Hiram Powers Biography

Hiram Powers

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Biography

Hiram Powers (1805-1873) was the most famous and significant of all the American neoclassic sculptors.

Hiram Powers was born on July 29, 1805, in Woodstock, Vt. The family soon moved to Cincinnati, where Powers grew up. He began his artistic career modeling wax figures for Dorfeuille's Western Museum in Cincinnati. His efforts then were noticed by the novelist Frances Trollope, who, years later, was of great assistance to him.

In 1834 Powers went to Washington, D.C., where he executed plaster portrait busts of such clients as Andrew Jackson and Daniel Webster. When Powers settled in Florence, Italy, in 1837, he made marble reproductions of these busts. He spent the rest of his life in Florence. The American sculptor Horatio Greenough, who was in Florence at that time, aided Powers socially and artistically. He also received encouragement from Bertel Thorvaldsen, then the most famous European neoclassic sculptor.

Powers continued to sculpture portraits throughout his lifetime. His patrons were visiting Americans and Europeans, some of noble heritage or of great repute. It was in the area of ideal works, however, that he made his reputation. He began creating such works as his bust *Ginevra* soon after arriving in Florence and followed this with his first full-length sculpture, *Eve Tempted*. His second full-length nude female figure, the *Greek Slave,* won him international acclaim; six full-size replicas were made. The statue became the best-known American sculpture of the 19th century because of its exhibition at the Crystal Palace in England in 1851 and the tour of several versions of the sculpture in the United States. The piece was emulated by other sculptors, both American and European.

Power's *Greek Slave* was followed by other full-length works, such as *California, America, Eve Disconsolate,* and *The Last of the Tribe,* as well as busts of these, and *Faith, Hope, Charity, Psyche, Diana,* and *Proserpine*. Over 130 replicas of *Proserpine* are known to have been made. The great disappointment of his life was the lack of serious governmental patronage; this was accorded, instead, to his contemporary Thomas Crawford. Powers did, however, furnish the U.S. Capital with sculptures of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

Powers died in Florence on June 27, 1873. The entire contents of his studio, including all his plaster models, about 20 marble sculptures, and his tools, casts, and manuscripts, were later acquired by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.