A REBEL IN PATAGONIA

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A century ago every young American who aspired to become a sculptor headed for Rome. Some stopped in Florence and never got much farther along the rocky road, some never came back home, sinking into the comfortable timelessness of Italy. The past crowded so close upon them that they lost contact with the present in a romantic dream of golden yesterdays and gilded tomorrows where fame beckoned.

Among these hopeful young men was William Morris Hunt. Because of his later prominence as a painter of the Barbizon school, one never thinks of him as a member of that group of Italio-Yankee sculptors which includes Hiram Powers, William Story, and Horatio Greenough. Yet at the beginning of his career Hunt followed close on the heels of these pioneers, and after learning the rudiments of cutting cameo portraits “from a noted Boston sculptor” he set out for Rome in 1844.

When “the atmosphere of the city of the dead Past proved inimical” to his delicate health, other academies had to be found, and his mother encouraged him to try Düsseldorf. But Düsseldorf was not the answer for William: the course of study prescribed by the academy was intolerable, there was too much drudgery, and divine inspiration seemed to the young student to be smothered in rules, traditions, precepts, and literature. Next it was decided that Hunt should enter the studio of the sculptor Pradier in Paris. But while wandering about the city, he chanced upon a painting by Couture, and suddenly he made up his mind that painting was the art for him. He entered the studio of Couture, and from that moment the Bohemian life claimed him. Later he fell under the spell of Millet and went to live and work with him at Barbizon.

Since, from this time forward, Hunt occupied himself entirely with painting, his sculp-}

ured works are very few; in fact only four pieces, except for his early cameos, seem to have been recorded. As a student in Rome under the direction of Henry Kirke Brown, he modeled a copy of the Naples Psyche, adding from his imagination the missing parts. His mother’s pride in this first work caused her to have it cut in marble. Hunt also modeled two portrait medallions, one of his brother John and one of his master, Couture. Later he made a large plaque in high relief of three galloping horses. Of these efforts in sculpture only the last seems to have much significance as a part of the work of the artist. This group of horses formed a major element in a composition which Hunt worked on intermittently from about 1847 until the time of his death.

A plaster cast of this group was one of the first pieces of modern sculpture presented to the Museum—a gift from the artist’s brother, Richard Morris Hunt, the architect, in 1880. At that time the donor wrote to John Taylor Johnston, President of the Museum: “The cast of the group of horses in the ‘Anahita’—which I presented to the Museum . . . I should have unboxed and mounted somewhere—It could be plain or an appropriate moulding or it could be mounted as I have one in Newport on a flat board about eight inches larger all around than the cast—the board covered with red plush—the effect is fine.” Mr. Johnston, forwarding this letter to General di Cesnola, Director of the Museum, wrote: “Please observe what Hunt says at the end of his letter about mounting the cast. . . . When mounted it should be hung under Hunt’s pictures, below the line.” The general apparently decided against red plush.

When Hunt returned to the United States in 1855 he felt, as all American artists felt on leaving Europe, that the very air of the country seemed hostile, or worse than actively
hostile—indifferent to art. When he and young Elihu Vedder paid a call on Emerson in Concord, they told him that to an artist America was Patagonia—a land of exile, a desert without pictures. Boston must have indeed seemed to them then a far cry from the carefree *vie de Bohème* of Paris, and the life centering around the Studio Building on Tremont Street but a pale replica of the Latin Quarter—like a plaster cast, almost like a death mask, one might say, of the lively original.

In 1846 Hunt had received from his brother Leavitt a translation of a Persian poem about Anahita, the goddess of Night, which fired his imagination, and he immediately set about translating the poem into a picture. Having some difficulty in drawing the “fearful plunge” of the “well-trained coursers” attached to the chariot of the goddess, Hunt modeled the three horses in clay. The conception fascinated him, and he painted many studies. One of these was sketched upon a tea tray which was then framed in gold plush and hung in his sister’s parlor in Newport. When Hunt’s studio was burned in the great fire in Boston (1872), all his sketches and studies for Anahita were destroyed with many portraits and his collection of paintings by Millet.

The tea tray, some small photographs, and the original clay model of the horses then being cast in a plaster shop, which escaped the fire, were all that remained of his labor, save perhaps some skill of hand gained in the many repetitions of the composition. Some claimed that the central figure, the goddess of Night, was, if not a direct portrait, at least inspired by Hunt’s wife. Perhaps modesty prevented any insistence on this point, since Anahita, though somewhat vague as to form, was represented partly nude.

Undaunted by the fire, Hunt set up a new studio and between painting portraits and instructing pupils in the principles of the Barbizon manner he started to make studies for a new Anahita. When, in 1878, he was awarded a commission to paint two large...
mural decorations for the new capitol at Albany, it was almost inevitable that the long considered and much emended design for Anahita should be the subject chosen for one of them. The title was clarified for the benefit of the American public to The Flight of Night, symbolizing the darkness of ignorance fleeing before the bright dawn of civilization and progress in legislative halls as well as in the general Patagonian wilderness.

Because of faulty planning on the part of the builders and an American hankering to get things done in a hurry, only about fifty-five days were allotted to Hunt to paint the murals—each forty-five feet long and sixteen feet high. Much of the work had to be done at night by the light of calcium flares; the walls were not properly prepared to hold the paint; there was no time to draw up full-size cartoons; and the designs had to be thrown on the walls by means of a magic lantern and traced.

The constant nervous strain and the long hours of climbing about on a scaffolding forty feet from the floor—to say nothing of the artist's fear that his paintings would not be finished on time or that, worst of all, they might prove to be failures when the scaffolding was removed—brought on a complete collapse shortly after the job was finished. His faithful assistant had sought in vain to allay his dread of failure by offering to paint out the pictures in one day if Hunt thought them unworthy.

The finished murals were, however, well received, but the acclaim with which they were hailed by critics and public came too late. On returning to Boston the artist could not seem to resume his usual activities, and he was forced to stop work and retire to the country in an endeavor to recover. In the summer of 1879 he went to Maine to stay with the Thaxters at Appledore on the Isles of Shoals, and there he died, whether by accident or design no one could decide. The poet Celia Thaxter found him one morning floating face down in a pond; the staff of his umbrella, broken in two, was found on the bank near by. Hunt had once said, "A ripple of Eternity closes over us."

It was Hunt who made the paintings of Corot, Millet, and Daubigny so fashionable among American collectors, and he pointed out the excellence of the work of his friend the sculptor Barye, whose small animal groups in bronze were purchased in such quantities by Americans during the later years of the nineteenth century. Hunt was largely responsible for directing American art students' eyes from Rome to Paris as the goal and paradise of artists, a position Paris has held ever since. He also discovered the picturesque and paintable fishing villages along the New England coast, where earlier artists had been able to find nothing sublime or spectacular enough to paint.

It seems remarkable that Hunt's simple instructions on painting and drawing should have met with violent opposition from the critics and that his pictures often aroused harsh judgments. Although Hunt was of an
entirely different generation from Allston’s, their paintings share some inherent air of timidity and restraint; it is as though Allston did not dare whole-heartedly to be a painter of the English school and Hunt could never be quite at ease as a painter of the Barbizon school. Perhaps it was the effect of their indifferent early training. As Hunt said: “In judging of a painter, his surroundings and his drawbacks ought to be taken into consideration. I might have painted if I had lived in an atmosphere of art, but in America everything resolves itself into the getting of money, and selling a poor article instead of a good one.”

Hunt the teacher was quite another matter—his influence on his pupils and on other art students, through his widely quoted remarks, had a profound effect in undermining the sterile formulas of the academies. He had the ability, so essential in teaching, to implant his enthusiasm in his pupils, who regarded him with awe and affection, almost as a saint.

He must have been a very attractive person. He was tall, striking in appearance rather than handsome, and not a little eccentric. His witty conversation and his interest in people won him countless friends. Some thought he looked like an Arab sheik, others like Leonardo or Titian—the resemblance was considered to be a natural family likeness among geniuses. Henry James, however, saw in Hunt a resemblance to the knight of La Mancha, Don Quixote. Hunt’s unassailable social position had a certain importance in making his personal idiosyncracies acceptable in Boston—he could swear like a trooper in polite circles or balance a soup plate on his head in a restaurant and get away with it.

Perhaps the most significant point regarding Hunt’s Talks on Art, composed of verbatim reports of his criticisms of his students’ work, is not only what he said but the fact that conditions made it necessary for him to say it. His remarks—often important in themselves and frequently amusing—when taken as a whole, reflect in reverse, so to speak, the curiously narrow, provincial attitude toward art then current. His free and easy teachings, which substituted the poetic Barbizon truths of impressionistic naturalism for current academic rules, frequently crackled with heretical lightning. His barbed remarks on complacent Boston probed too deeply for comfort into the safe, conventional habits of mind. Unfortunately the same hand that has preserved so many of his remarks has also censored out many a telling phrase from the published Talks, but “what Hunt said” about this or that was quoted all over Boston, and each new quip flew from ear to ear, delighting the bold modern spirits and doubtless shocking the conventional.

Among the things “Hunt said” are:

“Some people have expressed themselves as discouraged in their expectation of finding any art in America, and have ‘long since ceased to hope!’ Let us remember that art, like jelly, has always been more easily recognized when cold. It has always existed, in all nations, and the tradition will probably not die here.”

“I would as soon listen to a lecture on Art as to smell of music, or to eat the receipt of a plum pudding!”

“Now little boys, look at your books! Don’t open your eyes and look over there at French art! I have seen it, and I know that it is not good.”

“As print grows cheap, thinkers grow scarce.”

“In France a man is snubbed if he gives an opinion without knowledge. Here A, B, or C gives his opinion and it is tooted all over Boston.”

“The truth is, there are so many people looking back into the past that they would not see great things that might happen today. If Homer were to come here and sing, they would say, ‘Hold on! You’re in our way.’ We’re looking back into the Past!”

The Albany murals, because of dampness in the stone on which they were painted, have almost disappeared, and a false ceiling erected many years ago now conceals the wreck.