, except through the use of indirect natural lighting or artificial lighting which ever so subtly imparted the palest of warm tints to his sculptures, particularly when the walls surrounding the piece were of a warm maroon, burgundy, or mahogany color.

In fact, Powers had very explicit ideas about how his pieces were to be lit and how shadows should be made to fall on them: the shadow cast by the nose, for example, was barley to touch the top of the upper lip. The shadows, Powers felt, left something to the viewer's imagination and preserved a desirable degree of illusion. Semi-obscurity, he maintained, "might bring it nearer to nature [and] combine truth of detail with a broader and higher truth. Some things," he continued, "can be better seen by artificial light which removes somewhat from the region of bare reality." Powers also felt that firelight, and by extension gaslight, were preferable to "vulgar daylight" because they added a ghostly and spiritual radiance to the whole which, like a mist, "sets a scene beyond the limits of actual sense and makes it ideal."

Powers, drawing on the Swedenborgian view that perfect conjugal love was embodied as a female form in a mist, felt that a dense fog or a sense thereof could spiritualize almost any material object. The nearly snow-blinding glow given off by newly-carved, sparkling white marble could be compared with the "brilliant auras, sparkling as with particles of gems" which Swedenborg saw as being given off by pure conjugal love. Powers was actually concerned that the white radiance of his sculptures might hurt viewers' eyes.

Powers' spiritual rationale for the physical characteristics of his work led to a stress on techniques that distinguishes his work from that of most of his contemporaries. His surfaces, for example, are very different from those favored by the other neoclassicists. Where theirs are often polished to a high sheen, his are matte and porous like real human skin, yielding a naturalistic affect that was and still is often admiringly commented upon. Powers invented special finishing tools to achieve

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these surfaces, and is said to have worked on the sculptures himself in their final stages, a practice which was contrary to the normal studio practice in Italy at the time. Usual routine called for the sculptor to first create a clay bozetto, or small, rough model, which was sometimes later fired for preservation. Then the artist might or might not execute a full-size clay from which the "finished" plaster would be cast. The marble carvers would use this full-size, finished plaster to execute the

actual marble sculpture with the aid of pointing tools to assist with the automatic transfer of the proportions from one block of material to the other. Even in this system there existed a customary separation of duties among the Italian carvers: one man blocked the piece out, another "pointed it up," a third worked on hair and other textures, and a fourth often finished the "flesh." Other studio workmen might make drawings of the piece at any of these stages, and still others would photograph it for the posters and *carte de visites* which the artists would use to promote the work to a client.

When he first arrived in Italy, Powers could not afford this kind of assistance and so actually undertook most of the carving on his early works himself. As he became more successful, he rarely devoted time to working the marble himself except in the finishing stage. However, he did invent a whole new way of working directly in the plaster to make full-size models. Instead of fashioning a full-size clay model from which a mold would be made to produce the large plaster given to the marble carvers, Powers cast plaster in blocks, constructing the large plaster out of these blocks by carving the intended form from them directly. He invented a special rasp which allowed the plaster to pass through the metal grater, hence preventing clogging. Because Powers created the final plaster himself, he was able to come closer to his original conception than any of the other "Yankee Stonecutters" even though he did not actually carve the marble facsimile himself. Through this efficient process, Powers dramatically modernized the tradition he had inherited, a tradition dating back to the Greeks.

Unlike *The Greek Slave*, the theme and viewing context of which encouraged its association and comparison with Greek sculptural prototypes, Powers' *Eve Tempted*
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conformed to a contemporary notion of ideal beauty that people held about humanity in an Edenic state of grace. Van Wyck Brooks wrote that when the work was exhibited, "people reminded themselves that the mother of mankind, among the flowers, had unquestionably been naked 'and was not ashamed,' and it was understood that there was no need to fear it would introduce foreign indelicacy among our women." Powers felt that man's body was intrinsically free of sin, saying that "The body of man is always innocent for it only operates the command of His will." He added that he didn't believe our creator's design when he made Eve was that her personal charms should be forever veiled from his sight.

Powers seemingly shared the neoclassicists' notion of an Edenic Greek culture where artists, in keeping with the religion and philosophy of the day, would have seen naked bodies at will in the gymnasium, art schools and playing fields. "A pure heart," Powers said, can look upon a nude "without defilement." He did not believe, however, that the Greeks made perfect sculptures, generally because these ancient sculptors seemed more interested in the physical body than in the soul, and specifically because they portrayed heads too small to house well-developed brains. Powers analyzed the body according to the nineteenth-century English classicist John Flaxman's canon of proportion, which he found more satisfying than that of the Greeks, and went so far as to double-check the proportions published in Flaxman's lectures and to find printing errors in them.

He used nearly thirty different models for *Eve Tempted*, carefully measuring body parts with calipers, just as he did with his portrait commissions, in order to be as accurate as possible. Like other neoclassicists, he worked both in this collective way and through use of a single "perfect" model. Neither he nor his colleagues had any intention of producing facsimiles of bodies in marble that viewers might mistake for the real thing.

Powers actually saw his *Eve Tempted* as a critique of current fashions, observing

with customary wit:

She is an old fashioned body, and not so near well-formed and attractive in her person, as are her granddaughters, at least some of them. She wears her hair in a natural and most primitive manner—drawn back from her temples and hanging loose behind, thus exposing that very ugly feature in women—temples. Her waist is quite too large for our modern notions of beauty, and her feet—oh—murder! They are so very broad and large! Did ever a body see such long toes! They have never been wedged into form by the nice and pretty little shoes worn by her lovely descendants—and then how ugly she would appear with clothes on—so ridiculously flat and perpendicular below the waist behind. It would require a carload of cotton, at least, to correct this formation. But Eve is very stiff and unyielding in her disposition and I am afraid she will refuse to conform to the improved ideas of her more refined daughters. In regard to her hair, she prefers convenience to fashion—and she is willing to expose as much of her face as was left destitute of hair by her maker. She will not allow her waist to be reduced by bandaging, because she is far more comfortable as she is and, besides, she has some regard for her health, which might suffer from such restraining upon her heart, lungs, liver, etc. . . . I could never prevail upon her to wear modern shoes—for she dreads corns—which she says—are neither convenient nor ornamental—and as for her nudity—she does not appear to know that she is so . . .

Powers' unique synthesis of the real and the ideal was a fortuitous result of the timely fusion of contemporary notions of beauty with his religious beliefs. Swedenborg had taught that humankind's interior self, or mind, is spirit clothed in the world with a material, external body which it controls at all times. Both spirit and body have the same form, that is the form of

"man," and both were created by God in His image. These thoughts are paralleled, interestingly, by Johann Lavater, the eighteenth-century Swiss physiognomist who said that "One spirit lives in all. Each member of the body is in proportion to that whole of which it is a part." Lavater's idea that a person's character might be read from the formations of his or her face, body or handwriting were very influential, particularly among the neoclassicists. "There is a harmony in nature," Powers wrote, "which must be strictly considered; and the artist, creating his ideals, must work out the parts from a central thought and feeling in which his memory of the perfections he has seen in all human bodies will lend him aid and inspiration."

Powers began work on his first ideal statue *Eve Tempted*, on April 22, 1839, a year and a half after arriving in Florence and as soon as he could spare time away from carving the marble portrait busts for which he had taken a number of likenesses in clay before leaving America. His first concept was to base the idea of Eve on that of Salomon Gessner, an eighteenth-century Swiss writer still popular at the time. According to Gessner's tale, *Der Tod Abels* (Leipzig, 1758), Eve would have been gazing down at a dove lying at her feet and reflecting on death, the inevitable outcome of her sin. Powers went so far as to make a bozetto in clay (now lost) of this initial version of Eve.

Sometime in the next year, however, Powers changed his conception to that of Eve at the moment of her temptation. A full scale model in clay was on view in the studio, probably by 1840, when Robert Townsend, an Albany businessman, saw her and ordered one in marble. (Townsend eventually withdrew his order, claiming the nudity would be too difficult for his Albany friends and neighbors to accept.) By 1841, the full-size plaster was finished, for it was commented upon that year when Mrs. Trollope and Lady Bart made a studio visit to Powers. Lady Bart's reaction to the statue was immediate and enthusiastic:

Who with soul could look on Powers' *Eve* and say it 'beautiful' and

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nothing more! Many things are beautiful that signify nothing, but when an object seems with expression, it is more than beautiful. Such is the *Eve* of Mr. Powers imaged as before the Fall. The fatal apple—plucked but not tasted. Inquiring thought is on her brow, and pleasure, hesitation, satisfaction, and doubt are the varied emotions portrayed—not merely in the face but in the whole frame. Every limb speaks, not of passion, but of feelings which we may conceive to have been Eve's between the period of gathering the fruit and eating it. She had taken the first step towards sin; hence the conflict of her feelings—but she was still pure, still unconscious of shame, her eyes were not yet opened. In our imaginations, such a figure may perchance be portrayed—but how bold that artist who shall attempt to give it tangibility and substance—to present bodily not a goddess—but a woman—innocent, sinless and perfect in outward form—as an angel, yet not an angel!

The object of Lady Bart's rapturous description had been pointed in preparation for the marble carvers by late 1841. Early the next year, the marble block had been selected and the roughing out was in progress; by May, 1843, the work presumably was near completion, for Bostorini, Powers' detail carver, was reportedly working on the hair of the marble.

When finally completed, this newly structured image of Eve looked for all the world like a personification of Milton's Eve in *Paradise Lost*, who "like a wood nymph light" had betaken herself to the groves with "Goddess-like deport" to work among the roses and myrtle "veiled in a cloud of fragrance." A "fair virgin, [her] heavenly form angelic, but more soft and feminine, her graceful innocence, every air . . . overawed his [Satan's] malice."

The demeanor of Powers' *Eve Tempted*, bearing just a trace of pridefulness, or of childlike pleasure in her own loveliness, recalls Milton's manner of psychologically predisposing Eve to the

Fall. Then too, Powers describes his Eve as looking in the direction of the apple with "an expression of serious reflection and desire" on her face, and of the serpent's head appearing "just below the right hip and looking cautiously up in her face." Powers' *Eve Tempted* seems mesmerized by the apple she holds in her hand, almost as if she were in a trance. The sculptor's setting corresponds perfectly with Milton's scene, in which Eve finally decides that there is no profit in freedom if she can't have this freedom as well. Quickly reaching for the fruit, she plucks and eats. Although the earth trembles at her deed, since all is lost, she remains intent on enjoying the fruit and the pleasure it gives her. No hint of the disaster she has wrought yet appears on her face in Milton, or in Powers. In fact, Powers depicts her as holding two more apples in her left hand, not only because she was taking one to Adam, but because she was planning to eat the other herself as he ate his.

Despite the compelling quality of the completed *Eve Tempted*, Powers was apparently dissatisfied with the result. By May 13, 1845, he had completed a revised model in clay of *Eve Tempted (II)*. In a letter now unlocated but paraphrased in his studio journal, Powers wrote that "The Eve now finished—or nearly so, I shall keep in my studio for a time longer. It is not sufficiently well supported to be carried about without danger—and besides between you and I [sic]—I have made great improvements upon the model for the second one. It is now ready to begin in marble."

The marble *Eve Tempted* owned by the National Museum of American Art, which is unsigned, undated, and has hair that is not quite finished, is either the first version Powers wanted to "keep in my studio for a time longer," or it is, as scholar Richard Wunder insists, a statue carved by Powers' workers after his death from the plaster cast of the first *Eve Tempted*.

The new improved Eve is probably the one represented by the plaster now in the collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Washington. Powers described the revised, "improved" *Eve Tempted* in this way:

She is five feet ten inches high, stands on her right foot, the other is thrown back, the left arm hangs with fruit in her hand—at her side, the other holds to her bosom another apple. Her head is turned to the right and the face downwards, for she meditates. Her hair hangs upon her right shoulder. The serpent surrounds her feet, being partially concealed by herbage—and he rises around the trunk of the tree among some ivy, and is stealthily looking up into Eve's face. She has broken the commandment already by having taken the forbidden fruit, but she has not consummated the act—she has not yet eaten of it. She hesitates and the serpent [knows] that she is already overcome.

The changes in hair, arm position, added height, and proportion together make the revised Eve a somewhat more satisfying composition than Powers' first effort. The first Eve is two inches smaller around the hips and waist; the second Eve is two inches taller, but the additional height is in the legs. Both have ten-inch long feet. At the same time, the missing awkwardness removes with it something of the youthful innocence one sensed in the first Eve: the body seems less young and fleshy in the plaster at the National Museum of American Art, a factor that, in conjunction with the slightly downturned, meditating head, serves to convince us that Powers is portraying a different moment that he did in the first *Eve Tempted*. She of course had sinned too, by plucking the fruit, but she doesn't yet seem conscious of that; *Eve Tempted (II)* does.

The marble for which the plaster at the National Museum of American Art was a study had a subsequently trying history. Finally completed and sent off to its owner-to-be in 1849, the statue was lost at sea in a shipwreck. Fortunately, it was recovered and sent along to its initial owner, Colonel John Preston of South Carolina. Preston later sold the piece to department store magnate Alexander Turney Stewart, who left it to his wife when he died. Mrs. Stewart sold it to James Fish for the Hofmann

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House, a hotel in New York City. Since 1904, when it was sold yet again, the statue's location has not been known.

The revisions to his conceptions of the temptation of Eve still failed to sate Powers' fascination with the theme. From the time that the concept of *Eve Tempted* was first realized, the sculptor had "cherished the idea of creating another state of the 'Mother of Mankind,' representing her after the Fall." This plan had to be put off constantly. During the 1850's, statues succeeded each other in such rapid order that it was not until 1859 that Powers began working steadily on a small model of *Eve Disconsolate* or *Paradise Lost* as he preferred to call it. Although the model was finished in 1861, the piece was not executed in marble until a decade later. In the interim, however, he did produce a marble bust based on the full-scale composition in progress from which a number of replicas were issued. Nathan Dension Morgan, who commissioned the full-size statue and was probably acting as agent for Alexander T. Stewart, sold it to the merchant in 1872. After Stewart's death, his widow sold the statue at auction through the American Art Association in March, 1887. Whom the purchaser was, or how the work came into the possession of the Berolzheimer family are unknown. In 1951, that family gave *Eve Disconsolate* to The Hudson River Museum. A replica, made after Powers' death by his master-carvers, is now in the Cincinnati Art Museum.

Powers described this final *Eve*, his consummate statement on the subject, to his friend, George Peabody of London, on October 24, 1861:

It was a standing figure six feet three inches high and she seems as if walking in painful meditation. Her head is raised as in supplication for forgiveness and her hand is pressed upon her bosom while the other points down to the serpent accusing him as the cause of all woes. By this arrangement of the hands, the statue, though naked, becomes sufficiently modest by accidental concealment to admit of a mixed company stand-

ing before it without offense or sensitiveness.

This, Powers' last *Eve*, is taller, longer-of-limb, more dramatically vertical, and yet more dynamically in motion than the others. It has its closest kin in Masaccio's fresco of the *Expulsion from Paradise* in the Brancacci Chapel, S. Maria del Carmine in Florence, with which Powers was surely familiar. Powers' version imitates the positions of the hands in the Masaccio, and the upright, chin-up pose, though not the expression, nor the position of the legs. Here it seems he may have borrowed the backward thrust of the right leg from the *Venus Calpinage* in Naples, of which he had a photograph included with pictures of his own works in his panels of *carte de visites*. (Stylistic sources were readily available to Powers throughout Italy. Photographs of these statues are included with Powers' own works on the panels of *carte de visites* which he used as advertisements of his best pieces, thereby lending his work the cache that came from association with that of the ancients.) Only that passage in the ancient statue relates to Powers' *Eve Disconsolate*, however, as that *Venus* is dancing and looking back over her shoulder. This is the only instance of Powers reversing the placement of the supportive tree-stump from the left to the right behind the figure, an apparently deliberate change that indicates that this part of the figure was important to his conception. The projected feeling of motion aligns the figure with two other late works of Powers—*Il Penseroso* and *The Last of the Tribe*.

The moment Powers' *Eve Disconsolate* portrays in the story of the Fall surely explains the dramatic change of appearance effected. After Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit together, they went into a wild frenzy of lovemaking. This moment must be sometime after that. Milton sets them quarreling the day after, Adam blaming Eve for wandering off where the serpent Satan could get at her alone. Eve is in tears with tresses disordered until he forgives her. They discuss suicide to cheat death of any other victims, but the Archangel Michael intercedes, showing Adam how Eve's "seed [meaning her son, Jesus

Christ] shall bruise the serpent's head" in the future. Michael convinces God to allow Adam and Eve to seek redemption and find eternal bliss and joy after death: God then instructs Michael to "send them forth, though sorrowing, yet in peace" out of Eden. Adam says "Whence Hail to Thee, Eve, rightly call'd Mother of Mankind, Mother of all things living, since by thee man is to live . . ." But Eve, "with sad demeanor meek," doesn't feel deserving of the title and thinks her judge was infinite in pardon "that I who first brought Death on all am grac't the source of life."

This is the *Eve* Powers depicts. He insisted on calling the statue *Paradise Lost*, even though others then and since have called it by various names: *Eve Repentant*, *Eve After the Fall*, and *Eve Disconsolate*. Powers wrote to N.D. Morgan, the statue's first owner, that he: "was not satisfied with [his] first attempt as indeed the temptation of Eve did not afford an opportunity for the expression of the bewilderment, distress, and remorse which must have appeared on her face and in the attitude of Eve, when she replied 'The serpent beguiled me and I did eat.' " Powers said he found it necessary "to give a year's full time in all to the modeling of your [Morgan's] statue of 'Paradise Lost.' I continually found something to be improved and am far from presuming it to be perfect. I aimed at nobleness of form and womanly dignity of expression. She is forlorn, but does not quite despair for she looks up imploringly. She accuses the serpent with one hand and herself most with the other."

In all of his versions of *Eve*, Powers' conception corresponds to Milton's literary characterization. There is a decidedly narrative quality to the series which probably developed over the years out of his continued dissatisfaction with any one statue's power to tell the whole story. Narrative became increasingly important to the neoclassicists' work, playing a large role in the choice and treatment of subjects late in the nineteenth century. Milton's vision of *Paradise Lost* and *Regained* is certainly complex and open to a rich range of interpretation. Although Powers makes

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no mention of it as his source, he was surely familiar with it and with Milton's other writings, witness the title of his statue *Il Penseroso*.

Looking once again at Powers' versions of the Fall in the light of Milton's vision, one observes in *Eve Tempted* that the serpent, coiled up around the vine-covered stump, its head pointed, "looking cautiously" at Eve, waits in just that manner for his tempting speech to sink into Eve's mind and have its effect. Afterwards, "Back to the thicket slunk the guilty Serpent," in Milton and in *Eve Disconsolate*. (Powers originally sent to America for a real rattlesnake to use as the model, so accuracy was in his mind in more ways than one.) Then too, the foliage is lush on the base of *Eve Tempted*, but not on *Eve Disconsolate's* tree stump. Eve hasn't quite brought the apple fully down onto her palm in *Eve Tempted*, as though "pausing a while," as Milton relates, "thus to herself she mused." Of course there is no fruit to be seen later. Instead her hands perform double, or perhaps even triple duty, hiding her genitals and breasts, and also pointing to the snake. That hand is open, not closed-fisted in an accusatory gesture, however, and in its openness also reveals the genitals it ostensibly hides.

With these hand gestures, Powers may be hinting at Milton's concept of Eve as the Mother of Mankind, and later as the Virgin, Mother of Jesus, the seed who will "bruise the serpent's head." This is a subtle point, but Powers could be exceedingly subtle: the fingers of Eve's other hand, for instance, positioned to cover her breast, actually part on both sides of her nipple as if to indicate, again, both her role as Mother of Mankind and the Virgin's future role as Mother of Jesus, the crusher of Satan. Even if Powers did indeed intend his sculptures to mean all this, it is not surprising that he did not mention Milton as his explicit source, preferring instead to keep his sources of inspiration confidential. Indeed, according to one scholar, he had changed his mind about using the concept of Eve in Gessner's *Der Tod Abels* for *Eve Tempted* as soon as he found out that a letter he had written describing this

plan in detail had been published in the Cincinnati *Republican*.

Powers' development of these themes in the subtle manner suggested above is made all the more plausible by an understanding of some of the intellectual currents of his day. Like the other neoclassicists, Powers was quite aware not only of phrenology (the study of human character as revealed in the configuration of the head from the brow back to the base of the skull) and physiognomy (the same for the face) but also of the traditional language of gestures, all of which had been more or less codified earlier. He seems to have been especially interested in hands, judging from the numerous replicas he issued of the charming marble hand of his daughter Loulie, and at least one other for a patron who wanted a carving of his wife's hand holding a rose. In his studio he also left numerous casts of hands which are now in the collection of the National Museum of American Art. Arms captured the sculptor's interest as well. Of all the models he used for *Eve Tempted*, only one is known to us—Rosina Boyle, Lady Bulwer, who served as the model for Eve's right arm. The cast of it survives in the collection of the National Museum of American Art. Powers would measure heads with calipers, but take casts of the hands and arms. Perhaps Powers' reliance on the latter went back to his early years working as a waxworks artist for the Western Museum in Cincinnati, where only the head and hands were rendered in plastic form (clothing filling in the rest of the body).

Powers' interest in hands also may have stemmed from his religious beliefs. Swedenborg taught that the sense of touch was crucial to both motherly and conjugal love. In a larger sense, "The reason why even communications of the mind are effected by this sense is that the hands are the ultimates of a man, and his first [principles] are at the same time in the ultimates; by this means all things of the body and of the mind are also held in unbroken connection. Hence it is that by his touch Jesus healed the sick."

Powers was also a believer in Spiritualism. Being a Swedenborgian did not

necessarily dispose a person to Spiritualism, but since Swedenborg himself had visions, they were certainly not discounted. Whether they took the form of table rappings which counted out someone's age, spirit hands that reached out to touch you, or the voice of someone beloved but long gone from this world, spirit manifestations all concerned communication between this world and another, either past or future. A very large white hand was reported to have placed a wreath upon Elizabeth Barrett Browning's head during a seance conducted by the tubercular and unattractive young American medium Daniel Douglas Home, an event that she frequently discussed with Hiram Powers while in Florence. Mrs. Trollope, who met Home in London, took him to Florence where the Powers, Brownings, William Wetmore Storys, Bulwer-Lyttons and many other artists and writers attended seances with him, often experimenting with "magnetism" on their own. Powers wrote to Edward Everett that he intended to try the experiment, saying, "my belief is that we are all under the immediate influence of the spiritual world, and the merest film separates us from the view of that world. I am no fanatic nor am I prone to believe things without the strongest proofs . . . but they interest me very much."

Powers' unshakable belief in the existence of another world to which this earthly one corresponded was a touchstone of his artistic vision. He was able to rise above the accumulation of data in the creation of an ideal sculpture like *Eve Tempted* and *Disconsolate* because Powers was so perfectly in tune with the interior world, described by Joshua Taylor as "fleshly existence caught in the perfect web of stilling thought. Ideality, in other words, is a state of mind not a complex of bodily measurements." For the artist devoted to creating a realm of pure thought, of ideality, but keenly aware also of the ever more complex visible world around him, Swedenborg's concept of correspondences provided a possible means by which matter could be elevated to the realm of the spirit.

Spiritual concerns were uppermost

Hiram Powers

in the minds of most American artists and intellectuals in Powers' day and many parallels can be drawn between the transcendental philosophy of nature and its expression in both the mid-nineteenth century painting of the Hudson River School and the American neoclassicist fusion of the real and the ideal in sculpture. Behind it all is a pragmatic kind of Neo-Platonism which saw the beauty of reality whether in the virgin wilderness of North America or a virginal face, as a physical manifestation of a spiritual or ideal phenomenon. The

loss of that virgin wilderness to the advance of civilization, like the loss of innocence to the advance of scientific knowledge, was acutely felt, and was given expression in works like Hiram Powers' *Eve Tempted* and, more especially, *Paradise Lost*. Powers would have agreed with Ralph Waldo Emerson when he wrote: "The arts have been taken from nature by human invention; and as the mind returns to God, they are in a measure swallowed up in the source from which they came. The mind, as it wanders from heaven,

molds the arts into its own form, and covers its nakedness . . . but it is only when the heart is purified from every selfish and worldly passion, that they are created in real beauty, for in their origin they are divine." □□

This essay was first published by the Hudson River Museum in 1986.

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