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Joel Tanner Hart: Kentucky's Neo-Classic Sculptor

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As with many eighteenth and nineteenth-century designations, from Shaker to Impressionist, the term neo-classic was invented as a perjorative one. The emphasis was, no doubt, on neo, with the implication that any "new" or "reborn" classicism could not hope to equal, much less surpass, the original, embodied in the arts of ancient Greece and Rome. It is doubtful, however, that nineteenth-century artists felt a sense of competition with these revered images; instead, they simply wished to emulate them as part of a return to what they considered pure forms. What they did hope to accomplish in their own art varied, of course, from artist to artist. This has caused some confusion among art historians as to the precise tenets of the neo-classic aesthetic. Indeed, the term is used today with a certain amount of hesitation. Nevertheless, it is a useful one and by now carries with it connotations of easily recognizable artistic attributes. With the coming of neo-classicism to the art of painting in the second half of the eighteenth century, the diagonal perspective of the Rococo gave way to a more strict compositional frontality; the sensuous curves of the Baroque were replaced by purer, quieter lines. Depictions of the human body were more likely to be idealized with the features softened, smoothed out, and conceived in a more generalized manner.¹

This latter quality—the search for perfection in the human form, a direct emulation of a Greek aesthetic—lent itself particularly well to sculpture. Marble—with all of the implications of purity which could easily be transferred to the physical and moral character of the person, real or imagined, to be carved—was by the mid-nineteenth century the most popular and the only really acceptable medium for contemporary sculpture. Indeed, a nineteenth-century sculpture might be called neo-classic today for no other reason than that it is made of this pure white stone.

By the second quarter of the century, artists were flocking to Italy in search of this stone and the remnants of the works of their ancient artistic predecessors. Besides, living was cheap in Italy, and

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the necessary finishing craftsmen, adepts at handling the marble, were there in abundance. When an artist from England, Germany, or the United States received a sculptural commission or desired an education in sculptural methodology, it was more or less taken for granted that he or she would go to Italy. This is precisely the course followed in 1849 by the American sculptor Joel Tanner Hart (1810-1877).

Hart was born in Clark County, Kentucky, where he received early training as a stonecutter. His early work, specifically that done in Lexington for gravestones, attracted the attention of a local citizenry with aesthetic interests. Thereby encouraged, Hart decided, in 1845, to pursue the commission of a statue of Henry Clay then in the planning stages by the Ladies' Clay Association of Richmond, Virginia. Hart traveled to that city and, having secured the commission, finally departed for Italy in 1849 to put it into marble. There he lived for the rest of his life, executing this and various other commissions, hobnobbing with other members of the artistic and literary community in Florence, and becoming reasonably well-known himself.

The purpose of this article is to review the major works of Joel Hart in an attempt to place them in the context of the late neoclassic period in which they were created and, thereby, to create a better understanding of that period as it was defined by American sculptors active at the time.

**Part II: Hart's Methodology**

A brief look at the manner in which Hart worked may be useful in understanding the products of his career. In many ways his methodology was typical of that of the sculptors of his time and, in that sense, may be used as a representative of those techniques. As will be seen, however, Hart placed particular emphasis on the use of measuring and pointing.

A. *Drawing and Measuring*

As with most American sculptors of the nineteenth-century, there is little evidence that Joel Hart was a proficient draftsman. Lorado Taft, the sculptor and art historian, saw a real lack of drawing skill in Hart's full-length *Henry Clay* (Fig. 1), a deficit which, according to Taft, would affect all of Hart's work.
There is some evidence, however, that Hart was not a complete alien to the pencil. An early silhouette charcoal portrait of his sister, Mary (Hart) Weaver (Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort), is an uncomplicated but not incompetent work. It is of indeterminate date but it is certainly an early effort. (The Kentucky Historical Society dates the work at ca. 1831. Mary Weaver died in 1845).

Furthermore, an oil painting of Pocahontas, said to be by Hart, was known to exist in Lexington, Kentucky in the 1960s. Its present whereabouts, or how or why it came to be called a Hart work, is not known. No reference is made to it or any similar work in Hart's extant correspondence. However, the subject was of some particular interest to Hart, for he made a special side-trip to the site of Pocahontas's bravery when he was in Richmond in 1845.5

In an early biographical sketch, George C. Williamson states that Hart in his youth gave up carving for a brief time “and took up with painting,” but “finding that his real capacity was with the branch of the art in which he had first worked,” he returned to sculpture.6 (Unfortunately, Williamson's biography fails to give a source for this information.)

Hart himself made reference to drawing in a short review of his life's work in a letter to his friend Henry Pindell in 1872. “Something like this [his Woman Triumphant] has been my life's dream,” he wrote, “after ‘drawing’ and measuring all that I could get at of the pretty Country Girls.”7 Notice, however, that Hart put the word “drawing” within quotation marks, which implies that he may not have considered himself a draftsman of any real ability.8

This brings us to the subject of what must have been Hart's true starting point in the execution of his art, that is, measuring. This procedure was far from innovative in sculpture and was the main subject of Gérard Audran's publication of 1638, Les Proportions du Corps Humain Mesurées sur les Plus Belles Figures de l'Antiquité. Basically, this was a book of measured drawings of antique sculpture from which an aspiring artist could learn a more “perfect” proportion.9 Certainly no self-respecting neo-classicist could have ignored such a work. We have no evidence that Joel Hart had access to this volume, but his own interest in measuring could have rivaled M. Audran's. Throughout Hart's letters and notes are references to measuring the limbs of the female form. He
devised elaborate charts to record these measurements, and several charts dating from the 1840s survive. Indeed, Hart's quest for perfectly shaped individual human features stayed with him all of his life and seems to have bordered on the obsessive.

B. Pointing

Related but certainly not secondary to Hart's interest in measuring was his fascination with a device "for modelling statuary from life and for measuring and copying statuary and other uneven surfaces." This, a pointing machine, measured the concavities and elevations of a figure by means of representative points which were then matched in depth in plaster or marble. Such devices had been developed for many years, but Hart began experimenting with improvements on them while he was still in Kentucky in the 1830s and 1840s. By 1856 he had made enough alterations in pointing techniques to apply for a patent in London. The machine seems to have been Hart's drawing-card, and many of the American tourists making the obligatory calls at the studios of Florence commented on seeing the device. It also seems to have been Hart's calling-card as well, for when he visited London in the late 1850s he received several commissions following an article about the machine published in the *London Athenaeum*. The machine seems to have been particularly useful in modeling drapery and was often used for that purpose by Hart's own workmen. Hart had also hoped to "copy if I could get permission, the two or three great Greek works." He claimed that the machine saved him a great deal of time, though some of his patrons thought otherwise.

C. The Use of Workmen

There were no American sculptors active in Florence in the nineteenth century who did not use local craftsmen in the execution of their marbles. As Wayne Craven has noted, "The sculptor himself looked upon the tasks of casting the piece in plaster and then carving it in marble as laborious, physically strenuous, time consuming, and altogether unfit work for the creative artist." Joel Hart was no exception. While he certainly must have carved the first marble versions of his earliest works (e.g., the bust of Cassius M. Clay [Fig. 2] and the first bust of Henry Clay [Fig. 3]), once he arrived in Italy, he took full
advantage of the local workmen. He had dealings with many of these competent craftsmen, but one, Demetrio Guilioni, figured largely in the execution of some of Hart's most important work. For example, in 1860 Guilioni put into marble Hart's bust of Henry Clay (Fig. 4), now in the Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, and Hart was so impressed with the work that he kept it as a show piece in his studio until 1873. Guilioni also finished the bust of John Warren Grigsby (unlocated) in 1856 and was under contract to finish the full-length Henry Clay for Virginia in 1857. Hart considered him to be "the best workman that I ever saw." Other craftsmen at work in Hart's studio were Ferdinanda Barchus, who specialized in carving drapery, and Baldisari Vincitti who was sent to Hart by sculptor Chauncy B. Ives and who specialized in carving hair. A certain Leopoldo was working for Hart in the mid-1850s. In 1863, while working on his full-length Henry Clay for Louisville, Hart sent to the United States for a Sig. Gagliardi. Thomas Crawford had recommended this workman "whom he sent out to supervise his works for our Capitol." Hart was impressed with Gagliardi's carving ability but also liked him because he "speaks English and is a staunch Union man." Furthermore, it should be mentioned that Hart's nephew Robert Hart was also in the studio in the late 1850s, supervising the workmen in Hart's absence and acting as a sort of apprentice/workman himself. In fact, he seems to have been instrumental in the finishing of the Virginia Clay and other works, as will be discussed in the following section.

Part III: Henry Clay

Before Joel Hart had ever heard of the Ladies' Clay Association of Richmond, he modeled from life and cast in plaster a bust of Henry Clay (Fig. 3). This was in 1842 and, considering the circumstances, was the most natural thing for a young sculptor in Lexington, Kentucky to do. After all, Clay's home, "Ashland," was less than a mile from the city limits, and the famous orator was a familiar sight in the town as he went to and from his law office. Besides, Hart's friend and mentor, Shobal Vail Clevenger had come to Lexington in 1837 to sculpt Clay and was only one of many artists to do so. Hart's first impression, therefore, of a
professional sculptor at work was Clevenger modeling Henry Clay (Fig. 5). Hart would have occasion to see Clevenger's Clay again in Cincinnati when, in 1839 and 1841, both artists showed their works at the Ohio Mechanic's Institute. 30

In 1846 and 1847, Hart toured the eastern United States with his 1842 bust of Clay, sprinkling the countryside with plaster replicas of it. On procuring the commission from Richmond for the full-length Clay, however, he became dissatisfied with his first effort and decided to remodel it. Although the new version was finished, after many sittings, in 1847, it is nevertheless difficult to ascertain which of the extant Clay busts is indeed the second version. Hart wrote in 1852 that his second Henry Clay bust was "modeled especially for the (Virginia) statue . . . with the head turned to the right instead of the left as in the case with my first which is draped." 31 The only Clay bust by Hart, or at least said to be by him, with the head turned to (the viewer's) right is the small (six inches high) bust at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 6). This bust, which certainly resembles the others known to be by Hart, was given to Mrs. Anna (Lynch) Botta of New York by Henry Clay, evidently around 1850. 32 (Clay died in 1852.) Mrs. Botta knew Hart from his visit to New York in the mid-1840s and had entertained him at her home near Washington Square. 33 It is not unlikely, then, that she would have felt pleasure in owning a bust of her friend by Hart. Hart had sent one or two marble replicas of the second version to Clay in 1847, and it may well have been one of these that Clay passed on to Mrs. Botta. 34

The problem here, however, is that in all three versions the head of Clay faces in the other direction (Figs. 1 and 9). Since the plaster bust at the Kentucky Historical Society (Fig. 3) is inscribed "J. T. Hart, Sculpt. 1842," we must assume it is either the first version or a cast of it. It seems that Hart may have changed his mind and used the first version for the eventual full-length, but why he might have done this is a question not answered in his extant papers. 35

At any rate, a bust of Clay by Hart which is more stylistically interesting than any of the previously mentioned ones is a bust now at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington (Fig. 7). Not only does the modern drapery (as opposed to the predictable classical drapery of most of Hart's other busts) give a more striking image, but Clay's features also seem to be more carefully modeled and, in the end, more realistic. The startling variation in the drapery,
however, makes it obvious that this bust is a by-product of Hart’s most well-known work, his life-size, full-length sculpture of Henry Clay at the Virginia state capitol at Richmond (Fig. 1).

Though the contract for this work was signed in 1846, the finished marble was not sent to Richmond until 1859. The delay caused the ladies there to lose patience with Hart as early as 1851, but the artist was still unable to get the statue into clay until 1853. Yet another delay followed, however, and by 1857 the Virginia press was publishing vicious comments about Hart’s artistic and professional abilities. Hart was in London at the time, trying to procure bust commissions, and his friend Alexander Galt wrote him that the commission for the Clay might be lost. Galt then took charge and drew up a plan whereby Hart’s nephew Robert (already at work on the statue’s drapery) and other workmen would finish the sculpture in eighteen months. Luckily for Hart, the plan was agreed upon and the commission saved.

Robert sent his uncle photographs of the completed clay model and Hart returned to Florence in late 1857 to supervise its transferal first to plaster (Fig. 8) and then to marble. Meanwhile, Hart had obtained commissions for a bronze version of the statue from the city of New Orleans. Immediately he duplicated his plaster model and sent it off to Munich to be cast at the Royal Bavarian Foundry. The work was in New Orleans by late 1859, and, coincidentally, both it and the Virginia statue were unveiled on the same day, 12 April 1860, the eighty-third anniversary of Clay’s birth.

Hart had made some slight changes in the final plaster version before having it put into marble and bronze. The support column, for example, was made more decorative by changing its shape to octagonal. In addition, Hart took some pains to give the fingers on both of Clay’s hands a more graceful arrangement. The two smaller fingers on the right hand were bent inward and Clay’s touch on the column seems lighter in the final marble than in the plaster. Hart wrote of this in a letter to John Wilson in June, 1858: “I have modelled the hands of Mr. Clay exquisitely; I could have modelled four heads in the same time.” As can be seen more clearly in the bust of Clay at the Corcoran (Fig. 7), any changes in the head are so slight as not to be of any great importance. Of all the busts, this is by far the closest to the full-length.

Hart’s artistic association with Henry Clay was not over, however, for in 1860, while he was in America for the unveiling of
the New Orleans statue, the sculptor received a commission from the city of Louisville for yet another replica of the full-length. Unhappily, the committee in that city could not raise enough subscription money for the marble until after the Civil War. The work, therefore, was not finished until early 1867.

For this third Henry Clay, Hart expressed a desire to remodel the work, "as there are many defects in it that I had not the time to remedy in the model on my return from England." In 1863, he wrote that he was "improving the Statue of Henry Clay for Louisville, both in its proportion and natural action, from numerous daguerreotypes, etc., taken from the life." Confirmation of Hart’s progress and improvement on the work was given in a letter (probably solicited) of 1864 by William Henry Rinehart. "I take great pleasure," he wrote, "in saying that I think your model a great improvement both in action and modeling upon your former ones of that great Statesman." William Voorhis was also in Hart’s studio, observing progress on the Louisville statue in the winter of 1864, and wrote Henry Pindell that Hart "has made several great improvements upon his first life-size statue of Mr. Clay. He has improved the drapery and avoided the stiffness of action which was apparent in the first."

Unfortunately, whatever these improvements were, or were meant to be, is difficult if not impossible to say. The Louisville work (Fig. 9) does seem to be of better proportions than the one in Virginia, but this could simply be a matter of placement and viewpoint. The pedestal in Louisville, designed by Hart, puts the figure on a higher ground. Clay is almost eye-to-eye with the viewer in Richmond, both in the figure’s present location and as it stood originally on the grounds of the capitol in Richmond. Clay’s bow tie is somewhat droopier in the Louisville version, but his trousers are as baggy as in the Virginia statue, and the octagonal column has been retained. Any other changes are simply too subtle to make any real difference in overall effect.

Although Hart had several other chances to depict Henry Clay, the Louisville commission ended his official association with the great orator, representative of the neo-classicist’s interest in the heroic and patriotic figure, a type of sculpture which Hart had carried out for such other notables as Andrew Jackson and Kentucky’s state Sen. Robert Wickliffe, both realized in marble busts with classical drapery. Exactly one decade remained in Hart’s life in which he could concentrate on that other division of neo-
classical sculpture which truly interested him—the Ideal.

Part IV: Ideal Works

In the eighteenth century, the neo-classical painter Anton Raphael Mengs wrote, “By the ideal, I mean that which one sees only with the imagination, and not with the eyes.”51 An artist, in other words, must edit the accidental parts of nature, improving on them or disposing of them altogether, if he hopes to achieve the ideal.

Joel Hart was again typical of nineteenth-century sculptors in this regard. Despite all of his peregrinations with images of Henry Clay, Hart was sincerely interested in expressing his own artistic emotions by conceiving and executing ideal figures. As one eminent art historian has written, “It was in the ideal figures that the artists poured forth their greatest creativity and in these that the neoclassic ideals were most fully expressed.”52

A. Il Penseroso

Hart was experimenting with conceptions of the Ideal in 1851 but was given his first real impetus to put something into marble by the death of Henry Clay the following year.53 This was a bust of Virginia Mourning Over Her Son (i.e., Clay) and was said by Alexander Galt to be “one of the most beautiful (busts) I have ever seen.”54 Hart conceived it as a placating gift for the increasingly impatient members of the Ladies’ Clay Association.55 Whether a version was ever actually sent to them is not clear, but when a marble replica was ordered in the mid-1850s by William H. Lowery of New York, Hart decided to call it “Pensive Thoughts” or Il Penseroso (Fig. 10).56 The exact reason for this change in title is not known, but the iconography of Il Penseroso, based on Milton’s description of Melancholy in his poem of the same name as Hart’s sculpture, was a well-known and popular one in the first half of the nineteenth century.57 More immediate for Hart, however, was the La Penserosa (now unlocated) being put into marble in Florence by Hiram Powers at exactly the same time—early in 1856—that Hart decided on the new name for his Virginia.58 There can be little doubt that Hart saw Powers’ sculpture for, according to Powers himself, the initial work on it was “the chief attraction of my studio” from October to December

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1853, and Hart could easily have seen it there. But other than the title and the obvious evocations of melancholy, the works are not otherwise related. This is not surprising since Hart had conceived the image as a depiction of something else.

Nevertheless, Hart’s *Il Penseroso* does not fail to embody the pertinent lines from Milton:

Hail thou goddess, sage and holy
Hail, divinest melancholy
Whose saintly visage is too bright
To hit the sense of human sight.

Indeed, Hart shows the figure with closed or at least downcast eyes, as if to protect the viewer from the “visage too bright.” On the whole, this bust is certainly the most attractive of Hart’s extant works and was no doubt the first product of his endless measurings of the living female form.

A second ideal, *Angelina*, probably done about 1857, no longer survives. It was carved on a base of leaves—again, possibly influenced by Hiram Powers, whose *Proserpine* (begun in 1851) appeared likewise, at least in one version. Hart expressed dissatisfaction with the leaves, however, and proposed to his clients bases of typical classical drapery for this and the *Il Penseroso*.

B. Morning Glory

Hart’s next original neo-classical ideal, dating from 1869, was that which he called *Morning Glory* (Fig. 11). It depicts a very young girl contemplating a flower she holds in one hand while, with the other, she holds up the hem of her dress which contains more blossoms. In feeling, the life-size sculpture is not unlike Horatio Greenough’s portrait of Cornelia Grinnell (Private Collection, Massachusetts) of 1830-1832 or even Lilly Martin Spencer’s painting *We Both Must Fade* (National Museum of American Art), executed in the same year that Hart carved his *Morning Glory*. While there is no evidence of any direct link between any of these works, they all express the same sentimental, melancholy Victorian interest in the passing of time and youth and the eventual approach of death. And what better metaphor could there be of this for the nineteenth-century artist than the flower,
especially the morning glory, the very name of which implies momentary, transient beauty? These feelings were immediately apparent to contemporary viewers of Hart’s work and one visitor to his studio remembered being particularly struck by “the marvelous beauty, statuesque pose and early maturity of a little girl—a mere child. In one hand, she held a morning glory into which she was thoughtfully gazing, as if realizing her destiny in the depths of its delicate petals.”63 This piece was evidently a fairly popular one for Hart, and at least two full-size marbles were made. One was sent to Hart’s friend Henry Pindell of Louisville in 1873 and is now in the Louisville Free Public Library. A replica came to light recently in a private collection and was purchased by the National Museum of American Art in Washington. Hart also made a number of smaller, statuette replicas of the work in the 1870s, none of which is known today.

C. Woman Triumphant

After his neo-classical depictions of Henry Clay, Hart’s best known work, at least in his own time, was his Woman Triumphant, variously known as The Triumph of Chastity, Woman’s Victory, Beauty’s Triumph, Woman’s Triumph, and The Triumph of Womanhood (Fig. 12). Hart considered this work his “life’s dream,”64 but he could begin work on it only after the completion of the Virginia and New Orleans commissions—and while the Louisville commission faltered due to lack of funds during the Civil War years. It was finally put into plaster, full size, in 187565, and Hart began pointing it in marble with his own hands in 1876. He died before it was finished, however, and the marble was completed by his English sculptor friend George Saul shortly after 1877. Hart’s will indicates that two plasters of the work existed, one with Cupid’s arm raised, one with it lowered.66 The completed marble followed the first format.

The final work, which was unfortunately destroyed in the burning Fayette County, Kentucky courthouse in 1897, showed an undraped female figure, life size, holding aloft an arrow. At her feet and reaching for the arrow is a winged infant cupid at whom she looks benevolently. There were any number of antique sculptures of the female nude in Florence, Rome, and Naples which could have inspired Hart, but we know of only one which attracted his particular attention. That was the ever-popular Venus
de Medici who then, as now, reigned over the elegant Tribuna in the Uffizi. Hart had pointed a copy of the Venus in 1873 (now at the Louisville Free Public Library) for friends in Kentucky who were eager to have her for their own. This interest in the statue is not unique, however, as the Venus was one of the most copied sculptures of all time. For all her beauty, however, she is not as compositionally close to Hart’s Woman as a work of 1778, Venus Chiding Cupid (Usher Art Gallery, Lincoln, England), by the English sculptor Joseph Nollekens. The two share the same playful qualities and feelings of woman’s, or at least female beauty’s, triumph over love or life. Hart may have seen this work on one of his excursions to London, but if he did the experience was not recorded in any of his extant papers.

He preferred, it seems, to consider the idea embodied in the work to be “modern and my own.” This, he thought, gave his work a raison d’être, which was seen and understood by contemporary, albeit sympathetic, critics. It was called everything from a “new world ideal” to the answer for “the great question of woman’s destiny.” Even the critic Henry Tuckerman, a perceptive presence in the field of nineteenth-century art criticism, called the design “unique.”

All of this aside, the variations of name and interpretation given to this work in the nineteenth century make it difficult for us completely to understand Hart’s intention. The artist himself called the sculpture by several names, reminiscent of his having changed the title of the Il Penseroso even after the work was completed. It is obvious, however, that what he did want was to sculpt the perfect form of woman—determined by decades of careful measurements—in the didactic, slightly moralistic, yet good-natured pose of a modern-day Venus. In fact, it is the sermonizing nature of this work, as may be said of much neo-classic sculpture, that allows her to be nude, despite her Victorian milieu. At the same time, the work allows the artist to escape the confines of the more predictable, mundane portrait bust by which he made his living, to a more enervating and self-revelatory world. This is probably exactly why Joel Hart considered Woman Triumphant to be his “life’s dream” and why he so looked forward to creating her.

If it is at all fair to judge such a work from photographs, which is all we have on which to base an opinion in this case, it can be said with some certainty that this work was an artistic success for
Hart. Some criticism has been leveled at the anatomical awkwardness of his *Henry Clays*, but it seems that he vindicated himself with his *Woman Triumphant*. Though perhaps a little heavy in the hips, the figure is not ungraceful, even when viewed from different angles, which is more than can be said of some more well-known nineteenth-century sculptures. In addition, this work breaks out of the static boundaries of pure neo-classicism as woman and cupid involve themselves in a rapid, upward movement which serves to emphasize the verticality and, one might assume, the other-worldliness of both figures. It is not surprising that when these figures were smashed by the falling courthouse beams, their remains were quickly carried off by the local citizenry as relics of the now departed but much-loved Ideal.

In his ground-breaking and still useful work of 1945, *Yankee Stonecutters*, Albert Gardner rather misleadingly summarized the life of Joel Hart as follows: “He dreamed away . . . his life, playing at sculpture, writing verses, and selling busts of Henry Clay whenever he needed money to prolong the comfortable and innocent idyl of his life in Florence.” Though Gardner’s chapter on Hart contains several errors of fact concerning the artist, his denigrating summary in this passage did Hart a particular disservice. The image evoked by Gardner of a child-like, naive, almost lazy craftsman who pretended to be a sculptor is certainly not the same image one gets of Hart after reading his own letters and those of others to him, hundreds of which are extant. First of all, it seems that Hart sold few if any busts of Henry Clay after he went to Florence, and, even if he did, it was not to prolong a “comfortable” life. On the contrary, his life could hardly have been called comfortable, even after he was paid rather well for his New Orleans and Louisville statues. Indeed, he had been forced to incur many debts over the years and actually moved into his studio permanently towards the end of his life to reduce his expenses. The conditions there, while probably not primitive, were far from idyllic and so far from comfortable that his closest friends moved him to more pleasant surroundings during his final illness.

Furthermore, he was hardly the only nineteenth-century sculptor to write poetry, and if he had only “played” at sculpture, as Gardner suggests, it seems unlikely that he would have been taken seriously by the likes of the well-known and respected artists Shobal Clevenger, Hiram Powers, Alexander Galt, and Thomas Crawford, all of whom were his friends. Nor could he have
maintained his position in the artistic life of Florence as he did for almost thirty years.

This is not to appear overly defensive of Joel Hart’s manner of living or of his work. Obviously, Hart had to deal all too frequently with the very human problems of social intimidation, hints of artistic inferiority, and, inescapably, rudimentary economics. Nevertheless, one may properly assert the validity of re-examining and re-assessing in some depth the work of a figure whose artistic reputation may have suffered unduly because of opinions about the way in which he lived. The appraisal of Hart’s sculpture in a context of the neo-classicism appropriate to his time is the only basis for determining his position among nineteenth-century American sculptors, and for stimulating a sympathetic interest in the details of his life.

What, then, are we to make of the career of Joel Tanner Hart? As has been pointed out here, Hart was in many ways typical of the American school of sculptors which, as Gardner has written, “seems to have sprung full panoplied upon the scene” between 1816 and 1836. While Hart never produced works as successful as Powers’s neo-classical Greek Slave or Randolph Rogers’s Nydia, Hart strove for the same artistic ideals as many of his sculptor compatriots, ideals which are today placed under the general heading of neo-classic. These same ideals have been characterised by Wayne Craven as showing a concern for a naturalism which he sees as part of a “Byronic Romanticism.” In striving for qualities of “youth, sensitivity, courage, [and] vigor, touched by genius,” these sculptors were naturally interested in depicting the famous men—and occasionally, women—of their day. If the classical and Renaissance tradition of creating “temples of fame” could be revived at Westminster, St. Paul’s, Santa Croce, and the Roman Pantheon, then sculptors like Joel Hart could follow suit with statues of a Henry Clay, raise the image to the level of a patriotic icon, and enthrone it in the courthouses and capitols of America. If Zeuxis could paint Helen by combining the best features of five different models, then Joel Hart could sculpt the ideal Woman by measuring the limbs of dozens of her living counterparts. By reviving these aspects of the classical tradition and by giving them new life in white marble, Joel Hart validated his claim to being called a neo-classic sculptor.
I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. William H. Gerdts, Professor of Art History at the Graduate School of the City University of New York. Dr. Gerdts, sensitive to my Kentucky origins, first suggested that I investigate the life and work of Joel Hart and was most generous in providing notes and reference material on Hart collected by himself and his former pupil, Bruce Weber, in 1980. I am also grateful for the advice of Prof. Clifford Amyx, of the Art History Department of the University of Kentucky, who read the manuscript of this article and provided me with a number of enlightening and useful comments.


The story of exactly how Hart, a Kentuckian, heard of and was given an important sculptural commission by a group of ladies in Virginia was told by Benjamin B. Minor in his history of the magazine which he edited: “Mr. B. B. Minor had in Tappahannock, Va., a school-mate, John Custis Darbey, of Richmond county. Darbey studied medicine and settled in Lexington, Ky., where he became distinguished and influential. He knew Hart's history, believed in his genius and resolved to befriend him. Hart prepared what was regarded by his friends as a model bust of Mr. Clay and brought it to Richmond, along with a letter of introduction and unreserved recommendation, from Dr. Darbey to Mr. Minor” (Benjamin B. Minor, *The Southern Literary Messenger, 1834-1864* [New York and Washington: The Neale Publishing Co., 1905], 206).

Lorado Taft, *The History of American Sculpture* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1924), 101. Taft mentioned, specifically, the feeling of unbalance in the figure and the poorly conceived (i.e., baggy) drapery.


Joel Hart, Diary, p. 3, Durrett Collection of Kentuckiana, Joel Tanner Hart Papers, The University of Chicago Library, Box 6, Folders 15-17 (hereinafter cited as “Diary”). Hart Papers hereinafter are cited as Durrett, with the box and file numbers given. Among the papers are many letters written to Hart and first drafts in Hart's hand of many of his own letters to others. I wish to thank the staff of the Department of Special Collections for allowing me access to these papers and for generously providing me with copies of requested materials, especially of Hart's diary.

Hart to Henry Pindell, 23 September 1872. Henry Clay Pindell Papers, Filson Club, Louisville, Kentucky, hereinafter cited as Pindell. I wish to express my special thanks to James Bentley of the Filson Club for generously providing me with copies of all of Hart’s letters that are in the Filson Club’s collection.

Nevertheless, Hart was able, when the occasion arose, to get some ideas, however sketchy, on to paper. For example, in 1871 he sent his friend John Wilson a design for a monument, evidently for a grave, for Wilson’s uncle, Farmer Dewees (Hart to Wilson, 16 April 1871 [Pindell]).


*These charts are among the Hart Papers in the Durrett Collection, Box 6, File 19. Hart often referred to his “models” by their first names but for a time wrote them in code. He evidently measured female members of his own family and those of neighbors and friends in Kentucky, but when he moved to Europe he evidently engaged professional models. Miscellaneous notes in the above-mentioned file imply that he measured these models in the nude and, I assume, this explains the coding of their names.*


*“Letters Patent to Joel Tanner Hart. . . .” The sculptor Thomas Ball wrote of Hart’s pointing machine in his autobiography: “[Hart] was obliged to take off points at one sitting after propping the head firmly, as used to be done in taking the early photographs; only more so, for the movement of a hair’s breadth while the operation was going on would spoil everything. Then he applied a sort of metal frame, which surrounded the head at a distance of four or five inches; from this frame, and pointing in to the frame from every direction, were innumerable steel needles. This frame was supported by an upright bar screwed firmly to the chair. . . . When all was ready these needles were carefully pushed in one after the other till they just touched the skin, and so fastened, when the instrument was opened and the victim liberated. The machine was now applied to the clay, which was then built out to the points of the needles” (My Threescores Years and Ten [Boston: Robert Brothers, 1891], 200-201).*


The *Athenaeum* article appeared in the issue of 30 December 1854.

*The Crayon*, vol. 1, no. 6, 7 February 1855, p. 92. This article quotes the article which had appeared in the *London Athenaeum* as saying that
Hart’s machine “is to statuary what photography is to painting.”

17Hart to Henry Pindell, 28 August 1872 (Pindell).

18Hart wrote to J. Warren Grigsby in 1852, “I have in less than half the usual time modelled a drapery . . . by the aid of our instrument” (Grigsby, File 258); and again the following year, “I don’t have to work a minute either in the marble on the modeling of drapery” (Grigsby, File 262).


20Hart to Henry Pindell, 7 September 1873 (Pindell).

21Robert Hart to Joel Hart, 10 October 1856 (Durrett, Box 2, File 10).

22Contract between Demitrio Giulioni and Alexander Galt, 3 September 1857 (Durrett, Box 2, File 21). Galt was working in Hart’s Florence studio while Hart was in London and was supervising, with Hart’s nephew Robert, the completion of the Virginia Clay.

23Hart to Henry Pindell, 7 September 1873 (Durrett, Box 2, File 10).

24“Bill for Ferdinand Barchus’s finishing drapery on R. Wickliffe bust,” 12 May 1853 (Durrett, Box 1, File 23).

25Chauncey B. Ives to Hart, 1851 (Durrett, Box 1, File 16).

26William R. Barbee to Hart, 18 February 1855 (Durrett, Box 1, File 3).

27Hart to Henry Pindell, 7 July 1863 (Pindell).


30*Catalogue of the First Exhibition of Paintings and Statuary in the Cincinnati Academy* (Cincinnati: s.n., 1839) and *Catalogue of the Second Exhibition of Paintings and Statuary by the Cincinnati Academy of Fine Arts at the Mechanics Institute* (Cincinnati: s.n., 1841). Hart exhibited his Andrew Jackson of 1838 here and Clevenger showed, among other things, his Henry Clay.

31Hart to W. W. Dibblee, New York City, 20 August 1852 (Durrett, Box 1, File 17).


33Diary, passim.

34Hart wrote to Clay on 4 December 1847, “I hope you will accept this head I sent you which I have finished entirely with my own hands; and also another I will finish in a day or two” (Papers of Henry Clay, Library of Congress, Microfilm 252, Roll 6). The bust referred to here is not the one at Ashland today. The provenance of the latter bust indicates that it was given by Hart to Gen. Leslie Combs and descended in the Vertner family to Mrs. Henry McDowell, who left it to the Henry Clay Memorial Association in 1948 (“Joel Hart's Studio,” *Woodford Sun*, Versailles, Kentucky, 10 October 1884 and letter to author from Mrs. Lorraine Seay, 19 DEARINGER
Henry Clay Memorial Foundation, 24 October 1983).

35Of course, the dating on the plaster at the Kentucky Historical Society could be incorrect. If this is a plaster replica of an earlier work, which is quite likely, it may simply have been inscribed incorrectly by an unknowing or misinformed workman in Italy. In that case, the Botta replica at the Metropolitan would be the most likely candidate for the first version. Offering a more certain answer to this question might be made possible by comparing the busts mentioned here with the plaster replica that is now in the collection of the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore. It is the only extant bust which can be documented as having been one of those sold by Hart during his tour of the eastern United States in 1846-47. It is the one he gave to Hon. Christopher Hughes of Baltimore who, in turn, gave it to the Society in 1847. Unfortunately, I have not seen this bust, and a photograph of it was not available at this writing. (See Anna Wells Rutledge, "Portraits in Varied Media in the Collection of the Maryland Historical Society," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 51 (December 1946): 282, no. 36).

36Thomas Nelson, agent for the Ladies' Clay Association, wrote Hart on 15 October 1851 that the ladies "think it is high time the statue should be forthcoming" (Durrett, Box 1, File 16). The language became much stronger as time went on.

37"Beginning of the Clay Statue in clay," memo in Hart's hand dated 2 June 1853 (Pindell).

38Alexander Galt to Hart, 1 July 1857 (Durrett, Box 2, File 19).

39Ibid.

40William H. MacFarland, Richmond, to Hart, 7 August 1857 (Durrett, Box 2, File 20). Hart defended these delays in a letter to the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* early in 1858; the editor, evidently sympathetic to Hart's problems, commented on the letter and the sculptor's situation: "...the delay has been owing to some extent to Mr. Hart's desire, before commencing the figure, to perfect a very ingenious machine for pointing" (vol. 26, no. 2, February, 1858, p. 154).

41The photograph provided here as Figure 8 is taken from Samuel Price's *Old Masters of the Bluegrass* (1902). Price gave no source for his illustration, but it is obvious that this is not a photograph of the final work (see Fig. 1). There are differences in the column and the fingers of the right hand as discussed in the text. I therefore conclude that this is a photograph of the plaster model. Price himself was an artist in Lexington, Kentucky, and he and Hart had many friends in common who could have provided him with a photograph of the sculpture at this stage. The photographs which Robert Hart sent to his uncle are in the Durrett Collection (Box 6, Folder 25).

42E. Parmele to Hart, 27 April 1857 and Hart to Parmele, 22 May 1857 (Pindell).

43Hart to Amanda Cook, 14 November 1858, Special Collections, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington.

44The question arises, as it inevitably does when one deals with nineteenth-century sculpture, concerning how much of the final work can be attributed to the artist and how much to the workmen he employed.
The question takes on a more interesting significance here, however, as Hart’s nephew Robert had a particular hand in the execution of the Henry Clay. This was pointed out in writings of the time. Hart himself wrote that Robert had “perfectly copied” the full-length of Clay so that Hart could give the work “a still more graceful, easy and perfect action” (Hart to Henry T. Duncan, 31 December 1857 [Durrett, Box 2, File 22]. More disturbing, perhaps, are the comments of the writer for the New York Times who recorded (in, of all places, an obituary of the elder Hart), “The two statues of Henry Clay—the one in Kentucky and the other in New Orleans—are due so far as the modeling in clay is concerned, to the patient labor of Robert Hart, whose life of bright promise was cut off in the midst of his diligent efforts to acquire thoroughness in the art to which, at past the age of thirty, he had resolved to dedicate his talents.”

45Hart to John S. Wilson, 3 July 1860 (Pindell).
46Hart to Henry C. Pindell, 7 July 1863 (Pindell).
47William Henry Rinehart to Hart, 1864 (Pindell).
48William Voorhis to Henry Pindell, 20 January 1865 (Pindell).
49Hart sent Henry Pindell a sketch of the pedestal for the Louisville Clay in April 1867. It was to be (or had already been) worked in Carrara marble by W. Charles Bultell’s workmen, according to Hart (Pindell). There was also some discussion of enclosing the sculpture in a glass octagon case. Hart was concerned that the work would become soiled. “The coal dust will wash off,” he wrote to Pindell in September 1867, “but if the galleries are near enough for men to spit tobacco juice on it, that won’t wash off” (Pindell).

50As early as 1853, Kentuckian Henry T. Duncan wanted Hart to reserve a marble block for a statue for Lexington of Clay “in a Sitting Posture with a Roman Toga” (John Wilson to Hart, 5 January 1853 [Durrett, Box 1, File 20]). The Kentucky legislature appropriated $10,000 in January 1860 for the execution of a statue of Clay for his grave in Lexington, and it was widely understood that the work was to go to Hart (Richard Collins, History of Kentucky [Covington: Collins and Co., 1878], 626). In fact, Hart had been seriously thinking about such a work in 1853 and sent a sketch of his ideas to John Wilson. In Hart’s design, the monument would consist of an obelisk in three sections with allegories of Peace, War, Religion, and Liberty on the first level; Agriculture, Commerce, Manufacturing, and History on the second; and veiled figures of Kentucky, Virginia, Liberia, and Bolivia on the third. A large statue of Clay would surmount the work, all in marble and decorated with basso-relievos of scenes from Clay’s life (Hart to John Wilson, 23 December 1853 [Durrett, Box 1, File 26]). Due to Hart’s procrastination on the Virginia statue, however, the Lexington commission went to architect Julius W. Adams. Though Hart had refused Adams’s permission to use his models of Clay (Hart to Wilson, 18 May 1860 [Durrett, Box 3, File 9]), it was well-known that Adams used the model, especially for the head of Clay (John C. Darby to Hart, 13 April 1860 [Durrett, Box 3, File 8] and J. Winston Coleman, Historic Kentucky [Lexington: Henry Clay Press, 1968], 10).

51Quoted in Honour, Neo-Classicism, 105.
Hart also sent Lowery a copy of the antique bust *Sacredolicia* which Hart had copied from the original in the Royal Gallery in Florence using his pointing machine.

Prof. Clifford Amyx alerts me to the difficulty of Hart's designation for this work. "Il Penseroso," Hart's masculine name for this feminine bust, is problematic. If the allusion is to Milton, as one naturally assumes, then the marble itself is the figure of Melancholy, the "Goddes, sage and holy," described by the contemplative male speaker of Milton's poem. One might argue, on the other hand, that Hart erred in not more properly calling the figure *La Penserosa*. Some have similarly questioned Milton, and Sir Paul Harvey, in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, quibbles directly with the title of Milton's poem of 1632: "The title suggests, as Dean Church pointed out, that Milton at this time had not attained full proficiency in the Italian tongue; the word, which is intended to mean 'contemplative,' should be 'pensiersoso.'" Milton's 'mistake' seems to have spawned subsequent derivative titles other than that by Hart. For example, an 1848 exhibition of paintings by the American artist Thomas Cole included an *Il Penseroso (Exhibition of the Paintings of the Late Thomas Cole)* [New York: The American Art Union, 1848], no. 49); and the American sculptor Joseph Mozier carved a full-length figure in 1868 which he called *Il Penseroso*. By name, Hart referred to the piece merely as *Penseroso*, though he commonly referred to it as "my Ideal."

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53 *Bulletin of the American Art-Union* (November, 1851), 133.
54 Alexander Galt to [______], 18 November 1852 (Durrett, Box 1, File 19).
55 Ibid.
56 Hart to William H. Lowery, 3 April 1856 (Durrett, Box 2, File 6).
59 Ibid., 180.
60 Ibid., 180.
61 Hart to John S. Wilson, 28 May 1857 (Pindell).
62 Hart had met Spencer, probably in Cincinnati in the 1840s, and the artist Thomas D. Jones mentioned her as a mutual friend in a letter to Hart on 9 August 1852 (Durrett, Box 1, File 17). See Robin Bolton-Smith and William H. Truetner, *Lilly Martin Spencer: The Joys of Sentiment* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973) which places Spencer in Cincinnati in the 1840s.
63 Dr. E. A. Grant as quoted in *Southern Exposition Catalogue* (Louisville: s.n., 1884).
64 Hart to Henry Pindell, 23 September 1872 (Pindell).
65 Hart to Henry Pindell, 27 October 1875 (Pindell).
66 Will of Joel Tanner Hart, 18 February 1877 (photostatic copy at the Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington).
67 Hart to Henry Pindell, 31 January and 7 September 1873 (Pindell).
74 George Saul to John S. Wilson, 5 April 1877 (copy at Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky).
76 Gardner, *Yankee Stonecutters*, 3.
77 Craven, *Sculpture in America*, 105.
FIGURES


10. *Il Penseroso*. Marble. ca. 1853. Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington. (Photograph: courtesy of the University of Kentucky)

