SAMUEL MORSE AND THE MUSE
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Last year the Metropolitan Museum received a portrait by Samuel F. B. Morse of his daughter Susan, the bequest of Herbert Lee Pratt. This important addition to the collection of American paintings provides an opportunity to review a group of pictures by Morse and other objects associated in one way or another with this most interesting man.

Morse the inventor is so firmly embedded in the popular imagination that in 1932, during the centennial celebration of his invention, the rediscovery of Morse the painter came as a pleasant surprise to many who read and wrote of that occasion. The man seemed suddenly to emerge as a many-sided genius. The common attitude toward his paintings that had prevailed since the middle of the nineteenth century was summed up, shortly after Morse’s death in 1872, by a writer who said: “As a painter, he was not very successful, and abandoned art as a profession in 1839. Such of his pictures as still exist are prized rather as the work of Morse the inventor of the Electric Telegraph than on account of any particular artistic merit of their own.”

Only a glance at any of Morse’s excellent portraits is sufficient to prove the grave injustice of the above estimate. For example, the well-known full-length portrait of Lafayette, now one of the principal ornaments of the New York City Hall, or the portrait of Susan Walker Morse illustrated on the opposite page. These and many other paintings speak not only of his great technical dexterity but also of his ready grasp of the personality he chose to place before us. In many cases his imaginative conceptions in composition provide an unusual but very welcome variation on the traditional formal portrait in the English style, which he absorbed while studying in London with Allston and West. We should say, contrary to the superficial judgment of Clara Clement quoted above, that Morse was a very successful artist; he was, it seems, only unsuccessful at making money with his brush, which is quite another matter, even though for a season he was the most fashionable portrait painter to the plantation aristocracy of Charleston.

Morse was much mystified and not a little pleased at the inscrutable workings of Divine Providence that seemed to divide his career in the middle between those supposed opposites the arts and sciences. Though he conceived his life to be the preordained design of God, he never seemed able to make the intellectual adjustment that would show him that his art and his invention were the product of related impulses. Morse was an intensely religious man trained in the rigid Protestant orthodoxy which flourished in New England in his father’s time, and he felt himself to be but a humble instrument in the hand of God, especially chosen to bring to mankind the peaceful blessings that would derive from the universal use of his magnetic telegraph. For Morse to have realized that his inventiveness was related to his ability as an artist would have been a psychological feat entirely out of character.

The deep, underlying relationship which pervades the occupations of men, a likeness which transcends the narrow and artificial boundaries of painting or mechanics, was pointed out by Emerson in his essay on “Art” in Society and Solitude. Emerson says:

“... the analogies which exist in all the arts ... are the reappearance of one mind, working in many materials to many temporary ends. Raphael paints wisdom; Handel sings it, Phidias carves it, Shakespeare writes it, Wren builds it, Columbus sails it, Luther preaches it, Washington arms it, Watt mechanizes it. ... The laws of each art are convertible into the laws of every other.”

The reason for the widely varied intellectual and manual adaptability of the artist and his versatility in seemingly unrelated fields is per-
The Muse—Susan Walker Morse, by Samuel F. B. Morse. Bequest of Herbert Lee Pratt, 1945. This painting was shown at the Metropolitan Museum in 1873, in its first loan exhibition, and also in 1932, in a memorial exhibition of Morse's paintings.
haps best explained by the following passage in *The Condition of Man* by Lewis Mumford. In speaking of the artist and the changes in his social status since the Renaissance, he says:

“The many-sidedness of the painter’s education and discipline made him the ideal handyman in a period of colorful improvisation: not bound to the rules of his guild, to the established conventions of his art, he was capable of moving forward in new directions. By his emphasis on technique, without regard for the ethical or ideological content of his paintings, the artist became the destined interpreter of the technicians of politics and finance who arose in the same period. Just as there was nothing the prince might not do, so there was nothing that the painter might not see or paint; his curiosity and inventiveness flowed over into every department of human activity, not least into technics itself, from Leonardo to Fulton and Morse. . . . The artist shared with the gentleman the discipline of an all-round development. But in one respect he was greatly the gentleman’s superior: he was not bound by caste limitations to deny himself the use of his hands: his real virtue lay rather in the fact that he could turn his hand to anything. . . . Under the new despotism of the machine, the universal qualities of the painter were a handicap: those who survived best were fragmentary men, applying a shriveled part of their personality to achieve the utmost efficiency in a little job.
In the new rationale of science, as laid down by Galileo, the painter’s world of figure and color had become irrelevant: in the new processes of industry, beauty and use were progressively separated, and mere quantitative production became the goal of mechanical improvement. In this change, the artist, who was the most courted figure of the fifteenth century, became ultimately the chronic unemployable of the nineteenth century.”

In general, the nineteenth century, with its intense love of strict categories and classifications of all things, including black and white moral patterns, decreed that an artist was an artist, an inventor an inventor, and anyone who was able to make creative contributions in more than one field laid himself open to the suffocating and insupportable honor of comparison with Leonardo da Vinci, especially when one accomplishment lay in the field of painting. If Morse was the American Leonardo, as a recent writer maintains, he was only a small-bore or low-caliber Leonardo.

Though Morse’s telegraph was not the first, his invention was more practical than any of its predecessors or contemporary rivals. One of its chief virtues was its simplicity—a simplicity that is practically the hallmark of the inspired amateur. Morse came at his problem untrammeled by too much knowledge of electrical theory, though he was prepared with some manual skill and an American “know-how”
Morse Telegraph Instrument, about 1837-1844. Gift of George Hutchins, 1876

when he put his experimental apparatus together. The slumbering power of theoretical discoveries mulled by drowsing savants in their cabinets of Natural Philosophy awoke under his fresh inspiration and took practical form in the mind of the artist.

The Morse Telegraph was in its way as much a product of the romantic mind as any of the contemporary fantasies of Poe, and like them it caught and enchanted the popular imagination. Here was a new Prometheus who tamed the lightning of Heaven and bade it follow his command; or, to quote a contemporary, the verbose but not unperceptive Tuckerman, "He puts his artist fire into a locomotive shape, and writes with electric fluid instead of painting with oil." In another place Tuckerman says of Morse: "He then [when young] aimed at renown through devotion to the beautiful; but it would seem as if the genius of his country, in spite of himself, led him to this object, by the less flowery path of utility."

As Tuckerman suggests, his experiments with "electric fluid" were an activity of mind and hand closely akin to his experiments in paint. Though his materials and results were in each case quite disparate, the kind of perception, the kind of willingness to place familiar things in new juxtapositions, the three-dimensional imagination which typifies the creative mind, were the controlling elements.

It is interesting to note that with the success of the telegraph Morse ceased to paint. Perhaps it is more significant that he also ceased to invent. In fact, it appears that success dried up the springs of inspiration altogether. It might be truthfully said that his career as a creative artist culminated in his last work of art—the Morse Telegraph.

The brilliant success of the Morse Telegraph and its spectacular and awe-inspiring possibilities transformed its inventor into a legendary figure. As the patriarchal representative of American ingenuity, he embodied the popular idea of what a successful inventor should be. From this time forward he was fully occupied with his role as folk hero and as the benevolent figurehead of a powerful corporation. In later life, despite all detractors and the many who put forward prior claims to his invention, Morse's reputation remained high and his bosom became a veritable pincushion of honorary medals and orders. Through good luck he was saved from the fate of so many inventors and lived for many years in affluence because he left his business affairs in the charge of a faithful friend. Even though he often found himself supporting causes that were un-
popular, somehow he remained aloof from very much blame.

Perhaps it is significant that the first work from the hand of Morse to enter the Museum’s collections was an early model of his recording telegraph. This model, presented in 1876 by George Hutchins, was then called “the first Morse Telegraph instrument,” which it obviously is not. It is probable, however, that it dates somewhere between 1837 and 1844, when Morse was trying to perfect an instrument to record the dot and dash messages signaled by his sending key. When Morse was in Washington in 1843, dancing attendance on a dallying and trivial-minded Congress in the hope of winning a government appropriation to build an experimental telegraph line, he demonstrated his invention to his friend Horatio Greenough, the philosophical sculptor. Greenough with his usual perception at once saw the abstract beauty of the telegraph even though the idea was expressed in crude spindles and spools. It may indeed be looked upon as a truly American work of art, a masterpiece, a brilliant synthesis of romanticism and practicality.

Whether Mr. Hutchins regarded his gift as an object of art, a historical document, or a mechanical curio, it is impossible to say. Perhaps his gesture mingled all these conceptions, at the same time revealing the Museum as a collection of curios. At any rate, the fact that he considered the Metropolitan Museum the appropriate recipient of the model and that the officials of the institution accepted it throws interesting light on their attitude. There may have been reflected in it an older and much broader conception of the function of the art museum, which held it proper to show there any of the handiwork of man, reserving the natural history museum for the works of God.

There are in the Museum various other works associated with Morse, representing in their way almost every important phase of his career. The portrait of Mrs. Daniel de Saussure Bacot (about 1820) typifies the fashionable and dashing portraits that made him so popular in Charleston. The portrait of DeWitt Clinton was painted in 1826, the year Morse organized the National Academy of Design. The newly acquired full-length portrait of Susan Walker Morse, the eldest daughter of the artist, was painted during the crucial years of the invention of the telegraph (about 1835-1837) when Morse was practically starving to death as Professor of the Arts of Design at the newly founded New York University. In the McGuire collection of nineteenth-century drawings there is a curious pen drawing of a head with closed eyes, dated 1840. In this year Morse had turned his attention to the new art of photography and made what are believed to be the earliest experiments in taking portrait photographs. Morse thought the camera would be a great aid to the artist, who could copy from a daguerreotype, thus relieving the sitter of the irksome
task of posing. At this early stage portrait daguerreotypes had to be taken with such long exposures and in such a strong light that the subject had to keep his eyes closed. It is probable then that this drawing is a study from an early daguerreotype. As a drawing it lacks charm, whatever its significance may be to the historian of photography.

The Museum’s archives contain a letter from Morse to the French scientist Dominique Arago in which Morse describes to his friend the improved state of the telegraph in 1846. Another letter from Morse, written in 1871 to the Secretary of the Museum, accepts with gratitude his election to a Vice-Presidency and expresses regret that age prevents him from taking active part in “the promotion of enterprises promising great public benefit.” The weight of his honored name, however, and a substantial check helped to bolster the infant institution.

The portrait of Susan Walker Morse shows her as a young girl of sixteen. She sits with a sketchbook in her lap, a pencil in hand, her eyes raised to the contemplation of some innocent daydream. This portrait has sometimes been titled The Muse, but one feels that this classical allusion is inappropriately heavy and formal for a picture which is essentially a summing up of all that the genteel maiden of 1835 should be—unworldly and good, fashionably pale, a perfect expression of sheltered female virtue.

It was painted in her father’s cluttered rooms in the handsome neo-Gothic structure that housed New York University on Washington Square. The background and accessories of the portrait were sumptuous and imaginary. Perhaps the artist was trying, by placing her in such grand surroundings, to make up to Susan for all the years she had spent as a poor relation living on the bounty of aunts and uncles. Possibly Susan’s modish taffeta gown with its wide Honiton lace bertha was also imagined by her fond father, who was at the time desperately poor and certainly in no position to furnish her with an elaborate wardrobe except by the wishful brush. Her dress is a soft golden brown—the color of old-fashioned molasses taffy. The velvet cushions and draperies of the divan are a muted shade of vermilion. As Mr. Wehle pointed out to me, the remarkable color scheme is so much in the key of the dawning Victorian age that it would be possible to surmise the date of the picture by the abstract facts of color alone without the supporting evidence of fashion and biography.

Susan’s life was not altogether happy. Her mother died when she was six, and her father was not able to provide her with a home of her own. In 1844 she married Edward Lind and at last found a home of sorts at her husband’s plantation in Porto Rico. Plantation life, however, proved lonely, the climate oppressive, and the limited and insular society tedious. For relief she was compelled to return often to spend extended periods with her now wealthy father at his estate, Locust Grove, on the Hudson near Poughkeepsie. On her return to Porto Rico from one of these visits Mrs. Lind was mortified to discover that her husband had chosen a native mistress. It is said that from that time forward husband and wife dined in silence at a table divided by a screen. Another sorrow, the death of her improvident son, overwhelmed her. Her husband died in 1882, and in 1885 Mrs. Lind sailed from the hated island for New York. It proved to be her last journey, for before reaching New York she was lost at sea. Whether she plunged willfully over the rail to suicide, or was swept overboard in a storm, the books do not say. One can only hope that the struggle was brief and that the engulfing waters were warm.

The passage quoted from The Condition of Man, by Lewis Mumford, on pages 264-265, is reprinted by permission of the publishers, Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc.