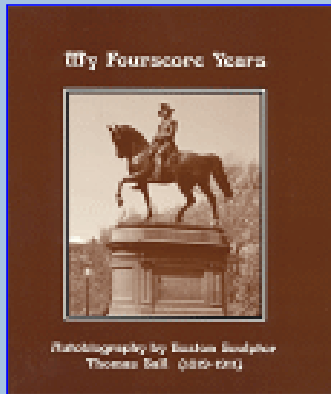
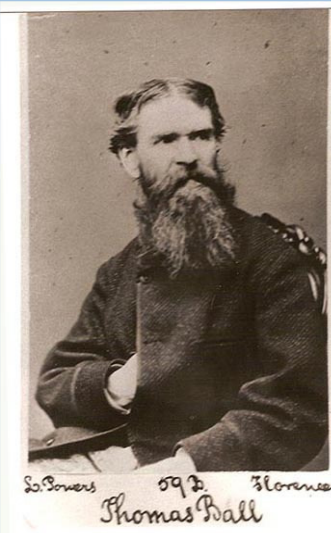


## Autobiography: Ball, Thomas (1819-1911)



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***My Fourscore Years, by Sculptor Thomas Ball.***  
*TreCavalli Press, Los Angeles. \$34.95, hard bound, acid-free paper, 81 photos.*

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Thomas Ball, Boston sculptor, 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. His best known monuments are the equestrian George Washington in the Boston Public Garden, the heroic statue Daniel Webster in New York's Central Park, and the Lincoln Emancipation Group in Boston and Washington, D.C.

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 patterns with intensity, crossing his eyes to create an overlapping three-dimensional stereoscopic effect. 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 wharfs, 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. These included such ambitious paintings as Christ in the Temple with Doctors and Scene From King Lear.

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; and lead roles in Rossini's Moses in Egypt and Stabat Mater, and Handel's Samson and Messiah. In 1848 he sang the title role of Mendelssohn's Elijah in the first American performance of that oratorio.

The Society committee honored Ball by presenting him a check for \$150

and a gold watch in 1851 (the watch was later lost in the Florence burglary). These came with a note that read "As the medium of this memento, we take the occasion to tender our best wishes for your health and prosperity, and our hopes that your purse, like the widow's cruse of oil, may fail not, till Time in his course around the dial of your Watch shall find you, like the Elijah of old, worthy to die." Ball sang the title role many times, and his voice remained powerful and vibrant. Sixty years after his first performance, he agreed to sing Elijah again on January 14, 1908, with the Montclair Oratorio Society.

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. These 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 him much recognition. It was constructed chiefly from memory, since the Statesman never sat for him, and depicted a convincing resemblance of Webster's features and personality.

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 Chickering's were relatives by marriage. He accepted a young pupil and apprentice, Martin Milmore, to assist him with background tasks. The statue was cast in bronze at the Ames Foundry in Chicopee,

Massachusetts, and placed in the Boston Public Garden. Partridge compared this work to the great heroic equestrian monument of Colleoni by Andrea del Verrocchio in Venice, c. 1488.

After the statue was completed, Ball returned to Florence in 1865 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 sculptors, including Frank Duveneck and Anne Whitney, used Ball's studio to prepare models for casting and making final refinements (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 John A. Andrew, 1870. Although not a high school graduate, he 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.

Many Americans visited the Florence studios of the expatriates at open receptions. Among them 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."

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. Then, ten years after writing his first autobiography, he 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. Ball and Couper worked together on the seated statue of Longfellow, placed in Washington, D.C., 1909.

Thomas Ball was a self-made man who rose from obscurity to prominence in his profession. 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, at his home in Montclair, New Jersey.

Despite his long sojourn in Italy, his art remained fundamentally American in style. Thomas Ball designed his statues in the style of realism. This is a style that was probably influenced by the discovery of photography. The first medium Ball worked in was marble. He refined his talents by working alongside Hiram Powers, who excelled in marble sculpture. As bronze came more into use, the smooth textured designs

used for marble did not appear well in metal. Ball eventually changed the surface treatment to add more texture for works that were cast in bronze, but some of his earlier heroic designs like the Emancipation Group and the enlarged Webster statue in New York City lost expression in the highly polished metal.

While the next generation of sculptors led by August Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French turned away from the plain, natural style of Thomas Ball, they drew much strength from the "truth in nature" of their earlier predecessors. Ball was very generous in assisting new artists, carrying on the tradition of those who had helped him in his early career. Daniel 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. 30 Ball felt 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." This influenced him greatly, and he stated 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."

Ball's painting style was similar to the English portraitists such as Gainsborough or Romney, but showed some of the sentimentality of Frances Alexander. William Partridge (*New England Magazine*, May 12, 1895) offered these concluding 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.

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