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The "New Birth of Freedom"

The Gothic Revival and the Aesthetics of Abolitionism

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On the evening of April 27, 1865, the National Academy of Design opened its fortieth annual exhibition, the first held in a magnificent new Gothic Revival building on the corner of Fourth Avenue and Twenty-Third Street in New York City. The occasion was somber: the Civil War had just ended, and the building was draped in black mourning bunting for President Abraham Lincoln who had been assassinated less than two weeks earlier. Inside, visitors to the exhibition ascended a grand staircase to the second floor gallery where they were confronted with one of the largest and most controversial pieces in the show, a colossal plaster sculpture depicting the figure of a black woman reclining on one elbow, the other hand raised to her brow in gesture of despair. This was Anne Whitney's *Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Out Her Hands to God* (also known as *Africa*) (figure 6.1). An allegorical representation of the plight of the African peoples under slavery, *Africa* was one of many forms of artistic production created in direct response to the national crisis of the Civil War. Describing the cultural framework of this period, the art historian Kirk Savage wrote, "The shift from slavery to freedom precipitated by the Civil War was the cataclysmic event and the central dilemma of the century. . . . [It] reverberated throughout public space in countless ways, some obvious

Fig. 6.1 Anne Whitney, *Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Out Her Hands to God* (or, *Africa*), ca. 1864. Courtesy of Wellesley College Archives

and others subtle."[1] Concentrating primarily on sculpture, Savage has written about the importance of aesthetic representations of race during the war and subsequent Reconstruction period, and of the propagandistic and memorializing functions of art as a vehicle through which concepts of race were reinforced.

Beginning with the critical reception of Anne Whitney's *Africa*, this essay examines the racial dimension of the movement toward "naturalism" that swept through the fine arts in America beginning in the 1840s. Focusing primarily on Peter B. Wight's monumental National Academy of Design building, it suggests the presence of racial thinking in the transition from neoclassicism to Gothic Revival–style architecture in the United States, a transition previously seen as a matter of aesthetics or fashion, removed from and undisturbed by its political context. Known chiefly as an homage to the English art critic John Ruskin's beloved Venetian Gothic, Wight's Academy building is one of most prominent examples of Gothic Revival architecture built in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century (figure 6.2). The style was becoming popular throughout Europe and its current and former colonies during this period, though its forms and meanings were adapted and interpreted differently in different geographic locations. While the context of the Academy building's construction against the

Fig. 6.2 P. B. Wight, National Academy of Design, New York, 1865. General view of the building from the opposite corner. *National Academy of Design: Photographs of the New Building*, with an introductory essay and description by P. B. Wight (New York: S. P. Avery, 1886). Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art.

backdrop of the social and political upheaval of the Civil War has been acknowledged in architectural history, the centrality of that national crisis to its design has not. This essay discusses the relationship between the adoption of the Gothic Revival style for the Academy building and the broader aims of its patrons and its architect as members of the northern antislavery coalition. Like Whitney's *Africa*, the building was intended as an aesthetic expression of abolitionist ideals. Whitney's approach was figurative: she sought to elicit abhorrence for the practice of slavery by representing its human consequences. Without explicit reference to race, Wight, a disciple of Ruskin, relied on the symbolism of the Gothic Revival (both its aesthetic form and its explicit reference to craft production) to convey

complementary ideals of creative and social freedom. As this essay will explore, the building embodied a concept of "free labor" that had particular connotations in the context of mid-nineteenth-century America, one that helped shape ideas about the racial landscape of the nation after the war.

Anne Whitney's *Africa* and the Aesthetic of Abolitionism

It is illuminating to compare the reception of Wight's Academy building to that of Anne Whitney's *Africa*, which was featured in the inaugural exhibition held there in the spring of 1865. In both cases critics juggled claims to naturalism with fealty to historic models in order to judge the aesthetic success of the work. And in both cases the meaning of the work was tied to the antislavery cause. Produced in response to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, *Africa* was a deeply felt contribution to the debate over slavery.[2] Inspired by Enlightenment thinking, the international movement to end the global slave trade began in the eighteenth century. In the United States calls for the abolition of slavery gained momentum in the 1840s, ignited by the question of whether the practice would be permitted in the new western territories.[3] Supported by a broad and multiracial coalition of activists, the movement was especially strong in Quaker and evangelical Protestant churches in New England. A member of a well-off white family, Whitney was affiliated with the Boston-based abolitionist movement. While others wrote editorials and gave speeches in favor of the cause, she used her skill as an artist to depict the humanity, intelligence, and self-awareness of the black race (as it was imagined at that time), and black women in particular. As is evident in its longer title, *Africa* was inspired by Psalm 68:31: "Princes shall come out of Egypt and Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God." Referencing this biblical verse, the statue celebrated the African continent as a center of ancient civilization. Opposing theories of black racial inferiority, it dignified contemporary African peoples as equals in the eyes of God. Rendering *Africa* both legible and sympathetic to her intended audience, Whitney gave her a neoclassical form, half clad in a toga and with noticeably Greek features. As art historian Melissa Dabakis has noted, Whitney took a constructivist approach to her subject, assuming that one could simply visually recode racial representation.[4] However this attempt at aesthetic translation was not uniformly well received. While her intent was to lend *Africa* the dignity of Western artistic tradition, Whitney struggled to reconcile classical iconography with the stereotypical representations of black female bodies familiar to her audience. This struggle became a central theme in the critical reception of her statue.

Africa became an object of fascination, attracting more attention than any other artwork on display at the Academy's 1865 exhibition. In the art press, Whitney's attempt to render a black woman in neoclassical form attracted ambivalent, if not

openly hostile, responses. While some critics praised her ambition, others criticized the statue for its lack of "realism." *Africa*, they said, did not represent a "real negress" because the features and hair were too Anglicized.[5] The language used to denounce the piece suggests that while Whitney's visual vocabulary deliberately resisted popular stereotypes, some critics were disappointed not to see those stereotypes reflected:

> The face is not the negro face nor any variety of it, nor is the head the negro head. Miss Whitney has only half dared, and between realism and idealism has made a woeful fall. She has shrunk from the thick lips, the flattened nose, the woolly hair; and in striving to suggest forms which a great artist would have accepted with a brave unconsciousness, she has succeeded in making only a debased type of the Caucasian breed. . . . Call a statue "Africa" and it is the first essential that the forms should suggest, at least, the African race.[6]

The same suggestion was made more kindly by Whitney's friend, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Unitarian minister and prominent abolitionist, who suggested that "Africanized features" would be an "added triumph" to the message that the statue conveyed. Of *Africa*, he wrote, "She must rise as God made her or not at all."[7] In other words, racial body markers represented an essential and innate truth that could not and should not be eliminated. Because *Africa* was seen as an inauthentic figural representation of the black race, she was deemed unworthy as an aesthetic representation of the abolitionist cause.[8]

One of the most critical reviews of *Africa* appeared in a local art journal, the *New Path.* Published by the "Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art," the *New Path* was founded in 1863 by the architects Peter B. Wight, Russell Sturgis, and several like-minded friends. Heavily influenced by John Ruskin and the English Pre-Raphaelite movement, they were passionately opposed to conventional forms of artistic representation, believing that only strict adherence to nature could produce original and vital art forms.[9] The magazine's criticism of *Africa* echoed that given to a contemporary statue, the American sculptor Harriet Hosmer's *Zenobia in Chains* (1859). Exhibited at the Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations in London in 1862, this statue depicted the Queen of Palmyra (Syria) walking in the procession of her conqueror, the Roman emperor Aurelian. While *Africa* was deemed too idealized to depict a black woman, the *New Path* rejected Hosmer's decision to stain the skin of her marble figure a pinkish brown, and criticized the sculptor for giving the queen the "face of a common, housekeeping type."[10] Whether augmented by accepted visual markers of racial difference or not, the use of historical models was deemed insufficient and unhelpful when it came to the artistic representation of enslaved black women. Hosmer and her fellow sculptors were advised to abandon allegory altogether and to put

their skills to better use portraying contemporary heroes of the abolitionist movement. Significantly, the magazine suggested a white woman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, as a real life abolitionist heroine worthy of artistic representation.

In contrast to the unsatisfactory *Africa*, the *New Path* critic pointed to other works in the exhibition he believed more truthful and aesthetically pleasing. It so happened that the fortieth exhibition of the National Academy contained a portrait of a contemporary African American woman: Elihu Vedder's *Jane Jackson, Formerly a Slave* (1864). This modest tondo depicted the bowed head of an older woman, her face partially obscured by a headscarf. Vedder had drawn the portrait from life, using a local street vendor as a model. The *New Path* praised it as "wonderfully fine, full of expression and full of truth."[11] From the perspective of the critic, Vedder's painting was notable for its naturalism: his depiction of Jane Jackson was that of an authentic African American woman. In its review of the Academy's fortieth exhibition, the *New Path* put things in proper order. According to the magazine's worldview, abstracted, allegorical representations of black women as queens or other symbols of nationhood were rejected, while "realistic" depictions of black Americans were praised when shown in their expected contexts. Most significantly the *New Path* review concluded by suggesting that both Whitney and Hosmer would be better tasked with another form of sculpture: carving naturalistic ornaments for the as-yet-unfinished National Academy of Design building.[12] In one sense this comment was demeaning; the two women were recognized artists fully capable of creating aesthetic products in their own right. To suggest they take on the role of architectural carvers was to belittle them. However, in drawing attention to these ornaments the critic for the *New Path* had another intention. Carved by stonemasons working under the conditions of "free labor," they are key to understanding the larger political meaning of the Academy building.

The National Academy, the Gothic Revival, and the Emerging American Race

Designed when he was only twenty-three-years old, Wight's National Academy building was a major public commission heavily freighted with meaning because of its program and because of the time and place in which it was built. Beyond its pragmatic function, public architecture assumes a semiotic role as an emblem or sign of cultural identity, and in this period cultural identity was defined in terms of race. In the evolutionary thinking of the nineteenth century, a race was considered mature only when it fully embraced the arts, when it discovered its own forms of aesthetic expression. In these terms the United States barely registered because its peoples were not considered established as a coherent racial group with an intelligible formal aesthetic. In his *History of Architecture in All Countries* (1862–1867), the Scottish architectural historian James Fergusson claimed that the puri-

tanical beliefs of the English colonial settlers had hampered the evolution of a national style.[13] In this sense North America was on a par with the African continent, he claimed; the poverty of vernacular architecture in both places reflected a lack of cultural development. For Fergusson, Americans were simply too pragmatic to bother with art. The result, he argued, could be seen in their "ugly" cities and architecture, in the haphazard and indiscriminate use of ornament on their buildings. The typical American, he wrote, would be perfectly satisfied by the "invention of a self-acting machine" that would produce plans of cities and buildings in classical and Gothic styles, "at so much per foot square, and save all further trouble or thought."[14] The same criticism was frequently voiced in the *Crayon*, a New York–based art journal published from 1855 to 1861.[15] While the country had a wealth of raw material at its disposal, the *Crayon* claimed, this material was seldom put to use in the manufacture of "articles of taste and refinement—matter made beautiful."[16] Instead designers relied on feeble imitation of foreign models, frequently mingling different architectural styles together indiscriminately. The result, in the buildings of contemporary New York, especially the commercial palaces lining Broadway, was vulgarity. The solution, the magazine editorialized, was to promote national schools of art in order to educate Americans in good design and to elevate their taste as consumers.

In this critical context, the new National Academy of Design building was to be both agent and symbol of change, proof that Americans had developed an aesthetic sense reflecting a mature culture. Founded in 1825, the Academy was a private organization modeled after the Royal Academy in London and supported by well-off patrons from the emerging mercantile class.[17] Under the influence of Hudson River school painters Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, and George Caleb Bingham, it focused on promoting naturalistic art, rejecting aesthetic convention in order to more truthfully represent the American landscape and its people. Prior to 1865 the Academy had no building of its own, offering classes and exhibitions in a series of rented rooms including the gallery of the Society Library on Leonard Street, and the Tenth Street Artists' Studios. Following an aborted attempt to construct its own premises at Broadway and Bleecker Street during the 1850s, in 1860 the organization explored the purchase of a new site with the aim of erecting a permanent building. In November of that year the trustees, with Durand as chairman, purchased a rectangular lot on the northwest corner of Fourth Avenue and Twenty-Third Street.[18] Only a few blocks north of Union Square, then the city's most stylish shopping and entertainment district, this was at the time a fashionable area. With regard to the proposed building, the trustees set out a basic brief: it was to be three stories tall, with rooms for a School of Design on the ground floor, a suite of reception rooms and a lecture hall on the first floor, and exhibition galleries above. They invited three local archi-

tects to compete for the commission: Richard Morris Hunt, Leopold Eidlitz, and Jacob Wrey Mould.

There was little doubt that the entries would be in the Gothic Revival style. Popularized in Germany, France, and England, the style was already well established in New York City, especially for churches. Existing examples included Richard Upjohn's Trinity Church (1841–1846) on lower Broadway and James Renwick's Grace Church (1843–1846) and Church of the Puritans (1846), both in Union Square.[19] These churches followed an English pattern, with a greater emphasis on ornamental features such as pointed arches than on fealty to Gothic construction methods. In reaction to the work of Upjohn and Renwick, Eidlitz and Mould promoted a different kind of Gothic, massive and robust rather than spindly and ethereal, suitable for secular buildings as well as religious ones. While Eidlitz's St. George's Church on Stuyvesant Square (1846–1856) was relatively restrained, Mould's All Souls Unitarian Church (1855) at Fourth Avenue and Twentieth Street had caused a sensation. Built for the liberal Rev. Dr. Henry Whitney Bellows, All Souls introduced New Yorkers to so-called structural polychromy, in which the natural color of building materials was displayed to decorative effect.[20] With alternating courses of starkly contrasting dark-red brick and pale-yellow stone, All Souls attracted unflattering comparisons to both a zebra and an uncooked beefsteak. By the 1860s tastes had changed and this vigorous and colorful form of Gothic Revival architecture was increasingly accepted as the most appropriate style for public buildings, overturning the neoclassical model that had dominated American architecture since the late eighteenth century.

The National Academy of Design building was to be the most fully realized expression of the mid-nineteenth-century Gothic Revival built in New York City. After petitioning to be included in the competition, the young Wight presented drawings for a building no less audacious than Mould's All Souls. Described in the press as "Italian Romanesque" in style, his design clearly referenced Ruskin's beloved fifteenth-century Doge's Palace in Venice. Taking the form of a cubic palazzo, it was notable for its Gothic arches and for the colorful effect of its stone and marble facades, with horizontal bands of alternating colors on the lower floors and a diagonal checkered pattern above.[21] This effect was magnified by a blind facade on the upper floor, concealing the top-lit exhibition galleries. The absence of windows allowed for an uninterrupted surface of decorative stone and marble topped with an elaborate marble cornice and pierced only by six circular ventilation openings filled with delicate medieval tracery. Besides the use of fashionable polychromy, the principle feature of the facade was a grand entryway featuring a double flight of steps leading up to a highly ornamented entrance door topped by a steep gable (figure 6.3). Every column supporting the stairway was surmounted by a unique capital decorated with carvings depicting plants and foliage (figure

Fig. 6.3 P. B. Wight, National Academy of Design, New York, 1865. Entry staircase from the southwest corner of the building showing the newels of the stairway. *National Academy of Design: Photographs of the New Building*, with an introductory essay and description by P. B. Wight (New York: S. P. Avery, 1886). Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art.

6.4). The boldness of this design clearly appealed to the trustees: although Wight was by far the least experienced of the competitors, and his design was considerably more expensive than what they had allowed for, in March of 1861 they announced him the winner of the competition. The *New York Times* called it "one of the handsomest buildings in the United States, and different from any other edifice in the City. It will combine many novel and beautiful characteristics in the highest style of art and taste. . . . The Gothic renaissance will be the chief style of architecture, with some florid adaptations of the still more modern day."[22] During the following year Wight was asked to make some changes in order to keep costs down. In the process the rounded arches became pointed Gothic ones and the polychromic effect was reduced to only two colors, blue-gray and white. However the realized design, completed in 1865, was not significantly different from his original competition entry. In 1866 the *North American Review* said of it: "It is the first attempt in our country, so far as we are aware, to revive a system of constructive building and natural decoration which has been for a long time neglected in

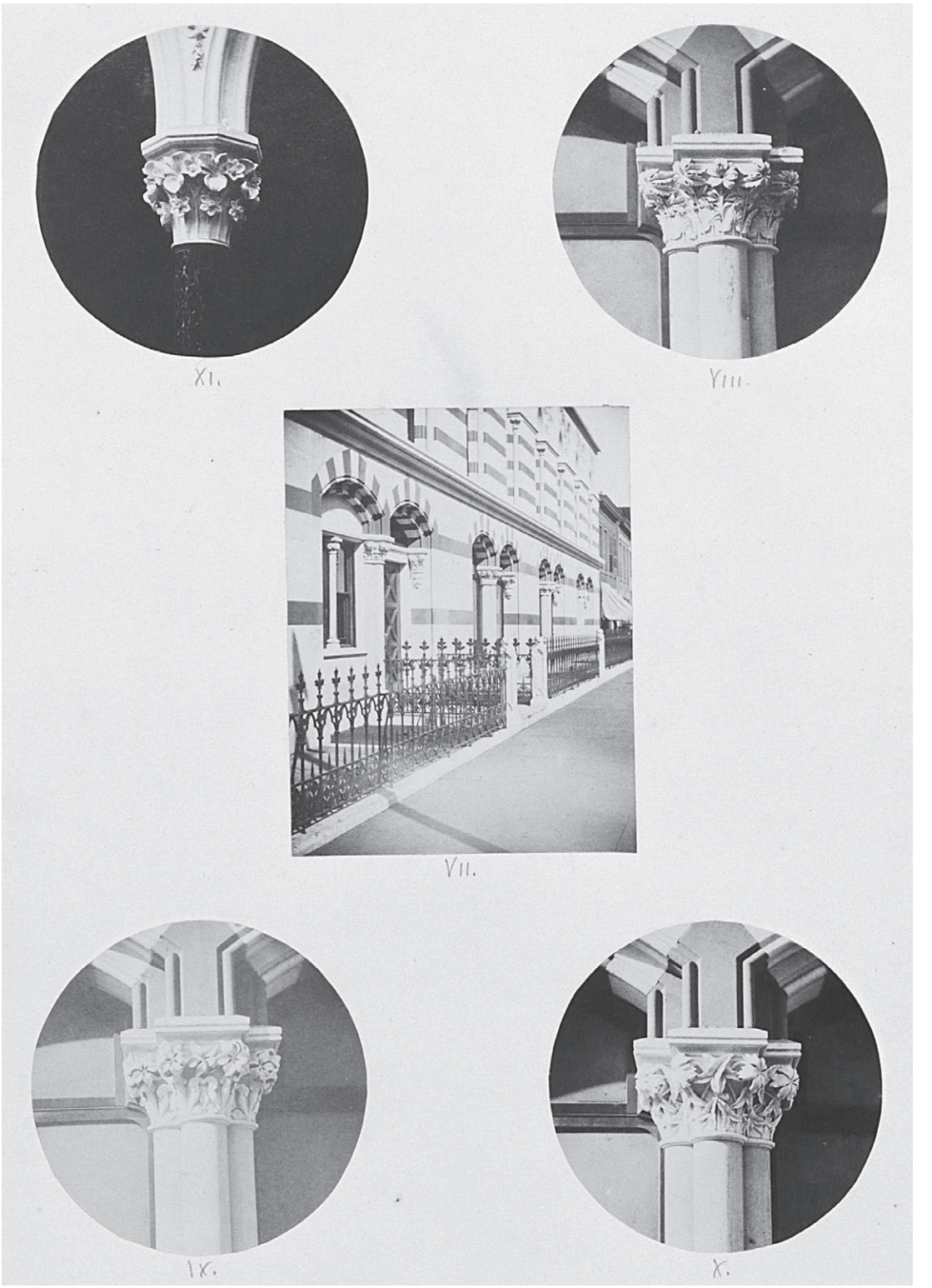

Fig. 6.4 P. B. Wight, National Academy of Design, New York, 1865. Detail of column capitals. *National Academy of Design: Photographs of the New Building*, with an introductory essay and description by P. B. Wight (New York: S. P. Avery, 1886). Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Europe as well as in America. . . . The only architecture which deserves the name of fine art is based upon laws of constructive beauty and harmony, derived from the study of nature, and adapted to the changing natural wants of man."[23] As this quotation suggests, the Gothic Revival, which seems so heavily mannered to us today, was valued chiefly for its naturalism.

American critics were particularly attracted to the adaptability of the Gothic. Although it was borrowed from a much earlier age, they believed it was ripe for further development. In the biological terms in which architecture was understood, the style had the potential to evolve. While it retained the authority of history, at the same time it had an innate and essential natural logic that would lend its newest expressions the aura of complete originality.[24] As with the fine arts, naturalism was the highest ideal for mid-nineteenth-century American architects. In an essay entitled "American Architecture" (1843, reprinted in the *Crayon* in 1855) the sculptor Horatio Greenough criticized many of his peers for their use of thoughtless mimicry and encouraged them to look instead to the natural world for inspiration: "As the first step in our search after the great principles of construction, we but observe the skeletons and skins of animals. The law of adaptation is the fundamental law of nature in all structures."[25] Crucially, Greenough did not reject the concept of style altogether, and by the 1850s the Gothic style was widely seen as the most beautiful and useful because of its naturalism, or innate organicism. Though clearly based on historical models, its use implied strict adherence to nature and natural principles as the primary model for the arts.

Beyond the purported naturalism of the Gothic Revival, the style's association with the medieval social world and with social reform in the contemporary age also held appeal, even for pragmatic Americans. Eloquently expressed by Ruskin and by Augustus W. Pugin in relation to English society, this association held particular meaning in the context of the upheaval of the Civil War. When the American republic was established in the late eighteenth century, the Greek Revival style was widely adopted for its public architecture. Americans built in this style to reinforce their claim as worthy inheritors of the democratic tradition begun in ancient Greece. The rejection of that style in the 1840s, it has been suggested, was partly because the symbolism of the porticoed Greek temple had become tainted by an outdated idea of nationalism, in particular as a state founded on and supported by the practice of slavery.[26] However it is likely that this negative connotation took hold only later, particularly with reference to the image of the plantation house with its classical pediment and colonnade. Those searching for an overt link between the vogue for the Gothic Revival and an emerging American understanding of race and racial difference may find it in the nineteenth century "Anglo-Saxon" movement described by historian Reginald Horsman.[27] As Horsman explains, beginning in the early part of the nineteenth century many

Americans of northern European origin sought a common national identity in the mythical "Aryan" tribe of northern Europe. According to popular lore the Aryans were a strong, independent, and practical people who had for centuries been steadily conquering westward territories, from their origins in Asia, across the European continent, and eventually the Atlantic. For adherents to this particular narrative of American origins, the Gothic style symbolized the racial connection between the new American race and medieval Germanic tribes with Aryan roots (an idea that was enshrined in the writing of the young Theodore Roosevelt).[28] While there is no evidence of that association in contemporary descriptions of the Academy building, this idea was to become expressed overtly in architectural discourse just a few years later, for example, in the writing of Chicago architect William Le Baron Jenney.[29]

In seeking to understand the meaning of nineteenth century historicism and eclecticism (in which elements of different historical styles are mixed together) for American architects, some scholars have argued that the orientalized Gothic Revival style popularized by Ruskin was attractive because it suggested a privileged cultural and racial lineage of which they might claim to be descendants. In his multilayered analysis of Frank Furness's Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia (1872–1876), the art historian Martin Berger discusses Furness's eclectic incorporation of Near Eastern, Moorish, and Saracenic architectural motifs.[30] Earlier in the nineteenth century, he notes, such motifs had typically denoted Jewishness and were used in the design of synagogues. The adaptation of these orientalized elements for a fine arts museum, he proposes, signified the passing of culture from Jerusalem (the biblical Holy Land) to the United States: "Unconcerned with stylistic accuracy or geographic precision, a wide cross section of Americans liberally interpreted a host of Near Eastern references as signs of the link between their cultural and religious heritage and an ancient Jewish past."[31] This interpretation is suggestive, and might also be applied to Wight's National Academy of Design building, which shared a similar program, patron, and clientele. However, in the concluding section of this essay I would like to explore another argument, one that might be read in parallel with Berger's. This argument is concerned less with the question of architectural product (the form taken by the building), and more with that of architectural production (the way in which it was built). As we know, for Ruskin and for Pugin the Gothic Revival indicated a rejection of modern architecture with its exploitative division of labor, and an embrace of medieval craft methods of production in which architectural creation was believed to have been a collaborative and cooperative activity. Famously, Ruskin saw this style as a metaphor for a more perfect social harmony. In particular he was obsessed with craft as an antidote to what he saw as the inhumanity of modern industrial production processes. For Ruskin, the medieval

stonemason was the ideal model of a free man: drawing on his own skill and imagination to produce his work according to his own methods and pace, he was his own master. By contrast the industrial worker, engaged in back-breaking repetitive tasks and discouraged from thinking for himself was nothing more than a slave to the machine. In the following section I would like to suggest that the Ruskinian celebration of "free labor" associated with the Gothic Revival style had a particular resonance with the "free labor, free soil" ideology of the newly formed Republican Party in the United States, the ideology that was to provide the foundation for ideas of American racial identity in the postbellum years.

The National Academy of Design and the Ideology of Free Labor

When the National Academy of Design building opened in 1865, the construction of a prominent public building in the Gothic Revival style communicated a strong political message in the face of the contemporary crisis. One of the few public buildings realized in New York City during wartime, it was a form of aesthetic propaganda for a particular view of the future of America and the American race, at a time when the city was socially and politically polarized. Besides presenting an innovative and attractive version of the Gothic Revival style, the building was also highly ideological. The moral associations of the style, born out of religious sectarianism in the United Kingdom, were here employed to bolster the cause of the antislavery coalition. Borrowing heavily from Ruskin's favored Venetian Gothic, valued for its admixture of various racial-national styles, both Eastern and Western, the architecture of the National Academy building represented the evolution of different European colonial races into a new American one, relieved of their dependence on the southern slave economy, and coded as white.

The Civil War represented a huge threat to the continued prosperity of New York City. The growth of the American economy in the first half of the nineteenth century was due in large part to the expansion of the plantation system in the south.[32] By the 1840s, the city occupied an important position as a national center for manufacturing and trade. The expansion of its economy was accompanied by rapid population growth as new sources of labor were imported to service industry, and also by ethnic, religious, and racial conflict. While migrants were vital to the success of the manufacturing economy, at the same time they were resented and shunned. So-called "nativists" (predominantly Protestant, American-born workers) clashed with Irish Catholics and free blacks who were willing to work in dangerous conditions for lower wages. The entire city was segregated by class and race: as the wealthy moved farther north up the island of Manhattan, following the path of real estate development, recent immigrants from Europe were consigned to the crowded blocks below Houston Street. Meanwhile the free black community was relegated to far-flung areas such as "Seneca Village," a settlement

in the northwestern area of what is now Central Park. City politics were also divided along ethnic lines. After the vote was extended to non-property-holding white males in 1825 the Democratic Party took control of city hall. The party of the working class, the Democrats supported white workers in their claims for improved labor conditions (higher pay and shorter working hours) while at the same time supporting the practice of southern slavery.

From the early nineteenth century racial, class, and religious conflict was enflamed by the debate over abolition, with the various arms of the Protestant church the most adamant proselytizers for the cause. In 1835 the Congregationalist General Assembly passed a resolve stating that "the system of slavery, as it exists in our land, is a sin against God and a violation of the inalienable rights of man."[33] At the Congregationalist Church of the Puritans on Union Square and at nearby Unitarian All Souls the Reverends George B. Cheever and Henry Bellows preached highly contentious weekly sermons condemning the practice. In the 1850s Cheever's sermons drew large crowds, especially during his monthly "prayer for the enslaved" services. Like his Brooklyn-based rival Henry Ward Beecher, Cheever played a powerful role in bolstering support for the abolition of slavery amongst his well-to-do congregation and also in influencing business leaders to support his cause, flattening the complex political and economic positions surrounding the debate into a simple and unassailable moral choice.

But while religious ministers preached the sinfulness of slave ownership, local merchants and their employees had a vested interest in the continuation of the practice. Abolitionism was particularly condemned in the working class press. In 1860 the Democratic Party–supporting *New York Herald* described the Reverends Cheever and Beecher as being locked in a struggle "to see which shall pay the most profound homage to the Almighty n*****. It is to him, rather than to Almighty God, that the incense of prayer and praise is offered."[34] For more than half a century the city had benefitted enormously from the expansion of the cotton economy. In this context, workingmen, merchants, and industrialists alike had strong motivation to support the southern states in the lead up to the Civil War.[35] The outbreak of war in April 1861 caused the majority of New York Democrats to join, reluctantly, with President Lincoln in support of the defense of the Union. However, while the city united in support of Congress and the Union army, it remained deeply divided over the issue of race. This division flared up in July of 1863 during the so-called draft riots, in which working-class white opponents of the draft burnt down a draft office, igniting a riot that quickly spread all over town.[36] The riot was suppressed by the military after three days, but not before the homes, businesses, and bodies of people suspected of supporting abolitionism, both rich and poor, black and white, were violently attacked. Appalled by these events, members of a self-described "intellectual aristocracy" united by wealth and

social standing and with a strong sense of civic responsibility dedicated themselves to supporting the local black community and redoubled their efforts to free those enslaved in the Confederate states.[37]

This is the backdrop against which the design and construction of the new National Academy of Design took place. For the members of the Academy, support for abolition was a signifier of class, religious, and political affiliation. Commissioned and designed by members of a powerful minority elite, largely supporters of the newly formed Republican Party, the Academy building was the aesthetic expression of self-declared moral authority over their political opponents. Their new premises was an expression of faith in the future of the nation established on new basis, one in which the old economic alliance between New York City and the southern states was destroyed. The Reverend Bellows summed this up in a speech on the occasion of the laying of the building's cornerstone: "You cannot have true Freedom without true Religion and true Art; nor true Religion without true Art and true Liberty."[38] In this way Bellows tied religious, social, and artistic freedom together, as the joint cornerstones of the American nation.

As a dedicated Gothic Revivalist, Peter B. Wight shared this belief in the essential link between artistic and social freedom. Discussing the Academy building, he emphasized his belief that it was the product of creative freedom rather than lifeless copyism. Several months before the building was completed he signaled his intentions in an article published in the *New Path* entitled "An Important Gothic Building" (his friend Russell Sturgis was the likely author). Published between May 1863 and December 1865, almost exactly coincident with the Academy building's construction, the *New Path* was ideally suited as a publicity vehicle to promote its merits as an exemplary public monument. Sturgis wrote, "The building is designed entirely in accordance with the views on architecture previously expressed in this journal. Indeed it is the first building in America that has been so designed. Two main principles are key: first, that all buildings should be designed in the medieval spirit, in other words should be 'Gothic' and not revived classic of any school; second that all carved ornament should be designed by the workmen who cut it, under such superintendence and instruction as the artist in charge may find necessary."[39] Of all the elements of the Academy building, Wight was proudest of the ornamental carvings based on real plants and flowers. Influenced by Ruskin's passionate advocacy for the dignity of labor in the production of art and craft, he was eager to explain how they had been made. Far more than merely supplementary, these carvings epitomized the spirit of the entire venture. The decorative capitals atop the columns, he explained, were "representative of the facts of nature, generally of leaves."[40] Working under his direction, stonemasons had used real models and photographs to create their own sculptural versions of ivy, oak, chestnut, and maple leaves, along with roses, lilies, and azaleas.

The capitals of the four shafts supporting the arch over the drinking fountain were each carved with a different plant: wild blood root, fern leaves, *Nabalus*, and Indian turnip or jack-in-the-pulpit.

Here Wight was drawing on a well-known model: the Ruskin-inspired Oxford Museum of Natural History (1855–1860) by architects Thomas Deane and Benjamin Woodward. The *Crayon* had earlier cited the Oxford Museum as an important precedent for American museums, suggesting it as a model for the proposed new Museum of Natural History in Cambridge, Massachusetts.[41] Representing natural forms (geological, animal, and vegetal), the choice of materials, decorative schema of the capitals, and wrought iron ornaments of this museum were designed to supplement the museum's mission to educate the public in the natural sciences. According to Ruskin's edict, the stonemasons were encouraged to create freehand ornaments using their own skill and observational power in the Gothic manner. Inspired by the English example, Wight was convinced that the close involvement of craftsmen in the design of carved ornaments for the Academy building "has promised so much for the future both of the workmen and of the arts in America. The workmen were the designers here."[42] As Wight recognized, this process involved valuing the stone carvers' time, not just the objects they produced: it was only possible because the trustees of the Academy allowed him to employ them under a separate contract, by the day, rather than a under contract for services delivered. In this way the artisans were free to take the time necessary to produce truthful and beautiful ornaments.

The carvings created by these men and the sculptures created by Anne Whitney and Harriet Hosmer represented the ideal of American freedom in different ways. While Whitney and Hosmer depicted the degradation of slavery figuratively, the naturalistic ornaments embodied a more abstract ideal of free labor borrowed from Ruskin. Although the sentiment had English origins, the concept of "free labor" employed in the Academy building had a particular meaning in the context of the Civil War. In particular, it had parallels in contemporary political speech. In the rhetoric of the Republican Party, the doctrine of free labor was the principle on which the antebellum nation would be established: all workers would be free to choose the conditions under which they worked. While Republicans did not make abolitionism a part of their original political platform, as the war progressed it became a useful rhetorical tool in the attempt to break up the huge economic and political power of the southern slaveholding states. As historian Anthony E. Kaye explains, Republicans overturned southern rhetoric about the importance of slavery to national prosperity, an idea enshrined in the three-fifths clause of the original Constitution, by reformulating the stakes of western expansion: "They redefined the exclusion of slavery in the western territories as the fulfillment of northerners' aspirations as independent producers. This antislavery vision of expan-

sion was articulated in an ideology of free labor that . . . defined the lot of small commercial farmers as the antithesis of slavery and the foundation of the north as a good society."[43] In the Gettysburg Address of November 1863, President Lincoln was explicit in linking the future of the nation with the abolition of slavery. The practice was not only un-Christian, he claimed, it was also contrary to the founding principles of the republic. Freeing the slaves would mean freedom for all. Even the international workers movement took up this idea. Karl Marx wrote in first volume of *Capital* (1867): "In the United States of America, every independent workers' movement was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labor in white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in black skin."[44] Believing the war would inspire a great movement for workers' emancipation worldwide, Marx's conclusion was premature. He did not foresee that the free labor ideology would lead to the amassing of great capitalist fortunes generated by factories rather than by plantations, that the freeing of enslaved peoples in the southern states would promote rather than retard the expansion of exploitative systems of production, now industrialized rather than depending on raw human labor.

The rhetoric of free labor had ominous implications for the question of race in America. At the core of the argument was the goal of the industrial North seizing control of the western territories from the slaveholding South. In theory the natural resources of these new territories would be exploited by free whites, leading to a decline in dependence on enslaved black workers and a lessened demand for black labor. Some abolitionists even advocated the expatriation of former slaves to Africa to avoid the founding of a free black class. In this way of thinking, a new American race would emerge on the western frontier, made up of immigrants from the United Kingdom and northern Europe. While still seen as members of different races, the Irish, Germans, Scandinavians, Bohemians, and Slavs were believed more easily assimilated into "American" behaviors, values, and customs—a process celebrated in the writing of Theodore Roosevelt and Frederick Jackson Turner around the turn of the twentieth century. Turner and Roosevelt wrote of the American occupation of the western territories "as the new center of gravity of the nation," a place where a new American race was being formed out of migrants from the Old World.[45] Freed from reliance on black labor and the accompanying threat of miscegenation, this new American race would be "colored white" in the words of historian David Roediger.[46]

In the nineteenth century, the progress of the architectural arts was seen as a reflection of national, and therefore racial, evolution. This theme was central to the discourse on public architecture in New York City during the 1850s and '60s, as evidenced by articles published in the *Crayon* and the *New Path*, in which the central question for the emerging profession was: What kind of architecture would

the American race produce? The aftermath of the Civil War seemed to offer an answer to that question for supporters of the Union cause. In the rhetoric of the time, the nation had emerged out of the conflict stronger than ever, and the crisis was credited with germinating new social and aesthetic forms. President Lincoln and the members of the National Academy of Design both used biological language to describe these outcomes. For Lincoln, the end of the war had resulted in a "new birth of freedom." Emancipation had become an essential component of American national identity (though the meaning of freedom remained ambiguous in a society still firmly attached to the idea of a racial hierarchy). For the Academicians, the war was a "regenerative force" that would produce new and better forms of art and design, and Peter B. Wight's National Academy of Design building was one of its very first expressions. Although based on a historic model, the Gothic Revival–style building was an architecture modeled on organic principles. In its use of natural materials and ornament based on native plants, built by craftsmen in charge of their own labor, it reified the belief in the evolution of a free "native" American race. Not to be confused with Native Americans, this race would be bred in the new western territories from the strong biological rootstock of European settlers, and would be identified as white.

After moving to Chicago following the great fire of 1871, Wight was one of a generation of architects who sought the aesthetic expression of the concept of the American race on the western frontier.[47] While he soon abandoned the Ruskinian Gothic as a visual style, he never gave up his belief in the essential truthfulness of the Gothic Revival and the appropriateness of its principles for modern American building. Through his work as a designer, a critic, and a mentor to the young architects of the Chicago School, he went on to play an essential part in the transformation of the Gothic Revival from a morally correct style to a rational constructive principle, a transformation that enabled the next generation of American architects to untether the concepts of "truth to materials" and "constructive expression" from their original historicist framing into a new and particularly American form of modernism, one that continued to communicate a racialized concept of American identity. Celebrated as a naturalistic product of free labor, Wight's Gothic Revival National Academy of Design helped shape an aesthetic projection of American whiteness.