A RELIC OF THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH

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This is the story of how a clever Yankee sculptor, Hiram Powers, who lived in Florence, Italy, tried to strike it rich on the Mother Lode without ever leaving his comfortable Florentine studio; and further, how he ended up, like so many other gold-seekers, in borrascas. In borrascas is a very useful Mexican mining term that the California argonauts learned almost as soon as they got to the mines—it means working in rock barren of rewarding ore, and, by association generally, having tough luck in the mines.

The centennial of the California gold rush, now being celebrated, makes an appropriate time to bring together the facts of this episode in Powers' career and to recount the history of his statue California now in this Museum. This marble lady is, without doubt, one of the most curious gold rush relics to be found this side of Dogtown Gulch, and, as far as I know, no other quite like it remains from the mad scramble for California gold that swept the world in 1849. Apparently, as soon as the news of the discovery of gold in California reached Italy, Powers, with his true showman's instinct, began to design a symbolic statue to bear the magic name that was on everyone's lips and of course tie in the name of Hiram Powers with the most widely publicized event of the time. As soon as his dream figure was completed in his rather humdrum imagination he drafted a letter to his brother in San Francisco describing it and offering it for sale, a letter planned, like so many other letters of his, for immediate publication in the newspapers. It was first printed in the California Courier, and in the spring of 1851 it was picked up and reprinted in the March issue of The Literary World. Powers wrote:

"... We are all in quite good health, and I am..."

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getting along pretty well here.... I am now making a statue of ‘La Dorado’ or California—an Indian figure crowned with pearls and precious stones. A kirtle surrounds her waist, and falls with a feather fringe down to just above the knees. The kirtle is ornamented with Indian embroidery, with tracings of gold, and her sandals are tied with golden strings. At her side stands an inverted Cornucopia, from which is issuing at her feet lumps and grains of native gold, to which she points with her left hand, which holds the divining rod. With her right hand she conceals behind her a cluster of thorns. She stands in an undecided posture—making it doubtful whether she intends to advance or retire—while her expression is mystical. The gold about the figure must be represented, of course, by color as well as form. She is to be the genius of California.

“I could execute this statue on a colossal scale in bronze or marble, and it might be placed upon a pedestal out or in-doors. It might be set up, if preferred, at the entrance or at the landing of the harbor of San Francisco. The new Goddess of Gold! Old Plutus is dead of chagrin since the discovery of California; and I am making a substitute for him. Is she wanted in your city? and will the good San Franciscans give me some of their gold for her? An inscription on the base or pedestal of the statue might commemorate the discovery of ‘El Dorado,’ so long held as fabulous, and the statue would stand as a monument to the most wonderful event of modern times. . . .

“Your affectionate brother,

“Hiram Powers”

If Powers had had any conception of what was going on in San Francisco he would hardly have wasted the postage to send such a letter. Although the city of San Francisco had a population estimated at about 30,000 in 1850 it was still only a boom town that had sprung up in one year of frenzied and helter-skelter activity. The major part of the population were adventurous young men just passing through town on their way to the great gamble at the mines. Their sole interest was to get to the mines, make a rich strike, and then hit the trail for home, the sooner the better. Clearly the town was in no proper state of mind to consider the purchase of a chancy marble goddess of “undecided posture,” a lady with a handful of thorns who didn’t know which way she was headed. Luckily for the city of San Francisco no drunken miner ever took it into his head, as an ironic whim, to commission the sculptor to execute this figure in colossal size to be placed on a hill overlooking the Golden Gate, or on the mud flats by the harbor.

When the gold fever struck, Powers had been living in Florence for about fourteen years—and living very comfortably—on the profits earned by the exhibition of his notorious Greek Slave. He hoped to do even better financially with his California, for which he had a much more elaborate plan. In 1849 Powers was perhaps at the peak of his renown as an artist. But his long residence in Italy, his increasing dependence on Italian marble-cutters, and the narrow limits of his artistic skill made him little more than a second-rate Italian sculptor. This, of course, he did not realize, and he never ceased to tell American visitors to his studio how very American he was and how important it was for American artists to choose American themes for their work. This is how he felt about it:

“I mean to devote my time and humble abilities to my own glorious country. Why should her artists go to the ancients for subjects, while she affords so many touching themes for the pencil and chisel? The only reasonable answer is that Americans will not buy them.”

This idea was part of his campaign for Government patronage. His statue California was designed to attract attention in America in the hope that the publicity would be of value in Washington. The immediate reward to be won was a colossal commission for the decoration of the national Capitol. But what Powers actually wanted was to be chosen by acclaim as official sculptor to the Government with carte blanche to make whatever monuments or sculptural decoration he pleased without competition from any other artist. That’s all he wanted, that was his goal, the prize he had vainly sought for from the day he left Cincinnati.

But Powers was never very successful in sell-
Marble statue of California, dated 1858, by Hiram Powers (1805-1873). Gift of William Backhouse Astor, 1872
ing his talents in Washington, partly because of his towering vanity, mainly, it seems, because of the powerful political and financial interests which gave their support to the New York sculptor Thomas Crawford. In this game for the most lucrative Government commission ever awarded to an American sculptor in the nineteenth century Powers’ fame and his patriotic choice of subject matter counted for little against such powerful opponents as Charles Sumner and Daniel Webster. Crawford had another advantage over Powers that was worth a great deal—his wife, Louisa Ward, was the daughter of a prominent New York banker. When Powers’ egregious plan to make himself sculptor-in-chief to the Government was realized and when it became known that his idea of a design for a pediment group consisted of one pawky standing figure the commission to decorate the Capitol was awarded to Crawford. Powers was a slick horse trader but not quite slick enough to put over a deal like that. The Government wanted sculpture and lots of it in return for the good round sum they had appropriated. Powers had refused to enter a competition with Crawford claiming that he was really too busy to waste time designing sculpture for a competition. He was afraid of ruining his reputation by not winning.

In spite of his talk about his American subject matter illustrating touching themes of “modern life” his ideal figures are very few in number and not especially “American.” In fact after his first success with the Greek Slave it might be said that his vein of sculptural invention petered out, leaving him working in barren stone—in an artistic borousca. The vein pinched out early and his real bonanza was always in the field of portraiture.

The California as completed differs somewhat from the California described in Powers’ letter to his brother, but it shares the general Italianate characteristics of its sisters, the Greek Slave, Eve Disconsolate, America, Il Penseroso, and Eve. In all these one finds the neoclassic virtues tiresomely overworked into vices, the re-

View of Hiram Powers’ studio in Florence about 1850, showing California on the left
lentless insistence on mechanical detail, the commonplace symbolic accessories, a bland sort of empty-glove anatomy based on the Venus de’ Medici, vacuous and cameo-like faces. The whole structure was an inert effigy which the romantic observer could enliven in his imagination to almost any sort of mood or meaning.

In the finished marble California the pearled, jeweled crown is missing, the modest kirtle with its “Indian embroidery” and feather edging has been boldly cast aside, the golden sandals are omitted and the cornucopia spilling gold nuggets of the original design has been transformed into a gigantic quartz crystal. California’s left hand, however, still points to the spilled nuggets which are not there. The sculptor was too lazy to change the gesture.

No Californian came forward to buy the golden goddess; the Government was not interested. California stood for several years by the door of Powers’ studio, a frozen asset, awaiting a purchaser. There Hawthorne saw her and described her in his Notebook:

“His statue of California, lately finished, and as naked as Venus, seems to me a very good work; not an actual woman, capable of exciting passion, but evidently a little out of the category of human nature. In one hand she holds a divining rod. ‘She says to the emigrants,’ observed Powers, ‘Here is the gold if you choose to take it.’ But in her face, and in her eyes, very finely expressed, there is a look of latent mischief, rather grave than playful, yet somewhat impish or sprite-like; and, in the other hand, behind her back, she holds a bunch of thorns. Powers calls her eyes Indian. The statue is true to the present fact and history of California, and includes the age long truth as respects the auri sacra fames.”

Finally, in 1856, Powers was lucky enough to find a buyer for his California who could stand the very stiff asking price—Mr. William Backhouse Astor of New York. The figure was cut in marble to his order and shipped to New York in 1858; there it was set up in Mr. Astor’s residence in Astor Place and there it remained in gloomy splendor for many years. It was rumored that Mr. Astor had paid $7,500 for it, almost twice as much as Powers had received for his Greek Slave. This high price apparently secured to Mr. Astor a promise from the sculptor that no other copies would be made.1

The statue brought Powers very little in the way of publicity because it was never exhibited publicly, and only the select few who were invited to Mr. Astor’s house ever saw it. However, one of these visitors was the author of a voluminous book on American art, Henry T. Tuckerman. He says: “At a brilliant party given by its owner this work was the nucleus of a gay crowd; it even drew attention from the many specimens of living beauty around, and the exquisite flowers and toilettes were comparatively neglected. Evidently the sculptor’s idea is to contrast the fascination of form with the sinister expression of the face,—the thorn concealed in the left hand with the divining-rod displayed in the right,—and thus illustrate the deceitfulness of riches. It is a singular coincidence that such an allegorical statue should adorn the dwelling of our wealthiest citizen.”

Perhaps after Mr. Tuckerman pointed out and published the “singular coincidence” he seemed to find in the allegorical significance of the statue, it fell somewhat in Mr. Astor’s opinion. At any rate a change in the style of parlor decoration was setting in—the new style that did not call for white marble statuary. “Everyone” was moving uptown to new mansions on Fifth Avenue, and in 1872, when Mr. Astor moved to his new house near Thirty-fourth Street, California was presented to the recently founded Metropolitan Museum of Art, then temporarily in the Dodworth Building at 68 Fifth Avenue.

By this gift Mr. Astor may be credited with starting the Museum’s collection of American art, as California was the first work by an American artist to become part of the Museum’s collection—a foundation stone if one may speak of it so. One year later Hiram Powers was dead, his lungs full of marble dust inhaled in a lifetime of digging for gold in the borrasca of neo-classic Carrara.

1 A replica of the head was cut in marble; it is now in the M. H. De Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, but no replicas of the whole figure were made.