Horatio Greenough Biography

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Biography

Horatio Greenough (6 September 1805-18 December 1852) was the first American to become a professional sculptor. The son of a wealthy Boston merchant, Greenough was reared in a cultural atmosphere. At Harvard College he pursued the normal course of classical studies, but his real interest was sculpting. He was certainly encouraged in this interest by Washington Allston, whom Greenough met in 1823 and often acknowledged as his spiritual father and aesthetic mentor. In 1825, when his class graduated, Greenough's diploma had to be sent to him because he was aboard a ship bound for Rome to study with Albert Bertel Thorswalden; subsequently spending most of the rest of his life in Europe with only infrequent trips to the United States. A friendship with James Fenimore Cooper resulted in a commission from the United States Congress in 1832 for Greenough's most dubiously famous work: a colossal, seminude statue of George Washington modelled after Phidius's Zeus. A second oversized work, *The Rescue*, realistically depicting a mother and child being saved from an Indian attacker, was completed in 1851 and placed on a buttress of the Capitol portico. Greenough also produced a series of portrait busts and a number of idealistic pieces in bas-relief. Greenough's functional theories about art, as revealed in his periodical writings and his one book, *The Travels, Observations, and Experiences of a Yankee Stonecutter*, published under the pseudonym "Horace Bender," are his single most important legacy. He died in Somerville, Massachusetts. In his essays Greenough presented a democratic aesthetic which offered an alternative to the turgid European aesthetics he deplored, and proposed a theory to serve as the basis for a completely American art. This theory was the "organic" or "functional" theory which held that works which develop organically from the forces within a democratic society and in which function dictates form, like the sailing ship or the assembly line, are truly beautiful. Emerson enthusiastically accepted Greenough's organic aesthetic because he saw it as an expression of his own beliefs about art by a man much better equipped to discuss aesthetic principles. Thoreau, apparently in reaction to Emerson's enthusiasm, developed a strong dislike for Greenough. Ironically, Greenough's theory was brought to its most dramatic fulfillment in the architectural style of Louis Sullivan, who claimed that his principle of "form is function" was suggested by Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* .