AN AMERICAN SCULPTOR IN ROME

THE WORK OF SIR MOSES EZEKIEL, A VIRGINIAN WHO HAS BEEN KNIGHTED BY EUROPEAN MONARCHS IN RECOGNITION OF HIS GENIUS

BY

KATHARINE H. WRENSHALL

"About half-past eight yesterday morning His Majesty [the King of Italy], accompanied by his Adjutant-General Brusati and two other aides-de-camp, made a lengthy visit to the studio of the American Sculptor, Cav. Uff. M. Ezekiel, in the Piazza delle Terme.

"His Majesty was much interested in the works of the valiant sculptor, and especially in the model just recently completed of the statue of Napoleon at St. Helena, the monument of Thomas Jefferson, the statue of Stonewall Jackson, Christ in the Tomb (made for the Chapel of the Consolation in the Rue Goujon, Paris), and various other statues and monuments.

"His Majesty remained some time in the lower and upper studios, admiring the various works of the artist, and congratulated the sculptor in glowing terms upon his great and noble achievements."

The sculptor to whom this delicate compliment was paid is one of a group of American artists whose genius has received greater recognition abroad than in their native land. As in the case of Mr. Elihu Vedder, this is largely because Sir Moses Ezekiel has lived in Rome for the greater part of his life.

Born in Virginia, in 1844, he was a student of the Virginia Military Institute. Cadet Ezekiel, at the outbreak of the Civil War, was one of that youthful corps which volunteered for service on the battlefield. With the other survivors of the terrible fight at New Market, he shared the honor accorded to the beardless boys when they were ordered to the famous "intermediate ground" lying between the city of Richmond and the Union troops then advancing on the Southern capital. Here young Ezekiel was captured, and he was imprisoned in Castle Thunder. After his release, he returned to the Virginia Military Institute to complete his education, being one of the ten young veterans who at the close of the war reëntered the Academy. He graduated a year later.

During this year of quiet study, the young cadet enjoyed the constant companionship of General Robert E. Lee, accompanying him on his daily rides, and having an unrestricted entrée to the Lee home. To the General he confided his great wish to go abroad to study, and he was encouraged in his ambition to devote his life to art; though difficulties were many and opportunities few, his will conquered, and in 1870 he began his work in Berlin.

No one but himself knows what the struggling student endured in the four years that followed, giving lessons in English that he might eke out a bare existence, sculpturing and studying night and day, that he might eventually succeed. His beautiful work found a place mainly in public buildings and private homes until public recognition came, in 1874. The Royal Academy of Berlin in that year awarded the "Roman Prize" to his remarkable and mystical "Israel" — its four figures typifying the Christ, Jesse, Jerusalem, and Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. With the modest stipendium accompanying the prize, he turned his face southward and found a permanent home in Rome.

Seeking quarters where he could live as well as chisel, he selected the studios in the ancient Baths of Diocletian, partly on account of an enforced economy, partly in the gratification of a wish to live in one of the ruins. It is now the busy centre of a well-ordered city, but it was then only a wide and empty space crossed by deserted roads leading past the vast and solemn ruins. The lower studio, where Sir Moses spends his working hours, is in an unaltered part of the ancient buildings, the springing vaults rising to the height of some eighty feet, all dim with age, showing softest tints of brick and mortar, the former marble casing of the walls having been replaced by time's encrustations. Here and there a plant grows freshly green from the crannied wall; below,

the snowy casts and sculptures and rich bronzes crowd each other, while in the heart of the light pouring from the lofty window a winged Victory has the exultant power of the Samathrace.

Here he has lived and worked since the day he landed in Rome, then only a friendless boy, with little money, but within his soul the joy and companionship of a great genius, accompanied by an unflinching determination.

FIRST AMERICAN RECOGNITION

His first commission after being awarded the Roman Prize by the Royal Academy of Berlin, came from America, and the subject was "Religious Liberty." In handling this theme, the youthful sculptor immediately evidenced not only his originality of conception, but what was of equal importance, his courage to depart from the accepted trend of thought and work. The strength of the new country, her power to protect, her will to do so, is skilfully suggested by the principal figure of the group, that of "America." A generous-mouthed, open-eyed, calm-browed goddess wearing mail — for she remembers that there has been need of armor, but over it draws the robe of peace — with hand extended palm downward, wards off danger or interference with the child standing beside her, the "Religious Liberty" (or Faith) of the group. With the flame of faith burning in his upraised hand, his head thrown back, the child gazes confidently at the skies, his bare foot on the tail of the serpent of Intolerance, while on the other side of "America" the eagle holds the head of the serpent in its claws.

The unusual and powerful treatment of the subject aroused general notice. Had it come from the chisel of a mature man, it would have attracted attention, but the sculptor was scarcely more than a boy. When the group was exhibited in Rome, it was pronounced by some as "the most important work of the age." American critics were equally favorable when it reached its destination, the Centennial Exposition of Philadelphia. Looking at the cast in the Roman studio to-day, one traces distinctly in this rendering of a great principle the general lines since followed and extended by the sculptor; a poetic and original idealization of theme, a restrained strength of execution, and a light and airy fancy enabling him to seize the possibilities of symbolism, though keeping the symbolism subordinate, as an accessory. In his treatment of patriotic themes it is less restrained, as in the monument to Thomas Jefferson, the original of which was placed in front of the court-house in Louisville, in 1900.

A YOUTHFUL THOMAS JEFFERSON

A replica of this splendidly conceived work is to be placed at the front entrance to the University of Virginia, where the figure of Jefferson will be seen to advantage, and the graceful power of the supporting pediment, the Liberty Bell, will not be lost. In this pediment, the sculptor's symbolism is majestic: the four spirits of "Liberty," "Brotherhood," "Justice," and "Equality," born on the first stroke of the bell in response to the immortal words of Jefferson, are forever free from their bronze prison. The symbolism of the second detail, that of "Equality," requires some explanation, the torn document in the spirit's hands being the "Laws of Primogeniture," and the scroll under its feet the Stamp Act.

The most striking features of the figure of Jefferson, which crowns the Liberty Bell, is the youthful contour of the face and the poise of the vigorous, well-knit body, realistic in its easy, swaying grace, the sculptor emphasizing not only the patriot's intellect and intrepidity, but his youth — for Jefferson was only thirty-three when the ink dried on his signature to the Declaration of Independence.

Sir Moses recently remarked, in reference to this figure: "Jefferson was a young man, able to stand unsupported by chair, cane, or column; I have shown him as such. Many have made him middle-aged, with a large Declaration in his hand, though, as a matter of fact, the Declaration was written on a small sheet, which I have measured."

The development of patriotic themes is a specialty of this sculptor. On the parade ground of the Virginia Military Institute, at Lexington, is the colossal bronze of "Virginia Mourning her Dead," and in the Johnson's Island Cemetery is the heroic bronze of the "Southern Soldier"; and at the present time, together with the Jefferson for the University of Virginia and other important work, Sir Moses is finishing a bronze statue of Stonewall Jackson for the City of Charlestown, West Virginia.

It is probable that in sounding this great-

est and best chord of human nature, patriotism, Sir Moses Ezekiel touches and holds his highest level.

In the statues of "Titian" and "Leonardo da Vinci," the development of the details of the ornate and heavy dress of the mediæval period presented difficulties to the sculptor, perhaps more satisfactorily overcome in the "Titian" than in the "Leonardo."

With cloak thrown back, displaying the vigorous lines of trunk and limbs, the "Leonardo" statue has an additional advantage in the face not being overshadowed by a cap, a rarely happy addition to either a marble or a bronze figure. Aside from these accessories, the giant artistic capabilities of Titian are presented with specific power, while the stalwart figure holds the physical strength that enabled Titian at the advanced age of ninety-nine to paint his magnificent "Entombment." On the whole, the "Titian" is a satisfactory piece of work, and especially so when taken in conjunction with the "Bismarck," the faces of the two men being too familiar to allow failure on the sculptor's part to pass unrebuked.

HONORED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF ROME

In February, 1908, the Faculty of the University of Rome visited the studio in the Baths to see a completed clay sketch of their distinguished co-worker, Professor Alfonso Sella. A man of remarkable mind, his output in the form of essays and text-books embodying his scientific investigations was prolific and valuable. Dying while still within his prime, his death was a loss to the world of science and a regret to his contemporaries and friends. Sir Moses Ezekiel was selected to make a bust for the University. A few days after the above visit, he described the result in a letter to a friend:

"The Faculty of the University of Rome have been to see the clay bust of Sella, and have ordered it in marble. They found it a most perfect likeness of Sella, and quite confused me by so many congratulations. . . ."

Loving the beautiful, accentuating it in his work when it existed in his subject, he has many busts of beautiful women scattered throughout Europe and America, but none really so perfect as that of "the Pearl of Savoy," the Dowager Queen of Italy. Very different in character is that of the "Christ Bound." Having a strangely painful effect upon all who examine it, the bust can never be a general favorite; but as a marble rendition of physical and mental suffering, it is matchless. It probably is not too much to say that, having once studied the bust, it would be impossible to shake off all recollection of the agonized face.

In marble protraiture Sir Moses has made some of his pronounced successes when combatting with the almost insurmountable difficulties of rendering a satisfactory likeness of the dead. And in dealing with unfortunate facial peculiarities, he has on more than one occasion so adapted some attitude or play of features that, while retaining truest likeness, he has achieved an attractive and often astonishing result.

In studying the work of Sir Moses, the most casual observer of the Greek treatment of drapery must be immediately struck with the indisputable evidence of its influence on this modern sculptor; the sweep and lightness of the fold, the very texture of the fabric which, the result of a skilful manipulation, reaches its greatest perfection in his famous "The Dead Christ" in the "Bazar du Charité." The garments lie in a breathless stillness, subtly suggestive of death and its immovability.

In evolving the type of head and features for "The Dead Christ" the sculptor was free to choose from the idealization of centuries, but he created his own ideal, selecting the highest characteristics of the Hebrew race; and with the pitifulness, the suffering, and the horrors of death eliminated, it is one of majesty and calmest triumph. That this has been wrought into the cold marble is beyond question, for when the cast is unveiled for visitors to the studio, it is usual that an utter silence will seize the most thoughtless person present, and some will even step back as before a mighty presence; the impression produced by either the cast or the marble is one of awe.

It is of interest that Sir Moses personally puts the finishing touches to the marble of all his works; when this particular sculpture was developed from the plaster cast, he, as usual, finished it, while the wonderful details of the faultless Carrara were only obtained by three years of patient labor.

In striking contrast to the dashingly vivid life of the Jefferson, or the concentrated powers of the Bismarck, is the sleeping peace of the recumbent "Effigy of Mrs. Fisk," or of "Mrs. Andrew D. White," whose lovely face seems merely sleeping. Too often, though a correct

representation of facial qualities, a bust or an effigy will fail utterly in what might be called response; but, under the hand of genius, the resisting marble may be far more satisfactory than the flat, though flesh-colored canvas. Yet the possibilities of a low relief when made in marble has its fascinations, as Sir Moses has acknowledged in some highly finished reliefs and intaglios.

The likeness of his mother is particularly exquisite in its light touches and fine line work, while that of his nephew is full of elusive beauties in its masculine strength, it being a touchingly appropriate memorial to the brave and gentle Jeptha Workum, a name known and revered by many of the citizens of Cincinnati, whose lives he saved from flood and fire. These need neither color to render them finer portraits nor the rounded marble to bring them into more tangible form. Satisfactory use of the relief in decorative work has been exemplified by Sir Moses in a number of fine pieces, most of which are now in European palaces and private homes.

A NOTABLE NAPOLEON

The greatest achievement of this sculptor is probably that now on the work-platform in his "Lower Studio" — a life-sized statue of "L'homme," as the French delight in calling Napoleon; though it is still in the clay, pliant and unfinished, it is a masterful portrayal of a man reviewing the crucial moment when he failed, the death-sharpened perceptions questioning if that moment did not really lie further back when the Good Angel was discarded for earthly aggrandizement.

Sir Moses presents Napoleon as seated by the sea-shore at St. Helena, his chin resting on clasped hands, holding a cane between his knees; brooding on the failure of his life, always self-adoring, he is passionately self-pitying, and the stubbed fingers folded on the cane are in themselves an epitome of the man's nature.

The powerful intellect sways him remorselessly from retrospection to anticipation of the future, now so nearly present, but with lips compressed he waits in the fearlessness of which even exile and the consequent prostration of the soul cannot rob him.

The late F. Marion Crawford called this work "The History of Napoleon," the terseness of the novelist's description embodying the sum total of the tragedy. Cesareo, the Sicilian poet and art critic, writes of it as follows:

"Rarely or never has the tragedy of Napoleon been signified with more severe sorrow, with such intense truth, with more heroic grief, than in the sculpture of Ezekiel. Beautiful as a chorus from the Filottete of Sophocles, while in the large and remote eyes of the Exile the memory is reflected of the vast battles, his hands fall inert on the grip of a common walking stick. Ah! nothing is more heartrending than the irony of that cane in those hands that commanded the world. Alone, in sight of the ocean, he does not notice the wind that ruffles the locks on his imperious brow. His old gray overcoat, thrown over his shoulders, seems to want to embrace him with the veteran affection of a humble, faithful friend. But over the new Silence, in which such majesty of sorrow is preserved, the invisible wings of an epic poem are passing."

Thus working with the same zeal as when a student in Berlin, and endowed with an apparently limitless reserve of originative conception of thought and a vast knowledge of the technique of his art, his works show a continuously advancing grasp on the possibilities of marble and bronze, and so much is accomplished that the enormous accumulation of casts have from time to time been destroyed in his studios. When friends protest against this destruction of the casts, he answers: "I have finished with this thought, I am through with it," and the casts continue to disappear from sight. In this destruction of his casts, Sir Moses Ezekiel has made probably the one mistake of his life; to lovers of art it will appeal as a loss not to be filled; but even with this ordered destruction of the casts, both studios hold many completed pieces of work both in clay and plastaline, the originals of groups and statues and busts that have brought him the titles he wears so honorably.

DECORATIONS FROM MONARCHS

The Emperor of Germany and the Grand Duke of Saxe-Meiningen have conferred upon him the "Cavalier Crosses for Merit in Art and Science," and the King of Italy bestowed on him the cross of an "Officer of the Crown of Italy." To meet him in his "Lower Studio," or "Workshop" as he fondly calls it, is regarded as one of the great opportunities of a stranger's visit to Rome, for here is his work, the results of an earnest life. But it is the "Upper Studio" that is more generally known to visitors, it being there that the master receives

SIR MOSES EZEKIEL IN HIS STUDIO IN THE BATHS OF DIOCLETIAN, ROME

"JUSTICE"

"BROTHERHOOD"

THE LIBERTY BELL IN DETAIL — THOMAS JEFFERSON MONUMENT

his guests, extending to titled stranger and to undistinguished traveler the welcome of a gentle, warm cordiality. Once a week throughout the winter season, Sir Moses lays aside his white buckskin coat and receives his guests, and there is music on these afternoons, rendered by the first pianist and the four finest string-musicians of Rome.

His antique silver tea-service shows to fullest advantage on a table of Giallo Romano Antico – a Roman marble of intense yellow — its one slab so highly polished that the flames of the candles in the ivy-wreathed candelabra are reflected in long lines of light between the bowls of flowers — very long lines of light, in truth, for the table can accommodate forty people. The candles on the table are supplemented by others arranged around the walls, and by massive, decorated ones held by carven angels kneeling by the piano, yet the light is always controlled and mellow.

The black furniture is hand-carved; a few

"EQUALITY"

"LIBERTY"

THE LIBERTY BELL IN DETAIL — THOMAS JEFFERSON MONUMENT

choice pictures fill in the spaces where the dark-red draperies are drawn aside, or are upheld by the shining horns of oxen from the Campagna, showing the book-cases beneath. But with the first chord from the piano the music-loving Italians become silent. The soft minor note of the flame under the tea-kettle is the only break in the waiting silence as the symphonies steal through the air,

THOMAS JEFFERSON MONUMENT

"Jefferson was only thirty-three when the ink dried on his signature to the Declaration of Independence"

while here dim, there bathed in light, the statues and busts allure thought to themselves or direct it to the master sculptor sitting in his favorite high-backed chair, his lustrous eyes on the musicians. The exultation of Victory, the majesty of the Law, the might of the State, the power of the Mind, the triumph of Death, are so wrought in marble or warmer bronze that none can fail to rejoice that genius lives.

THE SCULPTOR'S MOTHER

A Medallion of Mrs. Ezekiel, of Cincinnati

THE SCULPTOR'S NEPHEW

A memorial to Jeptha Workum, of Cincinnati

A MARBLE RELIEF OF MRS. McKIBBIN

"THE DEAD CHRIST"

EFFIGY OF MRS. FISK, AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY

EFFIGY OF MRS. ANDREW D. WHITE, AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY