Thomas Ball: "In the Lap of Giants"

by Greta Elena Couper

"You will remember what a whopper of a woman my Victory is—a regular twelve-footer!—and what a lap she has. Her knees project so far that I found it impossible to reach to finish under her projecting arm without sitting in her lap. So, putting a cushion under me, I sat down very comfortably. But when I attempted to get up again the trouble began! The platform was so near the level of her knees that it was impossible to recover my footing without spoiling her dress, and I was obliged to call upon my model—who was on the bridge with me—to lend me a hand, which she did without a visible smile for fear of offending my dignity. Now, I do not write this merely to make you laugh... I only wish your mother had been present with her camera to make a picture of the group, to be called *Victory Playing with a Doll*."

So wrote Boston sculptor Thomas Ball (1819-1911) in a letter to his grandson in 1895, from his studio in Florence, Italy. He is the creator of many heroic statues including the *Washington Equestrian* in the Boston Public Garden, and the nearby *Lincoln Emancipation* in Park Square. Ball was not only physically in the lap of the giants he was modeling, but he was socially in the lap of international giants—dignitaries who visited his Florence studio in the central part of their "Grand Tour." Many statesmen, musicians, literati, and other notables included artist studio receptions on their European travel itinerary, and journalists sent articles back to local newspapers on the success of these events. Among the American visitors was General William T. Sherman, who later wrote to Ball, "I need hardly assure you that our wandering vagabond Americans feel an honest pride in the hard-earned success of our artists who must seek in foreign lands the material for their art. But I know that no country cherishes a purer love for the creations of the chisel and pencil than our own. And we hope soon that the materials and men will so abound with us that our artists may at home work out the remainder of the problems."

Thomas Ball was a member of the more than one hundred expatriate artists living in Italy in the nineteenth century. He worked in the realistic style and was most successful in marble sculpture and heroic bronze statues, but was also accomplished as a portrait painter and musician. Specific statues and busts located in the Boston area are highlighted in this article, along with limericks and notes Ball wrote about his work, his family, and his students who included sculptors Daniel Chester French and Martin Milmore. This provides a unique window into the evolution of well known statues found in public locations in Boston, and the artist who created them.

In his second autobiography, *My Fourscore Years*, Thomas Ball relates true accounts of the Anglo-American artist colony in Florence, Italy. Reminiscent of the E.M. Forster novel *A Room With A View,* this narration describes the execution of sculpture, social life, studio receptions and ambiance of the Belle Epoque, observed from both continents. Ball provides personal insights into an artist's life; humor and heartache

mixed with first hand comments on well-known sculpture in various stages of execution.

Born in Charleston, Massachusetts, June 3, 1819, Thomas was the son of a house and sign painter and the youngest of five children (he had four sisters). His father had an artistic temperament, with frequently changing moods from happy to sad, but never unkind. Both his parents enjoyed music, and, in fact, met each other in music school, where his father sang as a tenor. From Ball's earliest years he felt drawn to music and art. As a child he made his own bamboo flutes, pumpkin-vine clarinets, and assorted stringed instruments. He used to view repeating patterns with intensity, crossing his eyes to create an overlapping three-dimensional stereoscopic image. This caused the carpet at church to appear to drop three feet, leaving him "suspended in the air". He carved miniature models of ships viewed from the wharves, which encouraged him to seek work briefly as an apprentice to wood engraver Abel Bowen.

Ball was forced to quit the Mayhew School at an early age to help support his family upon his father's death. He worked at Moses Kimball's Boston Museum and Fine Arts Gallery, performing assorted tasks including the repair of wax figures and conducting tours. Ball occupied his spare time reproducing the paintings on display, and supplemented his salary by cutting profile silhouettes for the patrons. These were so successful that he set up a small attic studio in Boston in 1837 and began painting miniature portraits, eventually graduating to life-size portraits and paintings of religious and historical subjects.

Several of Ball's works were exhibited in the 1840s at the Boston Athenaeum, the American Art Union, and the Apollo Art Association, but the uncertainty of commissions made it necessary for him to seek additional means of income. He did this through his talents in music, singing bass in a paid position for the choir of St. Paul's Church. He frequently performed solo parts for the Handel and Haydn Society, which included the role of Adam in Haydn's *Creation.* In 1848 he sang the title role of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in the first American performance of that oratorio.

Ball's first sculpture came about after an unhappy love affair. He could not concentrate on painting, and, in an attempt to distract himself from his thoughts, he began to model clay heads, at the suggestion of his friend the sculptor John C. King. In 1851 he modeled a small cabinet bust of the great singer Jenny Lind. Copies became very successful, as the coloratura toured the United States, capturing the hearts of the American public, and Ball's career as a sculptor was launched. After executing cabinet busts, principally of other musicians (among them George J. Webb, George F. Hayter, and Charles C. Perkins), he modeled a life-size portrait bust of Daniel Webster, completed just after Webster's death, which gained much recognition.

Webster held a special attraction to Ball, who had admired him since boyhood. The sculptor then executed a small statuette, hoping to win a commission for a life-size statue. Although not selected, the model was mass-produced in plaster and bronze and sold to the mourning public in 1853. The orator and statesman is depicted as if prepared to address Congress, standing erect, his right hand tucked in his jacket in

Napoleonic fashion. Many years later, this statuette was enlarged to heroic proportions and placed in New York's Central Park. Ball later modeled a companion study of statesman Henry Clay, 1858, and the two statues formed a complementary pair, with the wiry figure of *Clay* balanced by the ample-bodied *Webster.* The success of these helped establish a business of small plaster statuettes and portrait studies.

At age 35, with growing success in the sculpture profession, Ball married Ellen Louisa Wild and set sail for Italy in October 1854, aboard the steamer *America,* intent upon studying and working with the artists in Florence. Although late in establishing his profession, he expanded his reputation and became a close friend of the sculptors Hiram Powers and Joel T. Hart. Among their colleagues were the painter-poet Thomas B. Read, the painter Francis Alexander, and the poets Browning. The expatriates formed a very close social circle and often held receptions where the conversation was interspersed with music and an occasional recitative or theater production, and with refreshments of tea and cakes.

Ball returned to Boston in 1857 and gained the award to build an equestrian statue of *George Washington* for the city after the untimely death of Thomas Crawford, who had originally been granted the project. He spent four years (1860-64) laboring over this model in a large warehouse which belonged to the Chickering Piano Factory; the Chickerings were relatives by marriage. He accepted a young pupil and apprentice, Martin Milmore, to assist him with background tasks. The equestrian statue was cast in bronze at the Ames Foundry in Chicopee, Massachusetts, and placed in the Boston Public Garden.

After the statue was completed, Ball returned to Florence and in 1870 built a large villa on a hillside near the Porta Romana just off Poggio Imperiale, next door to Hiram Powers. His villa and studio on via Dante da Castiglione became an academy abroad for young sculptors who included Daniel Chester French and William Couper. Many other artists, including Frank Duveneck and Anne Whitney, used Ball's studio to prepare models for casting and make final refinements. [Authors note: For more information on Villa Ball refer to the biography of William Couper, *An American Sculptor on the Grand Tour*]

In Italy Ball's career flourished, and he received numerous orders for portrait busts, heroic bronze monuments, allegorical works, and cemetery memorials. For the city of Boston he executed statues of Charles Sumner, Josiah Quincy, and Gov. John A. Andrew. Although not a high school graduate, Ball received an honorary Master of Fine Arts degree from Dartmouth College in recognition of a series of portraits he had executed of illustrious alumni and administrators, including Daniel Webster, Rufus Choate, William H. S. Smith, and President Nathan Lord. His works of young children have a sweet coquettish style, represented by such titles as *Christmas Morning, St. Valentine's Day*, and *La Petit Pensée.* These subjects were influenced by the earlier antics of his daughter "Kitty" (Eliza).

In 1891 Ball documented his recollections of struggling to become an artist, his techniques in executing sculpture, and the life-style of the expatriate colony in Italy,

published as *My Threescore Years and Ten.* He remained in Florence until 1897, when he returned to America and set up a studio in New York City with his son-in-law, the sculptor William Couper. Ball and Couper worked together on the seated statue of *Longfellow,* placed in Washington, D.C., 1909. Ten years after writing his first autobiography, Thomas Ball completed the sequel, *My Fourscore Years,* with additional comments upon his life, philosophy, family, and fellow sculptors. He finished his days in Montclair, New Jersey, where he lived with his daughter and her husband. Never formally retired from sculpture, in his last years he dabbled in his lifetime hobbies of music composition, writing rhymes and painting until his death in 1911.

Works Located in the Boston Area:

Daniel Webster, bronze statuette (1853)
Henry Clay, bronze statuette (1858)
Herbert Skinner, marble bust (1855)
Rev. Ephraim Peabody, marble bust (1856)
Paris Peace Treaty, bronze panel (1856)
Declaration of Independence, bronze panel (1856)
Washington Equestrian, heroic bronze statue (1865)
Edward Everett, marble bust (18647)
La Petit Pensee, marble bust (1870)
Gov. John A. Andrew, heroic marble statue (1870)
Chickering Monument, marble group (1872)
Christmas Morning, marble statue (1872)
St. Valentines Day, marble statue (1874)
Lincoln Emancipation Group, heroic bronze group (1875)
Charles Sumner, heroic bronze statue (1878)
Josiah Quincy, heroic bronze statue (1878)
Christ with a Child, heroic marble statue (1881)
David with a Sling, heroic marble statue (1881)
Washington Monument, bronze five heroic statues and four busts (1888-96)
Thomas Ball, self portrait, plaster bust (1903)

Comments on Selected Works:

(This section can be expanded if needed)

Washington Equestrian, heroic bronze statue (1865)

In 1856 Ball began to model a four foot heroic *Washington Equestrian* monument. He executed the model on his own accord before any formal competition was announced, and it met with much interest, although the commission was awarded to Thomas Crawford. Then, after Crawford's untimely death, the project was given to Ball. Ball enthusiastically launched

into the execution of the monument although he had never modeled a life-size full-length figure. In a warehouse borrowed from relatives at the Chickering Piano Factory (60 feet by 40 feet, and 30 feet high), he immediately began building up the model, using plaster instead of clay. Plaster was used due to the weight of the sculpture (five or six tons) and the cold winter temperatures which could crack a large clay model. In the summer Florence was so warm that during July and August models were covered and stored until cooler weather returned. Thomas Ball described the large task of constructing the interior of his equestrian statue:

> Screwed firmly to my platform was an iron post, about ten feet high and four or five inches square; a horizontal timber, about the length of the body of the horse, rested upon the top of the iron post, which entered and passed through the middle of it, the two forming a T,—the timber intended to lie along just under the lowest part of the back, and together with the iron post, support the entire weight. I then formed of plaster a series of rough slabs, ten inches wide, three inches thick, and in the form of a half-circle of the diameter of the body of the horse. As soon as they were hard, I simply hung them up—a dozen on each side—to the timber, their lower ends coming together under the belly, supporting each other till I could join them with plaster. Thus I had a hollow cylinder, the ends of which I closed in the same manner, forming a foundation upon which to build the "barrel" of my horse. I next drew on the floor the outlines of the legs in their right proportions and positions; bending a strong iron to lay in the middle of each leg, I raised them about an inch from the floor, with a bit of plaster under each end, then filled in the outlines with plaster, covering the irons over and under; these irons should be long enough to project six or eight inches under the hoof and over the top, to enter the plinth below and the barrel above. In this way I had the legs solidly roughed out, with an iron exactly in the middle of each, and ready to be placed under the horse. Of course, my small model told me where to place the hoofs. After this the building up of the neck and head of the horse was a simple matter.

The finished statue depicts a highly spirited horse with precise equine anatomy. Washington sits erect in the saddle and gazes into the distance. Groups of school children were ushered through the studio to see the completed 16 foot high sculpture. Casting was delayed due to the outbreak of the Civil War, because all available bronze was being used for military purposes. The finished work weighed 10,317 pounds and was finally dedicated in the Boston Public Garden on July 3, 1869, exactly 94 years after Washington took charge of the Revolutionary army. The statue was set on a

fifteen foot high pedestal of Quincy granite, designed by Hammat Billings. The foundry was Ames Manufacturing Company of Chicopee, MA. Total cost was $42,000, of which Ball received $12,000.

Lincoln Emancipation Group, heroic bronze (1875)

This monument was ordered by the Freedman's Memorial Association and installed both in Washington, D. C., 1875, and in Boston, 1877. It depicts Lincoln standing before a kneeling black man whose wrist chains have been broken. The head of the former slave was modeled after Archer Alexander, last man to be recaptured under the Fugitive Slave Law. Ball used photographs sent to Italy to obtain an objective truthfulness and literal naturalism. The group has been praised for its nobility and power, despite a surface whose smoothness and shine lack a vivacity of texture. It was cast at von Müller's Royal Foundry in Munich at a cost of $17,000. The figures are accurate portraits of real men, thus portraying a literal truth in history. John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a poem for the unveiling ceremony, December 9, 1879:

> Amidst thy sacred effigies
> If old renown give place,
> O city, Freedom-loved! to his
> Whose hand unchained a race
>
> Take the worn frame, that rested not
> Save in a martyr's grave;
> The care-lined face, that none forgot,
> Bent to the kneeling slave.
>
> Let man be free! The mighty word
> He spake was not his own;
> An impulse from the Highest stirred
> These chiselled lips alone.
>
> The cloudy sign, the fiery guide,
> Along his pathway ran,
> And Nature, through his voice, denied
> The ownership of man.
>
> We rest in peace where these sad eyes
> Saw peril, strife, and pain;
> His was the nation's sacrifice,
> And ours the priceless gain.

O symbol of God's will on earth
As it is done above!
Bear witness to the cost and worth
Of justice and of love.

Stand in thy place and testify
To coming ages long,
That truth is stronger than a lie,
And righteousness than wrong.

Washington Monument, bronze, five heroic statues and four busts (1888-96)

When he was 70 years old Thomas Ball received the most important order of his life—the *Washington Monument.* This heroic marble and bronze group was ordered by Edward F. Searles for the city of Methuen, Massachusetts. On the morning of February 22, 1900, amid a driving rain, the townspeople witnessed the unveiling after two years of installation. This site was not too far from the park in Cambridge where Washington took command of the continental army.

The monument is a triangular monolith, rising from a square base of white Carrara marble, and consists of five heroic statues, four busts, and four eagles. The colossal figure of Washington stands fifteen feet high atop the marble base, dressed in military gear and is partially covered by a large cloak. His right foot is forward and left hand extended, as if in benediction. Niches on each face of the pedestal contain cameo-like bronze busts of his four Revolutionary War generals: Lafayette, Greene, Knox, and Lincoln. At the four base corners sit heroic-size bronze symbolic figures: *Cincinnatus,* dressed as a Roman general with a wreath and shield, represents the return of peace and laying aside of military arms; *Victory* is a beautiful woman holding a wreath and leaning forward in expectation; *Revolution* depicts a powerful man wearing a Phrygian cap and holding a small sword; *Oppression*, a heavily chained female figure, with drooping head and a stricken aspect. Between these figures are Eagles, with wings extended and talons clutching flags (executed by William Couper), that add a strong patriotic unity to the composition. In 1893 the figure *Revolution* was on display at Ball's studio, as reported by the *Florence Gazette:*

> There was a large gathering at Mr. Ball's beautiful studio outside the Porta Romana on Monday, March 20th, to see the completed model in clay of his colossal figure of Freedom [sic] for the Washington Monument which he is modeling. The design for the monument was in the outer room. The

> figure ... represents a young man sitting on a stone, covered with a lions skin. He has one foot upon a broken chain ... and a short Roman sword in his hand.... The whole figure is inspired by indomitable spirit and determination. The lion's skin is very natural and is modeled with a wise neglect of detail.

The following year the *Italian Gazette* reported:

> The reception at Mr. Thomas Ball's studio ... was numerously attended. The chief work on exhibition was a huge figure of Cincinnatus. The Roman Consul is represented as seated on a plough, deposing the wreath of laurels and shield he holds in his hand. The whole attitude is full of force and life, and every detail carefully marked.... It may be remembered that Washington was called the modern Cincinnatus.

The statue of *Washington* was exhibited at the great Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in 1893, where it stood in the rotunda of the Art Palace. Taft wrote "In conception, in expression, in pose, line, and accessories; in light and shade and, this time, even in surface handling, the figure is nobly monumental." Ball received highest honors at the Exposition.

In 1964 the *Washington Monument* was moved from Methuen, Massachusetts, to Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Hollywood Hills, California, after it was sold by the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. The monument was located in the downtown area of Methuen, MA, from 1900 to 1956. A Lawrence, Massachursetts, newspaper reported on its arrival in California:

> A statue of George Washington was finally set in place in California earlier this month following a cross-continent trip from Methuen... The statue, surrounded by four bronze figures on its buttress, was installed on the Methuen site originally by the late Edward F. Searles, who was reputed to have paid $250,000 for it. The monument was the work of Thomas Ball, one of the foremost American sculptors of his age, who thought of it as his masterpiece. It was completed in Europe, and brought to this country in 1893 for display at the Chicago World's Fair...
>
> After its sale to the Forest Hills [sic] people, the statue was dismantled and shipped cross-country. The Carrara marble base was found to have been partially deteriorated by exposure... and after three weeks of effort toward demolishing it by hand labor, a 3,000 pound ball on a mighty crane was brought in to complete the demolition... Another bit of history emerged from this destruction as workmen found a copper box imbedded in the base. The box contained pictures of Searles and his wife, plus an

> 1876 history of Methuen, memoirs of the statue's sculptor and newspapers of 1900. The mementos had been installed by Searles at the time of the base's construction.
> Following the monument's arrival in California, a replica of the original base was ordered constructed in Italy. This was eventually completed, and at last the statue ... stands in what will probably be its final resting place.

The *Washington Monument* was considered by many people, including Ball himself, as his chef d'œuvre. It has been described by a phrase once used for the Taj Mahal, "A thing designed by Titans and executed by Jewelers."

Conclusion:

Thomas Ball was a self-made man who rose from obscurity to prominence in his profession. Despite his long sojourn in Italy, his art remained fundamentally American in style. Lorado Taft stated, "It speaks volumes for the underlying strength and rightness of his personality that from first to last, from the untutored beginnings to the masterful products of the great Florentine studio, his work has always been good sculpture and generally of the most dignified and monumental type. Through all his work, as throughout his life, is found an atmosphere of cheerful earnestness and an essential nobility."

Interested in assisting new artists, Ball carried on the tradition of those who had helped him in his early career. A former student, sculptor Daniel Chester French felt as if he were his son, often signing his letters "your eldest", and stayed in close touch all his life, sharing ideas and philosophy. As Ball grew older he stated "I pray that my strength may hold out until my work is done, when I shall be content to lay aside my tools and, with a grateful heart, to steal away and be forgotten."

> What, though the brow with age be lined,
> The head with snow be sprinkled;
> If Charity and Love abide,
> The heart remains unwrinkled.

Ball felt there was a special force planning the pattern of his life. He noted in his first autobiography that he "had a firm belief in the influence of good and bad spirits, though not the slightest in their visible, audible, or tangible manifestation." He stated that the temptations and frustrations in life "may be met and conquered by a firm determination without compromise, but with faith in the assistance of a higher power." William Partridge offered these comments about Thomas Ball:

> In understanding the purpose and import of a man's life we arrive at a more sympathetic appreciation and understanding of his work... In glancing at the life of Thomas Ball, the first thing which impresses us, and the last, is his sterling honesty. It is a pure, consistent, brave life from beginning to end.

[Related Reading: ***My Fourscore Years: Thomas Ball (1819-1911),*** and
An American Sculptor on the Grand Tour; Biography of William Couper (1853-1942).
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