

William Couper: The Man Who Captured Angels

by Greta Elena Couper

The art of William Couper has displayed itself to a greater degree in angel portrayal than in any other field of sculptural art. - F.O. Payne.

American sculptor William Couper (1853-1942), native of Virginia, was known for his serious, sympathetic studies of angels and other winged figures. He established a wide reputation in both Italy and America for his work, which included bas-reliefs, portrait busts, allegorical figures, and heroic statues. Lorado Taft stated Couper's angels "are not merely pretty, they are beautiful, radiant creations, gracefully conceived, carefully drawn, and exquisitely carved. Billows of realistic drapery provide an image that is even more winning on this account" (*The History of American Sculpture*, 1930).

Couper's career began at a significant turning point in the development of American fine art, a time of sensitivity to European guidance, of yearning for the fine arts and for good music. The Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris had risen to international fame with its formal training and annual juried exhibitions. The neoclassicism of the day reflected a longing for the glory of the past; its staunch traditionalism centered on themes from antiquity and morality. Sculpture was considered public art, designed to educate and elevate the viewer.

Historically, sculpture did not become a profession in America until the mid-1800s when a demand arose for statues and memorials to commemorate the heroes and founders of the United States. Because the young country lacked local artists, many commissions were sent abroad, especially to Italy and France. Soon these examples attracted native sons to the profession, and sculpture began to emerge as a legitimate career. But pure marble and bronze casting foundries were not readily available, and many sculptors went to Europe to develop their skills. American sculptors of the nineteenth century can be divided into two groups: (1) those who went to Italy and worked in the neoclassic style (Horatio Greenough, Hiram Powers, and Thomas Ball); and (2) those who stayed home choosing to depict American life in a more realistic style (Henry Kirke Brown, Erastus Dow Palmer, and Clark Mills).

In the 1880s, American sculpture entered its "bronze age," and local foundries were established. Artists who worked in this medium included Thomas Ball (Couper's father-in-law), Martin Milmore (Ball's pupil), and John Quincy Adams Ward. After the Centennial Exposition of 1876, a new pictorial and natural style emerged, influenced by the development of photography. Artists turned to France for training. By the end of the nineteenth century, complex bronze compositions in the French style predominated. **In** a period when American art moved toward sentiment and realism, Couper's works reflected dignified restraint and idealization.

Five years before William Couper's birth, his father founded the Couper Marble Works behind the family home on the corner of Main and Granby Streets in Norfolk, Virginia. This firm specialized in importing and carving stone for construction and monuments. Succeeding generations of the family ran the business for 133 years (from 1848 to 1981). William often played in the marble works as a boy, watching the artisans create and carve works for sculptural display, experiences which had a profound impact on his life.

William Couper received his first professional training in 1872 at the Cooper Art Institute in New York City. Then, in 1874, he went to Munich, Germany, attending both the Academy of Fine Arts and the Royal College of Surgery. He left for Italy the following year. The newly united

nation was struggling toward identity, but the expatriate community distanced itself from these developments. Its members identified with the intelligentsia and delighted in Tuscany's rustic charm, enjoying its elegant and captivating artistic heritage.

In Florence, William Couper met many prominent artists, including Thomas Ball, Daniel Chester French, Joel T. Hart, Frank Duveneck, Julius Rolshoven, and the Hiram Powers family. The nineteenth century Anglo-American artist colony had settled in the Porta Romana area, across the Arno River near the Pitti Palace and Boboli Gardens. Together they enjoyed social events, including teas, studio receptions, theatre programs, musical evenings, and parties for visiting dignitaries. At this time, Daniel French was studying and living with Thomas and Ellen Ball and courting their daughter Eliza, but was planning to return to Massachusetts. In a note home French included a first impression of Couper, with an amusing note on his new rival: "Tuesday evening, Mr. Couper and I went, with the Balls, to the opera *Norma*.... Mr. Couper is a young man of 21 or 22 who is here for the purpose of studying sculpture. He is from Virginia and of Southern tendencies, I think, though he has too much good sense to say much about it. I give this sketch of him because, as he enters into all the gaiety of this neighborhood, you will be likely to hear of him again. Don't you think he is rather a dangerous personage to leave behind, when I go home next summer?" (Feb. 5, 1876)

After French's departure, William Couper became the pupil, and then the son-in-law, of noted Boston sculptor Thomas Ball (1819-1911). He specialized in portraiture and idealized statues and bas-reliefs. The Ball-Couper studios were a meeting place for local artists and musicians, as well as for the American and English residents of Florence. Couper wrote appreciatively to his family about studying with Ball: "This you know is splendid practice for me because it is a branch of my profession that is immensely valuable, and one can only get a practical idea of doing such a work in a great sculptor's studio, for it is only they that have such heavy work to do. Oh, father, you can little imagine how fortunate I am, some great Providence led me here."

In 1885, Couper exhibited in Paris and London, taking along *Psyche, Before the Scenes, Evangeline, Vision*, the model for *Coming Spring*, and *Princess*. Copies were sold, and he arranged for an art dealer in London (probably Bellman & Ivey) to keep two medallions and a bust for display. Couper shipped many of his statues to the United States, where they sold exclusively through Tiffany & Company, New York.

William Couper and Thomas Ball exhibited their works together at the studios in Villa Ball. The receptions were often attended by visiting Americans on the Grand Tour. Guidebooks printed locations of artists' studios. Newspaper reporters visited studios and reported back to an American public extremely interested in their expatriate artists. One correspondent wrote of his visit to the American colony:

Outside the Porta Romana are the studios of four American sculptors....[including] that of Mr. Ball, universally acknowledged as one of America's greatest sculptors.... He is engaged upon a colossal figure, to be placed on the Washington Monument in the small town of Methuen, in Massachusetts. The design for this monument consists of a statue of Washington, which is finished, and is being cast at Muller's foundry at Munich, and of four allegorical figures to be placed at the four corners, and four busts of generals to be introduced into the pedestal of the statue. The figure of Washington will probably be sent to the Columbian Exposition at Chicago. The statue upon which Mr. Ball is now at work ... represents Revolution. It is a sitting figure of a man wearing a Phrygian cap, and a loose cloak. In his right hand he holds a Roman sword, his left is placed on his heart. The upraised head has a grand expression of resolve and determination; the whole figure is full of life, animation and power. Like all Mr. Ball's work the modelling is spirited.... Mr.

Ball has also a figure of David to show, the most recent of his completed works. It is fine, full of action and strength, as well as beauty. A small bronze copy of *Paul Revere's Ride* is also, we believe, to go to Chicago Mr. Couper's last work is a pretty little bas-relief of a young mother carrying her little child pick-a-back. The baby is the sweetest, softest mite of humanity imaginable. The sculptor calls this *A Labour of Love*. Mr. Couper is not at present in Florence, having left his family and his charming home to go and study in Paris. (*Florence Gazette*, "Studio Notes," Jan. 7, 1893)

In 1892, William Couper was appointed to the advisory committee for the Columbian Exposition at Chicago to select representative works of American artists resident in Europe, a position he held for many subsequent exhibitions, national events which fostered collaboration among young architects, painters, sculptors, and landscape gardeners. As a direct result of the World's Fair, the American Academy in Rome was founded. The artists who had worked on the exposition - including Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Charles McKim, William Mead, and Christopher La Farge - wanted young Americans to have the experience of working together in Rome for a three-year period. Later, Couper's son, Richard Hamilton Couper, attended the Academy while studying landscape painting.

William Couper began as a neoclassicist, then turned gently toward realism. In the early works, there is little modeling, a neoclassical trait, but he includes realist details of dress. Couper took his ideal subjects from his own imagination, from ancient fables, and from such authors as Cervantes, Tennyson, and Longfellow. An emotive theme is often inherent within sculpture inspired by a literary source, a "cross-pollination" of the arts and literature prominent during the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. Many of Couper's works were executed in low bas-relief. The full effect of the design depended on the translucency of the marble, and illuminating the sculpture with subtle gas-lighting, which gave the works an ethereal air.

William Couper had a fascination with angels, inspired by the cemetery monuments he had watched being constructed in his father's marble works and later strengthened by the angels in Italian churches. But Couper did not merely copy existing styles. He felt that angels should evoke both male and female characteristics and should be reverent representations of higher values. He achieved a distinctive androgynous look in his angels, using features both strong and soft, defining the wings with fine anatomical detail. P.N. Furbank, E.M. Forster's biographer, wrote that it was as if Forster saw through to "life" and heard its wing-beat, grasping not just a soul but a palpable presence (*Forster: A Life*, 1978). Couper, too, heard this wing-beat, capturing its tangible essence in his sculpture.

One of Couper's earliest winged statues, *a Psyche*, has small wings of almost botanical quality. A beautiful maiden is just about to open the vase which holds the gift of beauty from Persephone to Venus. She rests on one knee, her face reflecting doubt and curiosity as she invades the secret of the goddess.

The relief *Vision* (or *Head of an Angel*) clearly shows the beautiful mix of masculine/feminine characteristics and purity that are the trademarks of Couper's angels. This relief depicts an angel in profile looking toward a star. Couper wrote: "I sent a photo to Mr. Marcus (of Tiffany & Co., NY) of the intaglio of it, calling it an angel head, and he wrote back it looked like a Vision. So thinking it a much better name (I) adopted it at once."

One of his largest angel works was commissioned by Edward F. Searles for his estate at Methuen, Massachusetts. *The Attending Angel*, a 14-foot-high bronze relief, now decorates the clock tower at the Presentation of Mary Academy in Methuen. The delicate treatment of the wings offsets the floridness of the robe. (Searles also ordered the colossal bronze statues and busts in the Washington Monument from Thomas Ball, for which William Couper executed the

winged Eagles. The Washington Monument was cast at the Muller Foundry in Munich, not at the local Galli Foundry of Florence, by special request of Edward Searles. It is now located in Hollywood Hills, California.)

The Angel of the Resurrection was executed in 1901 for Mrs. Albert Cones, wife of the treasurer of the Kimball Piano Company. In the same year Couper completed the model for *Recording Angel*, a statue placed at his mother's gravesite. The inscription on the scroll reads: "In Thy presence is fullness of joy. At Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." The *Recording Angel* was cast in 1903 at the Bureau Brothers Foundry in Philadelphia.

In the heroic bronze statue *Peace*, placed at the Minnesota Monument in Vicksburg, a symbolic female figure sits holding a sheathed sword at her right side and an American shield garlanded with a victory wreath at her left. These signify that both armies of the Civil War have given her their weapons and that the Union is now at peace. The work sits before a 90-foot white granite obelisk erected by the Van Amringe Granite Company of Boston, Massachusetts. Two angel figures were modeled at the same time *Peace* was executed and may represent alternate designs. Each stands before a stone obelisk: *Angel of Victory* and *Angel with Wreath*.

Another winged group developed by Couper was the *Girl Running with a Falcon*. This life-size statue was left in Florence in 1897 to be cast in bronze, but apparently lost after the family returned to America. The last winged figure he sculpted was the *Snowden Memorial*, a heroic angel standing with bowed head in reverence for the fallen hero. The beautifully detailed full-length wings and the facial expression reflect both protection and compassion.

Couper made for his parents a pastel drawing of an angel standing on a rock. He wrote: "I am so thankful to learn through your letter... that the picture which I took the greatest pleasure in making... for you and father, meets your approval. Our minister here was so much pleased with it he brought several friends at different times to see it, and as my artist friends judged favorably of it from an artistic point of view I felt when I sent it, it would pass muster'."

One of Couper's most important outdoor works, the *Confederate Soldier*, was commissioned by the Pickett-Buchanan Camp of the Confederate Veterans. Unveiled on May 16, 1907 in Norfolk, Virginia, during the tri-centennial of the Jamestown Exposition, it was dedicated to those who lost their lives fighting for Virginia and the South. William Couper's *Confederate Soldier* stands defiantly atop the Confederate Monument in downtown Norfolk. Johnny Reb proudly holds the unfurled Stars and Bars at his left side and a sword ready at his right, staring with eyes fixed northward. This bronze symbol of the Lost Cause, measuring 15 feet, is mounted on a 50-foot white carved granite shaft. Originally the statue was located on busy Commercial Place, at the gateway for the ferries running between Norfolk and Portsmouth. In 1965 it was moved when the downtown area was renovated. Other heroic area works include a swashbuckling bronze *Captain John Smith* at Jamestown and the *Recording Angel* at the Couper family plot in Elmwood Cemetery, Norfolk.

In 1897 William Couper left Italy and returned with his family to America. He built a large home in Montclair, New Jersey, and opened a studio with Thomas Ball in New York City. Before his retirement he had executed more than a hundred and fifty works, including the heroic *Confederate Soldier*, the stately *Moses* atop the Appellate Court House in New York, a series of monuments for the National Military Park in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and fourteen marble busts of scientists for the American Museum of Natural History in New York. When developing portrait busts, Couper spent a great deal of time researching personal background. He wanted his portraits to go beyond a photographic image, capturing the inner spirit and personality of each subject. He researched all existing photographs, paintings, and portraits of the subject; then interviewed family members and friends when the person being modeled was not available.

An important allegorical work that Couper considered his best is the marble seated female figure entitled *A Crown for the Victor*. Now located at the Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey, this sculpture depicts a crown being woven for the Olympic winner. Chiseled in pure white Carrara marble, it demonstrates the classical style and detail that were the artist's trademark.

During his Italian sojourn of twenty-two years, William Couper executed many marble groups that often seem similar in style to the works of Antonio Canova, neoclassic in spirit and technique. Yet they differ because of Couper's introduction of more finely detailed carving and an infusion of personality. Couper's art remained essentially Italian in style, in contrast to the Parisian school of realism. The "pseudo-classic" style of Florence was combined with an attention to detail that sometimes took precedence over more powerful lines and planes; Couper's refinement and sound knowledge of human anatomy balanced this Florentine trend. In later years, he turned toward realism in his treatment of dress and in the reflective personalities characterized in his portrait works. After retiring from sculpture in 1913, Couper painted seascapes in oil and watercolors. He worked from memory, having observed the sea during many transatlantic voyages.

Perhaps Virginia's most distinguished native-born sculptor, William Couper established a wide reputation for the scope and refinement of his angels, portraits, and allegorical works. Couper reflected, "I have been inspired from my earliest years with the desire to leave something of beauty behind, something which was not in the world when I entered it."

A Norfolk newspaper described William Couper's style: "Perhaps ... the highest praise we can give him is to say that to forms of great beauty, the beauty of health, and faultless anatomy, he adds lovely faces which are not Greek. They are outside the conventional type of sculpturesque beauty and are within our recognition as reasonable probabilities of our own day and generation. Finally, and best of all, every conception he has embodied is... pure and tender." (*Norfolk Landmark*, Jan.31, 1884)

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