



SCENES FROM AMERICA'S PAST
THE SCULPTURE OF
JOHN ROGERS

The Charles Hosmer
Morse Museum
of American Art

WINTER PARK, FLORIDA



Returned Volunteer
Cast Plaster
(1864, John Rogers)

Scenes of everyday American life as it was lived a century and a half ago were the specialty of sculptor John Rogers (1829-1904). Whether families, checker players, parsons, soldiers or children, each John Rogers subject is a group of characters drawn straight from 19th century American life. Each tells a simple story in memorable detail and expresses a clear sentiment. Extremely popular in his lifetime, Rogers was part of a group of artists and writers and illustrators who gave form and character to America's developing identity as a people – its self-image.

Today, we see in Rogers' scenes the tales and characters that came to be an important part of the mythology of America or at least a strain of it that had not yet been turned to more commercialized treatments such as those of Norman Rockwell and Walt Disney.

Charming, often clever, sometimes humorous, and occasionally moving, Rogers' scenes from America's past deserve to be remembered.

The 'People's Sculptor'

Abandoning the style of neoclassical idealism, Rogers built his special position as the "People's Sculptor" on popular realism.

Rogers' plaster sculptures adorned the houses of tens of thousands of middle-class Americans. In terms of sheer cubic inches it would not be surprising to find – if such a thing could be found – that Rogers' sculptural groups occupied more space in American living rooms than the work of any sculptor before or since.

This level of popularity, rare for sculpture, compares with popular prints. Rogers, in fact, has been described as the Currier and Ives of American sculpture.

While Augustus St. Gaudens (1848-1907) may have surpassed Rogers from a purely aesthetic point of view and Frederick Remington (1861-1909), who followed him, is far better known today, Rogers' achievement was not superficial.

The Artist as Entrepreneur

Rogers was born October 29, 1829 in Salem, Massachusetts. Although he studied drawing in high school, he embarked afterwards on a very practical career as a machinist and worked his way up to the rank of "Master Mechanic."



Council of War
Cast Plaster
(1868, John Rogers)

Modeling in clay was then only an earnest hobby. It was a nationwide recession in 1857, which left him job-



"Madam, Your Mother Craves a Word"
Cast Plaster
(1886, John Rogers)

less, that propelled Rogers into the life of an artist.

In 1858, when he was almost 30, Rogers journeyed overseas to study first in Paris and later in Rome under sculptors of neoclassicist

training. But Rogers, rejecting that style, departed Europe in March 1859 to pursue his own very entrepreneurial approach to a classical art.

Rogers opened his first workshop in New York City in 1859. By 1863, he had won election to the National Academy of Design and was enjoying public praise and financial success. By 1893, his sales of the plaster groups had topped 80,000 pieces. He sold about 1,700 units a year at an affordable average price of \$14.25 each.

Groupings were mass-produced in molded plaster, built on metal armatures and painted in a single tan color to reduce costs. They were often given additional paints and finishes by buyers and dealers.

Multiples by the Thousand

The sculptural groups, most 12 to 19 inches tall, were produced in plaster multiples, some running into the thousands. Rogers employed three men to cast his groups and three men to finish each statuette. But he

himself first sketched the sculpture and then modeled it in clay with his own hands.

A bronze master was made from the model, then molds were made from the master. Liquid plaster of Paris was poured into the molds in incremental layers for stability and allowed to harden. Metal support wires were inserted into the liquid plaster to reinforce the heads and limbs of the figures. The molds were removed when the form was solid enough to handle. Groups were cast in three to eight pieces and finished by hand.

When his groups began eventually to lose popularity, Rogers began producing large-scale works, including a life-size Abraham Lincoln in 1892, for which he won a bronze medal at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. But these works were never as popular as his domestic-scaled groups, and in 1893 Rogers retired to New Canaan, Connecticut. He died in 1904 at the age of 74.

The Ordinary Person as Hero

The artist's wide appeal rested in his selection of subjects that would be instantaneously recognized by virtually every middle-class American of his time. From these story subjects – early American history, popular Shakespearean plays, the Civil War, and daily life in pre-



Weighing the Baby
Cast Plaster
(1864, John Rogers)

industrial America – Rogers chose a moment he could freeze and use to depict a basic relationship among several interacting characters.

In all his works, Rogers avoided the classical and especially heroic and focused with precision on the human story of the ordinary person. Each character possessed remarkably individualized facial features; each group captured the play of relationships realistically and candidly.

For the first time then, ordinary Americans of average education, had in Rogers an artist who gave prominence to a world of experiences of which they had intimate knowledge. And despite what art historians would call Rogers, naturalist, anti-classical style, a broad public could have art in their homes in a “classic” medium (if plaster rather than marble) depicting “classic” subjects (in the sense of enduring and homey) that they could easily understand, enjoy and even entertain passing on to their children in “classic” fashion.

American Archetypes as Art

In their narrative references, precise detail, dramatic immediacy and even in their multiple production, Rogers groups have much in common with good book illustration. But significantly, the narratives

Rogers selected were not only from books, poems, plays and historic events but from American archetypes – the unwritten but widely known stories that underlie “genre” scenes: every parent weighing the baby, every gentleman’s game of checkers, every American’s visit to the parson. These sculptures touched a nationalist sentiment among the middle class that still resonates today.

During the post-war period, one can easily imagine both how difficult and how important it was for Americans – particularly the middle class – to find common ground. The war deeply undermined what was to begin with a fragile sense of common nationality. In its aftermath, the yearning for a clear sense of what it was to be an American – a sense of connection among people – must have been great and difficult to satisfy.

Rogers consciously or unconsciously showed great sensitivity to his culture. The nation that sought to heal itself found commonality in the people John Rogers called forth from stories, popular entertainment, and a recent pastoral past of family values.

This great mythical vision became for later industrial and post-industrial America a reflection of the identity of many Americans.

On the Cover

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Checkers Up at the Farm
Cast Plaster
(1875, John Rogers)