The Washington Bust in the Monument

Is it a Canova or a Ceracchi ?

By **Marian V. Dorsey**

THOSE who ascend the steps and enter the Washington Monument will find confronting them an object of arresting and compelling interest. It is the colossal bust of Washington in the niche facing the south entrance.

What do we know about this powerfully impressive image filling the position of honor among the niches which Robert Mills, the designer of the structure, said were intended to enshrine the most notable of Washington's fellow-officers?

No word concerning its "whence"? or "by whom"? was told us by last summer's chroniclers of the monument's embellishments, so far as known; but this quest, as pursued by the present narrator, many months prior to the centenary celebration, resulted, with the valuable aid of others, in bringing to light a statement in regard to it which had long remained buried from sight in the stacks of the Library of Congress, a statement which invests the bust with peculiar interest, as not only showing that the inherent nobility of Washington's countenance loses none of its power to persist through repetitious portrayals but also because it seems to prove that we possess in our city at least a skillful copy of a composite portrait produced by two noted Italian sculptors, one making his study from life and the other modeling from that study.

Difficult indeed was it to secure any direct and definite knowledge concerning this massive production upon which

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the mallet left no visible signature, although one is probably impressed on the back of it.

There being nothing found upon the subject of the monument bust in our local works of reference, the late Mr. Mendes Cohen, former president of the Maryland Historical Society, gave the searcher the information that the bust was bought by the Board of Managers of the monument at the sale of the effects of Dr. William Howard, of Baltimore, and that records, which included data of this purchase, had been secured by him at an auction sale many years ago and presented to the Society.

In going over these records the writer found, in an old account book labeled "Cost of the Washington Monument," the item: "Dec. 15, 1834, paid for a colossal bust of Washington—$50." This item was found also by other delvers in monument lore and included in some of the sketches published during the summer, but, while interesting in itself, it left the original query unanswered, for in these expense accounts no intimation of the identity of the sculptor was given.

The sum stated seemed indeed bewilderingly inadequate if the bust were an original from the hand of a celebrity, but the Historical Society's data of purchase and its former president's information that the purchase was made at the Howard sale clearly suggested that a clue to the sculptor might be found in looking for notices of this vendue in the daily papers of the autumn of 1834. As surmised, Dr. Howard's sale was extensively advertised in November and December of that year, mentioning that a catalogue was to be had enumerating the many valuable articles to be sold in settling his estate.

This catalogue was not to be found in the city, but through the kind co-operation of Mr. J. Maxwell Miller, our well-known Baltimore sculptor, the interest of his friend, Mr. David Roberts, of the French Department of the Library of Congress, was elicited, and Mr. Roberts, who finally located the catalogue in that library, found

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it to contain, among the listed treasures: "A Colossal Bust of Washington After Canova."

As gladly as this information was welcomed, the first throwing any light on the bust as a work of art, it did not wholly satisfy one's desire to know, still more definitely, about this mystifying production. If "after Canova," who did the copying?

In the very beginning of the quest there was found inside the portal of the monument, at the souvenir stand, a tiny booklet in which one reads—exactly as quoted—"The marble bust of Washington in the nitch at the south entrance is one of a pair representing the work of Ceracchi, an Italian sculptor of Philadelphia. One was designed for the nitch which it now holds, the other was sent to France as a present to the Emperor Napoleon." Whether Ceracchi's original bust of Washington was ever presented to the arch enemy of republics is not hinted by authorities, but, as we know, its replica was not made for the monument.

And yet so convincingly similar is the bust in the monument to the celebrated bust of Washington by Ceracchi that it was in the hope of finding it to be a possible product of his hand that this search for its originator was begun.

While sales catalogues are not infallible, Dr. Howard, a man of science, who was also a wealthy connoisseur, bought his treasures as one who knew them thoroughly, and he may even have had the bust made at his own order, so that, if he declared it to be "after Canova," he must have known its genesis. And yet, as will be shown, in being after Canova it was also "after" Ceracchi, even if not by him.

It was Washington who welcomed Ceracchi, an Italian sculptor of reputation, to the United States and approved his design for an imposing memorial to Liberty and to the American Revolution—its allegorical style discredited by the taste of today—giving the first contribution from his own purse to start the fund, but, as Congress did not

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appropriate the $30,000 required to execute it, Ceracchi returned to Europe disappointed in his hopes. With him he carried back a colossal bust of Washington, universally believed to have been made from life during the few years of his stay, though Washington's journal does not record the sittings, and supposed to have been intended as part of the Revolutionary memorial, and this, having been shown in France, was so greatly admired, we are told, for its masterly portayal that the artist was granted a sitting by Napoleon. Some writers say that Ceracchi's first study of Napoleon was made in 1796, at a time when he admired him; but that in 1800, while engaged in modeling the First Consul, the sculptor and his fellow-conspirators, all ardent republicans, planned to assassinate the imperially ambitious sitter. The plot, it is said, was discovered and Ceracchi executed in 1801. Others state that he died in banishment or the insane asylum.

This bust of Washington, which led to Ceracchi's undoing, fell at his death into the hands of Canova, who was his intimate friend, and it is known that from it Canova took the portraiture in modeling his full-length statue of Washington for the State of North Carolina, destroyed by fire in 1831.

If the bust in the monument is "after Canova" it must therefore have been copied by some as yet unknown sculptor or skillful craftsman from Canova's copy of Ceracchi's bust of Washington, for Canova made no study of the General from life, though in the pose of the head and the drapery of the toga the bust portion of Canova's Washington differs, to some extent, from the Ceracchi bust while clearly showing that the latter served as the model.

Even though in "Original Portraits of Washington," by E. B. Johnston, there are three busts of Washington attributed to Ceracchi—one bought by Congress for $4,000 and lost in the burning of the Library of Congress in 1851; one taken from this country to Madrid by the

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Spanish Minister and later brought back to Philadelphia by our own Minister to Spain, Mr. Richard Meade, it going next to Mr. Kemble, of New York, and from him to the Corcoran Gallery of Art for a time, and the third bought abroad by a member of the Middleton family and still owned by them at the time of the book's publication in 1882—yet Lorado Taft, one of the most eminent of American sculptors, in his "History of American Sculpture," published in 1903, mentions but one Ceracchi bust of Washington, which, he says, "after strange wanderings abroad was returned to this country, but has disappeared from view."

Let whoever will then contrast the bust in the monument with the engraved copies of Canova's Washington and the Ceracchi bust of him as shown at the Peabody Library in "Original Portraits," and in the third volume of Irving's "Life of Washington," and surely many must agree that, while the monument bust bears a close resemblance to the Canova statue, it is, at least to the non-professional eye, more identically like the Ceracchi bust that was Canova's model, our monument bust answering fully to Tuckerman's description of the Ceracchi one as "noble," "the face strong and pure, the eye direct and unflinching, the lines of the mouth decisive, lifelike and full of character."

It is curious to note that, in response to inquiries addressed to them last spring, neither the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Corcoran Gallery nor the National Academy of Design could tell where the Ceracchi bust of Washington was then located—the one that was removed from the Corcoran in 1889.

The National Academy of Design passed the question over to the Metropolitan Museum for solution. But if it knows it has made no sign.

One of the few, the immortal names that were not born to die!

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