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Richard V. West

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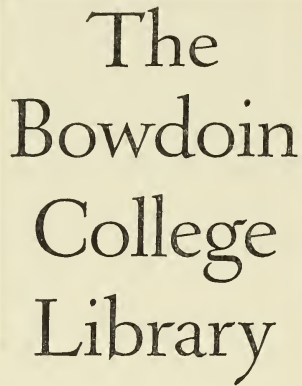
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The
Bowdoin
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Library

WALKER ART BUILDING

The Walker Art Building, designed by Charles Follen McKim and dedicated in 1894, houses Bowdoin College's art collection, which was founded in 1811 by the bequest of James Bowdoin III. Included in the collection are important colonial and federal portraits, Old Master drawings, classical antiquities, the Molinari Collection of Medallions and Plaquettes, and representative nineteenth- and twentieth-century American paintings, including works by Winslow Homer and John Sloan.

OCCASIONAL PAPERS I

The Walker Art Building Murals

Richard V. West



BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

BRUNSWICK, MAINE

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COVER: "*Natura*." Pastel on brown paper, 23¼ x 15 inches. Elihu Vedder, 1836-1923. Gift of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. 1955. 4. 1

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PREFACE

THE Bowdoin College Museum of Art is pleased to reincarnate in a new format the *Bulletin* which it discontinued in 1963. That publication was a quarterly which, owing to the exigencies of small staff and budget, ceased after a run of three years. In the interim the collections have continued to grow and many objects—both the newly and not-so-recently acquired—have not received the notice they deserve. Although staff and budget have not grown concomitantly, we hope to discharge our obligation to the larger world of scholarship as completely as the Museum's resources allow by adopting the scheme of publishing articles and monographs in the form of occasional papers.

In this inaugural issue we have published many of the documents and a large portion of the visual material in the Museum's collections pertaining to the commission and execution of the murals in the Walker Art Building. We hope that this article will stimulate further interest in the history of American mural painting in the nineteenth century and perhaps bring to light additional facts and documents to fill the lacunae in the reconstruction of events surrounding the creation of the Bowdoin murals.

We would like to express our thanks for the assistance of Mrs. Brenda Pelletier, Museum Secretary; Mrs. Roxlyn Yanok, membership secretary; David Becker, curatorial assistant, 1970-1971; and David Berreth, curatorial assistant, 1971-1972. Photographs were taken by John McKee, Joseph Kachinski, and Mason Phillip Smith. We owe a special debt to Edward Born, the college editor, whose aid made possible new photographs of the murals, and whose advice made the papers an actuality.

RICHARD V. WEST
Director



Fig. 1. An early view of the Walker Art Building rotunda, looking toward the Bowdoin Gallery. The murals from left to right are those by Vedder, Cox, and LaFarge.

The Walker Art Building Murals

THE recent gift by the artist's son of a rediscovered oil study for the mural *Venice* by Kenyon Cox (1856-1919) is a welcome addition to preparatory material and documents already in the collection of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.¹ Although these materials afford an insight into the inception and execution of the decorations by Cox, Elihu Vedder (1836-1923), Abbott H. Thayer (1849-1921), and John La Farge (1835-1910) in the rotunda of the Walker Art Building, they have never been published. Therefore, it seems appropriate to recognize this new acquisition by publishing the significant portions of the materials owned by the Museum and, in the process, reconstructing a history of the murals based on these and supplementary sources.

The documents in the possession of the Museum consist primarily of letters and copies of letters between the artists; the architect, Charles Follen McKim; and the donors of the building, the Misses Mary Sophia Walker and Harriet Sarah Walker of Waltham and Boston, Massachusetts.

Besides the murals, the visual material consists of preparatory drawings and sketches by Vedder and Cox. The Cox material is fairly complete, and in it one can trace the methodical development of the theme from the first rough compositional sketch through the measured figure studies and final design. The Vedder material is not so complete, but it does contain a number of splendid studies for individual figures in the mural *Rome*. Although the Museum possesses two La Farge sketchbooks which record a number of painting and stained glass projects, neither contains references to his mural *Athens*. It is likely that such material remained in his studio and then was dispersed; attempts to locate and identify studies related to the mural have been unsuccessful so far. The same situation exists in the case of the fourth artist involved in the mural project, Abbott Thayer. It is likely, given his unusual way of working, that there was very little in the way of preliminary studies for the mural *Florence*.² This assumption is reinforced by an incident recounted in the letters between the artist and the Walker sisters, discussed later in this article.

The inception of the Walker Art Building goes back to 1850, when Theophilus Wheeler Walker, a Boston merchant who was cousin and close personal friend of President Leonard Woods of Bowdoin, donated funds toward the completion of the College Chapel. In gratitude for the gift and in recognition of Walker's interest in art, a room in the Chapel was set aside as an art gallery and dedicated to the memory of his mother, Sophia Wheeler Walker. This room was the College's first formal art museum. The tiny gallery was crowded from the beginning, and the donor often expressed the hope of being able to provide a separate museum building for the College, an intention cut short by his death in 1891. Determined to carry out his wishes, his nieces Mary and Harriet Walker approached the College in April 1891 with the idea of offering such a building as a memorial to their uncle. The gift was formally accepted in September of that year.³

Meanwhile, however, in July the energetic sisters had written to Charles Follen McKim of the architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White, asking him to design a building "that shall be not only appropriate as a memorial, but will also show the purpose for which it is to be used."⁴ McKim, aboard the steamer *City of Paris*, replied in a letter dated August 10 that he would be pleased to undertake the construction of the building and added that although he did not know the other buildings at Bowdoin, he assumed "them to be similar in character to those of other Early New England Colleges" and thought that "however simple, a *balanced and symmetrical* design will be more likely to be at home amongst them, than any other" (italics his).

Their choice was to be of great significance, for McKim must be regarded as one of the great entrepreneurs of American mural painting. His enterprise in commissioning murals by Puvis de Chavannes, John Singer Sargent, and Edwin A. Abbey for the Boston Public Library (1887-1888) was an important milestone in the development of large-scale decoration allied with architecture. At the time McKim was entrusted with the design of the Walker Art Building, he was one of the principal planners of the Chicago Columbian Exposition. Part of the architectural decoration foreseen for this fair was the largest mural project attempted in this country up to that time. It employed many painters including Cox, Edwin Blashfield, J. Alden Weir, Carroll Beckwith, Edward Simmons, Robert Reid, Gari Melchers and, abortively, Vedder.⁵ The influence of this concerted, albeit ephemeral, display was tremendous and immediate. State capitols, government buildings, courthouses, and a succession of libraries and churches throughout the Midwest and East very soon blossomed with mural decorations. By the turn of the century, a chronicler of the brief history of mural painting in America would write, "so much has been done, and so well done, that it does not seem too remote a dream to believe that this is but a beginning, and the work will go on and on until the whole land is transformed and the walls of the buildings, from ocean to ocean, are adorned with paintings. . . ."⁶ Most of these buildings have, alas, gone the way of the great "White City" of the Chicago Exposition, leaving the murals of the Walker Art Building as one of the few examples of the decorative ideals and practices of the late nineteenth century that have remained essentially unchanged.⁷

II

In the choice of artists for the Walker murals, McKim had the advice of his friends and colleagues, the sculptors Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French.⁸ At first, only one mural, to be done by Vedder, was contemplated. McKim originally met Vedder in Rome in 1890 and had been impressed by the artist's taste and knowledge.⁹ He recommended Vedder to the Walker sisters, who issued a direct invitation to the artist to undertake the commission.

In August 1892 Vedder visited the Walker sisters in Boston, accepted the commission, and settled on the fee. He took a quick trip to Brunswick to survey the new building, then under construction, and was pleased with what he saw.¹⁰ McKim had, indeed, created the "balanced and symmetrical design" promised the Walker sisters in his letter of acceptance: modeled after two Florentine masterpieces, the Pazzi Chapel of Brunelleschi and the Loggia dei Lanzi, the building stood in sharp contrast to Richard Upjohn's German Romanesque College Chapel, across the campus quadrangle. Set on a high pediment, the gallery level was a modified Greek-cross plan with three galleries grouped around a large, domed sculpture hall. Under the dome, over the doorway to each gallery, as well as over the main entrance and exit to the building which constituted the fourth side, were large, semicircular tympana (Figure 1). Vedder's mural was intended to go on the lunette opposite the entrance, where it would be immediately seen by a visitor entering the building.

A little later it occurred to the Walker sisters or McKim that there were three other lunettes in the rotunda which could be decorated. No record is known to this writer of the process by which La Farge, Cox and Thayer were chosen, but in his choice of artists to complement Vedder, McKim seems to have had in mind presenting a variety of styles. Probably, the advice of French and Saint-Gaudens played a part in the final decision. La Farge was an obvious choice: by the last decade of the century his reputation had been firmly established by a number of stained glass windows and murals. He was best known then, as now, for the "Battle Window" at Harvard, the windows and decorations for Trinity Church, Boston, and the *Ascension* mural in the Church of the Ascension, New York. The choice of Cox was also expectable. He had just made a successful debut as a muralist at the Columbian Exhibition, and his reliance on Renaissance models paralleled McKim's procedures.¹¹ The reasons for the inclusion of Thayer are not so clear. We know he was friendly with McKim and Stanford White. As part of a circle of artists which included La Farge, Sargent, Ryder, Saint-Gaudens, George de Forest Brush, Edwin A. Abbey, William Merritt Chase and Frank Millet, he paid informal visits to the architects' Lower Broadway offices.¹² On the other hand, his slow production and restricted range would seem to have ill-suited him to mural painting. Perhaps it was Thayer's poetic interpretation of "womanhood endowed with beauty" that appealed to McKim and the donors. It is also possible that McKim, as an experiment, wished to give him an opportunity to try a project more ambitious in scale than his easel paintings. Although all the artists suffered various problems in the execution of their commission, for the less-experienced Thayer the project was to be a thoroughly agonizing and painful experience.

The invitations were issued in April 1893. Cox and Thayer accepted their commissions with alacrity, although the latter had some qualms:

I thank you for the offer of that very tempting job. I cannot resist trying it, unless you tell me I must begin on it at once for I shall be too tired for a month or six weeks I suppose. Of course I can learn the color scheme of the room from you but can I learn the colors the other fellows are to make their decorations. Be kind enough to let me know how much time I have got; and while you are about, I suppose it is to be a painting on canvas and stuck up there the common way now-a-days, not a fresco. Let me know.

Cox's letter of acceptance is dated April 6, 1893. Paralleling Thayer's letter in phrasing and content, it seems to reflect a greater confidence in the artist's ability to proceed with the commission:

The Bowdoin College decoration tempts me very much indeed, not only on account of the price, which I think sufficient, but principally on account of the opportunity for serious and permanent decoration work which is what I have long wished for. Of course there are all sorts of things I shall wish to know: subject, scale of figures, scheme of color &c. will all have to be decided. . . .

I feel in luck to have the offer of such a commission, and trust nothing will prevent my doing the work. It would require a good deal.

La Farge did not answer immediately, but by early May McKim was able to write the Walker sisters:

I am pleased to be able to add to the list of your artists the name of La Farge. . . . As soon as the artists have met and reached a conclusion as to their subjects I will duly advise you.

McKim deferred the question of subject matter to La Farge, the senior artist and acknowledged "Old Master" (Vedder had returned to Rome).

. . . it will I think be advisable to have a meeting of the artists to be engaged upon the penetrations of the dome of the Bowdoin Art Building, and I have written Cox and Thayer asking them to confer with you and arrange a day when you will meet here and go over the questions, as in this way only I think can all matters of detail be settled satisfactorily upon a uniform basis. At the same time I will have contracts prepared to be signed.

The artists settled upon the idea of honoring the cities that had profoundly affected the course of western art: Athens, Florence, Venice, and Rome. Meanwhile, Vedder, unaware of the change in plans, was developing the designs for his mural, which he had titled "The Art Idea." He was chagrined when he came to Brunswick to sign the contract in September 1893 to find that the specifications had been changed and that the mural had to be in place by May 1, 1894, to permit dedication of the building in June. In his words:



Fig. 2. *Campanile of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice.* Pencil on paper, $6\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{8}$ inches, ca. 1893. Kenyon Cox, 1856-1919. Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox Lansing, and Allyn Cox. 1959. 3. 6

I was told that the ladies (charming persons) who gave the order, finding that they could only afford to have one decoration, wanted that I should be selected to do it—which was a compliment I fully appreciated. I painted it in Rome, took it over, and saw it rightly placed in position in the time specified. In the meanwhile, however, by some subtle financial method, three more panels had been ordered, and the subjects were Florence, Venice, and Athens, so that mine, already composed, had perforce to be Rome. Fortunately, the “Art Idea,” for want of a better name, suited this scheme admirably. . . . But I had to lead off blindly, while the others knew just what they had to do, and besides had the advantage of time (no inauguration for them)—time, which one artist availed himself of fully, to the manifest advantage of his work,—a fine thing.¹³

This last is a sly dig at La Farge, whose mural was not ready until 1898. As it turned out, Vedder was also late. His mural was not installed until September 1894, after those of Thayer and Cox.¹⁴



Fig. 3. *Compositional Sketch for "Venice."* Pencil on paper, $6\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{8}$ inches, ca. 1893. Kenyon Cox. Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox Lansing, and Allyn Cox. 1959. 3. 7

III

Kenyon Cox took the occasion of the commission to travel to Venice with his wife in the summer of 1893 "to get the atmosphere" for the painting. It was then, rather than earlier when the artist was in Venice as a student, that he developed a great admiration for the paintings and murals of Paolo Veronese.¹⁵ As a result of the trip, Cox made a number of small annotated sketches of various details for possible inclusion in the composition. The Museum owns several, one of which shows the Campanile of San Giorgio Maggiore (Figure 2). At about the same time, the first rough and tentative compositional sketches were made, one of which shows the shapes and masses deployed very much as they appear in the final version (Figure 3).

From this pencil sketch, the artist worked up the first preliminary oil sketch to present to the Misses Walker and the architect for their approval (Figure 4). Here the formal design and allegorical program of the mural can be easily seen for the first time. In the center is the representation of Venice Enthroned, crowned with a diadem and holding a scepter. At her feet is a laurel wreath, the classical symbol of glory. Seated at her right is Mercury, the patron god of commerce, with the emblems of sea trade—a rudder, a bale of goods, and sails. To her left is the figure of Painting, holding a palette and brushes. Behind this figure reclines the Lion of St. Mark, and a glimpse of the Campanile and Ducal Palace.

This sketch would have been followed by a number of methodical drawings done directly from the model as studies for the allegorical figures. An example of Cox's method can be seen in the development of the figure of Painting, where the contours of the nude figure and the drapery were worked up separately (Figures 5 and 6). Dur-



Fig. 4. *Compositional Sketch for "Venice."* Oil on canvas, 19¾ x 36 inches, dated 1893. Kenyon Cox. Gift of Allyn Cox. 1968. 130

ing this process the pose was altered and adjusted as necessary. The other figures of Mercury and Venice were treated the same way (Figures 7, 8, and 9). These precise and searched-out drawings were then squared off for enlargement, transferred to the mural and consulted as the actual painting progressed. Freer and more painterly color sketches in pastel and oil were also done for the figure of Venice and probably the other figures as well. Finally, a large 1:4 scale cartoon was drawn on a squared-off canvas into which all the elements were refitted (Figure 10). Completion of the cartoon marks the last step before the mural was begun. Dated 1893, it may well be one of the sketches referred to in a letter written on January 30, 1894, by Mary S. Walker to Professor Henry Johnson, curator of the art collection at Bowdoin:

We have been in New York to see the sketches for the paintings. We liked them all very much. They (the artists) are all working together so harmoniously and with an evident desire for the *perfect whole*, that I am sure the Sculpture Hall will be all we have wished. . . .

The final painting (Figure 11) was completed by the end of April. To celebrate the event, Cox issued invitations to view the mural in his studio at 145 West 55th Street on the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth of that month. The canvas was then rolled up and sent to Bowdoin for mounting in the sculpture hall early in May.

In accordance with the subject of his mural, Cox chose to do homage to the High Renaissance in Venice by using as his models Veronese, Titian and Giorgione. On the paintings and murals of the first two artists he based the color scheme and figure types. A close parallel to the figure of Painting, for instance, can be found in Titian's *Allegory*



Fig. 5. *Figure Study for "Painting."* Pencil on paper, 15½ x 19 inches, ca. 1893. Kenyon Cox. Gift of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Decorative Arts and Design. 1959. 11



Fig. 6. *Drapery Study for "Painting."* Pencil on paper, 15 x 20½ inches, ca. 1893. Kenyon Cox. Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox Lansing, and Allyn Cox. 1959. 3. 2



Fig. 7. *Figure Study for "Commerce."* Pencil on paper, $15\frac{3}{8}$ x $18\frac{7}{8}$ inches, ca. 1893. Kenyon Cox. Gift of Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Decorative Arts and Design. 1959. 9

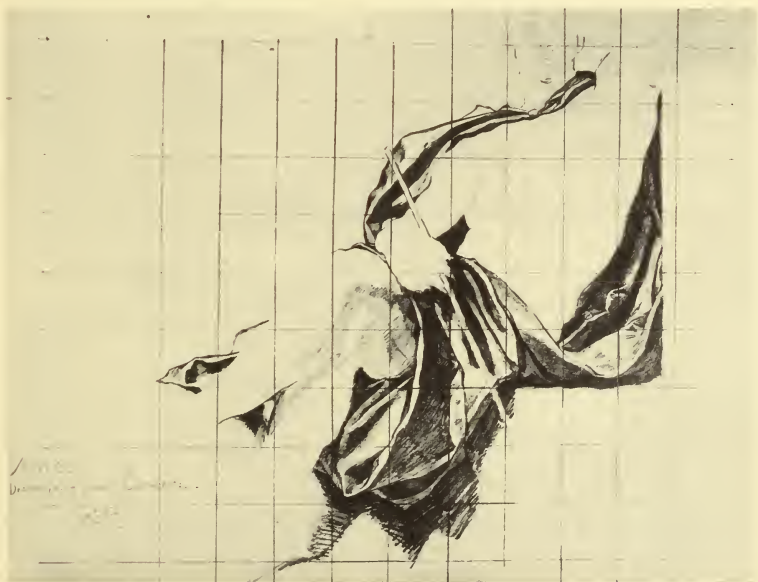


Fig. 8. *Drapery Study for "Commerce."* Pencil on paper, $14\frac{1}{8}$ x $18\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Kenyon Cox. Gift of Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Decorative Arts and Design. 1959. 10



Fig. 9. *Study of Lion.* Pencil on paper, 14¼ x 11⅞ inches, ca. 1893. Kenyon Cox. Gift of Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Decorative Arts and Design. 1959. 12



Fig. 10. *Scale Cartoon for "Venice."* Oil and pencil on canvas, 29 x 60 inches, dated 1893. Kenyon Cox. Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox Lansing, and Allyn Cox. 1959. 3. 1



Fig. 11. *Venice*, mural. Oil on canvas, 12 x 24 feet, dated 1894. Kenyon Cox. Gift of the Misses Walker. 1893. 38



Fig. 12. *Sacred and Profane Love* (detail, Profane Love). Oil on canvas, ca. 1515. Tiziano Vecelli (Titian), 1488/90-1576. Borghese Gallery, Rome.

of *Sacred and Profane Love* (Figure 12), and many parallels in pose and costume, particularly that of the figure of Venice, can be noted in the work of Veronese.

The composition, however, harks back to an altarpiece type developed in the late fifteenth century by Bellini and carried into the sixteenth by Giorgione. An example of the kind of composition to which Cox was alluding can be seen in Giorgione's so-called *Castelfranco Altarpiece* (Figure 13). Here can be remarked quite clearly the elements adopted by the American artist: an enthroned madonna forming a central vertical axis, pedestal and dais drawn in one-point perspective and draped with rich brocade, the measured placement of the two subsidiary figures in a shallow foreground strip, and a glimpse of distant landscape elements behind the figures. The static qualities of this composition may have appealed more to Cox as appropriate for the lunette than the restless arrangements of the later Venetian artists.

Besides the references to composition and figures, an important part of the mural's program was the incorporation of obvious stylistic elements drawn from Venetian painting of the High Renaissance. In the case of the Bowdoin commission, this can be explained in great part by its pertinence to the subject at hand, but Cox continued the practice in later murals. The artist's previous training in France under Carolus Duran and J. L. Gérôme had strengthened his natural talents as a draughtsman and it is of some interest to ponder the decision to adopt an idiom at variance with the style of many of his easel paintings and magazine illustrations. There was precedence for such



Fig. 13. *Madonna Enthroned with SS. Liberalis and Francis* (Castelfranco Altarpiece). Oil on wood, 1504. Giorgione, 1478-1510. Castelfranco Veneto, Cathedral. (Photo Alinari)

borrowings from Titian and Veronese in a few French academic murals executed earlier in the century, but the choice of such models by Cox at a time when the ascendancy of Puvis de Chavannes—whom Cox admired tremendously but warily—was at its height in America, owing to (or perhaps in spite of) the murals installed in the Boston Public Library, is significant. The artist's position was perhaps best adumbrated by Frank Jewett Mather in an essay on Cox:

Too robust to seek the solution of bleached tones, with the followers of Puvis, he turned to the Venetians. . . . He believed that their richer forms and colors and intricate rhythms in depth were more suitable for our modern ornate buildings than the paler hues and simpler forms based on the primitive masters of the fresco. In his practice . . . he scouted the idea that mere flatness and paleness were in themselves decorative necessities or decorative merits.¹⁶

In spite of an obvious sincerity of intent much of the effect that Cox sought was diminished in the academic rigor of translation from rough sketch to finished mural. Although the color and richness of Venetian painting offered a potentially rich source for a monumental style, the resulting mural indicates that the development of carefully constructed, clearly worked-out contours and surfaces took precedence. This process, while desiccating, gave the artist a means of achieving at the very least a measure of internal consistency and clarity and, in *Venice*, of creating architectural decoration of high order.

IV

Although there is some visual material by which to reconstruct the progress of Vedder's mural, there is more written evidence. A large part of the artist's correspondence and an amusing account of the experiences with the mural have been preserved in his autobiography, *The Digressions of V.*

After receiving the original commission from the Walker sisters, Vedder returned to Rome to work out his design for it and another commission. In early April 1893 Vedder's wife, Carrie, wrote to the Walker sisters concerning progress on the mural:

By the same mail came a line from Mr. McKim in which he said he "was sending by same mail answers to my questions" but these have not yet reached us. . . . In the mean while my husband is revolving the decoration in his mind and has elaborated the subject to such a point as to fear he may not be able to confine himself to the circular space which he proposes to occupy. He has given me long descriptions of his ideas which I have had . . . intentions of writing down but unless I could take his words down in shorthand it would be impossible to keep his ideas long enough to write them, and even if put down in words they would be useless in comparison with his own sketch. He has however warned me that he does not intend to put a stroke on paper until the thing is concrete in his own mind so that it is likely to be something like his illustrations to the Rubaiyat, revolving in his brain for ten years and worked out on paper within nine months. I am happy to say that his decorations for the Huntington dining room are going along so rapidly and satisfactorily as to make me almost tremble lest some catastrophe may be impending. It seems quite too good to be true but it please God to bring him safely through all.

As mentioned previously, it was only in September 1893 that Vedder became aware that there were going to be three other artists also working on the commission and that a theme had been chosen. Presented with a deadline, Vedder returned to Rome to execute the mural. Although he had the help of two assistants, the painstaking artist made slow progress. In February 1894 Carrie wrote their daughter Anita:

Now he is not going to spoil his work by much haste, and break his heart in misery. He is doing nothing else and he is working as fast as he can but as far as his being in America by the 1st of May it is as impossible as if they wanted the Sistine Chapel in a year. . . .¹⁷

Vedder preferred to make his preparations slowly and carefully, since he felt that once the cartoon was finished, the actual mural painting would proceed very quickly. Some of the individual studies in the Museum's collection attest to the high degree of finish Vedder gave his preliminary work. The fine drawing of *Anima* (Figure 14), for example, shows the pose very much as it appears in the completed mural (Figure 15) with the exception of a few details, such as the arrangement of hair. It is interesting to note that Vedder drew in a manner popular with the masters of the Italian Renaissance. Most of the studies are drawn on a light brown paper, with both the light and dark tones worked up with crayon and chalk. A study for *Natura*, trying out alterna-



Fig. 14. *Study for "Anima."* Black crayon and white chalk on light brown paper, 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 inches, ca. 1894. Elihu Vedder, 1836-1923. Gift of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. 1955. 4. 9

tive poses and arm positions (Figure 16), is much less complete but illustrates the care in which contours and masses were blocked out. A final study for the head of *Natura* (Figure 18) is a self-sufficient work in its own right, similar to the pensive faces which appear in characteristic oil paintings of idealized heads which the artist produced from time to time.

At any rate, during the spring and summer of 1894, Vedder developed the cartoon and proceeded to complete the mural. By August, the mural was finished and shipped off to Doll and Richards in Boston.¹⁸ Vedder arrived in America early in September, collected the canvas and came up to Bowdoin to mount it. He found the Cox and Thayer murals already in place, but he took some solace from the fact that, owing to discrepancies in the measurements of the "identical" lunettes, the other artists had some difficulties in fitting their canvases, having to add pieces. By September 28, Vedder was ready to mount his mural with the help of Mr. Hesselbach of New York:

The putting up of the canvas was a ticklish affair. . . . The method used is called "marunflage" [the correct term is *marouflage*], much practiced in France. The canvas, about twenty-two feet wide, was first cut to fill the semicircular space, then rolled up from each side toward the centre, where the two rolls meet. The night before, the space for the picture had been coated as thickly as possible with white lead, and early next morning the canvas was taken up on the scaffolding. You see, the back of the canvas had also to be painted thickly, which was done as they went along. First painting quickly the space between the rolls, the canvas

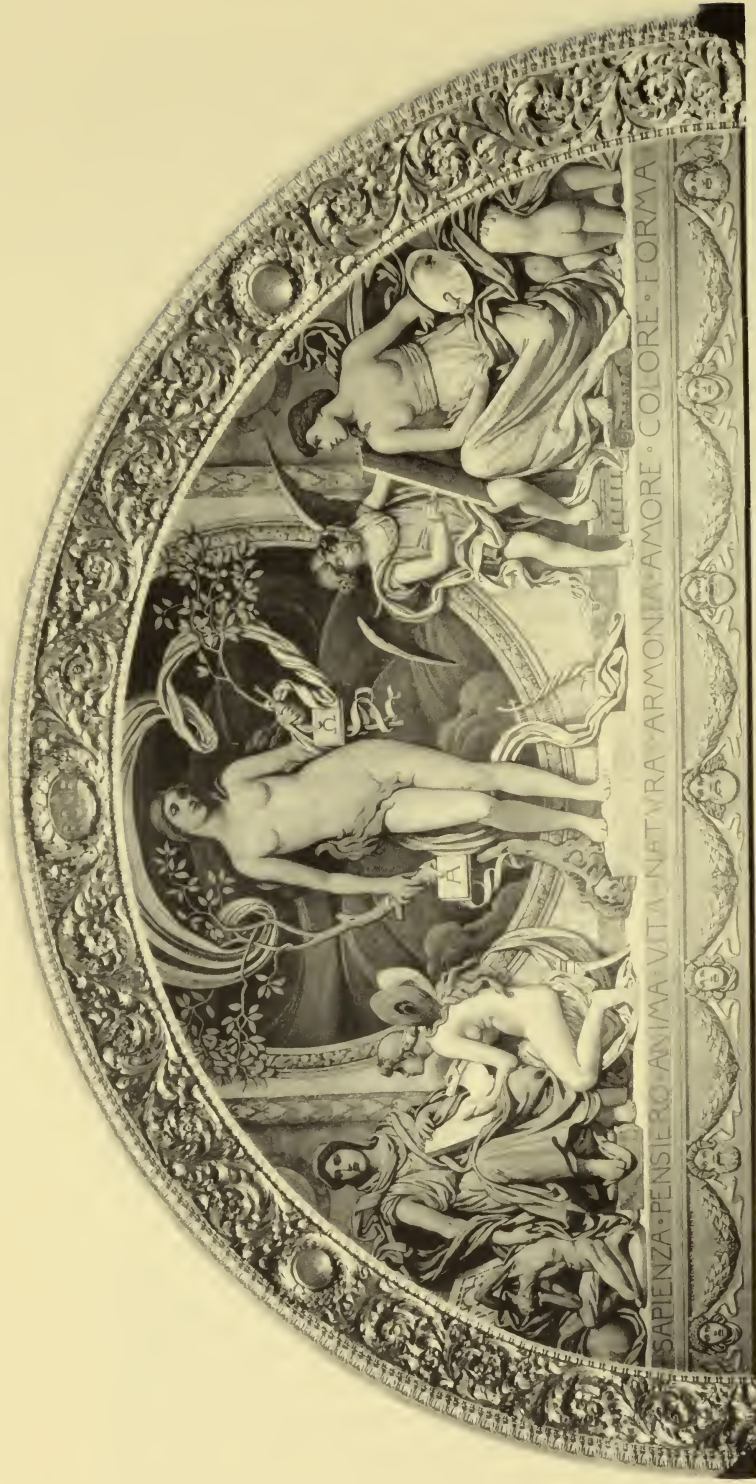


Fig. 15. *Rome*, mural. Oil on canvas, 12 x 24 feet, dated 1894. Elihu Vedder. Gift of the Misses Walker. 1893. 37

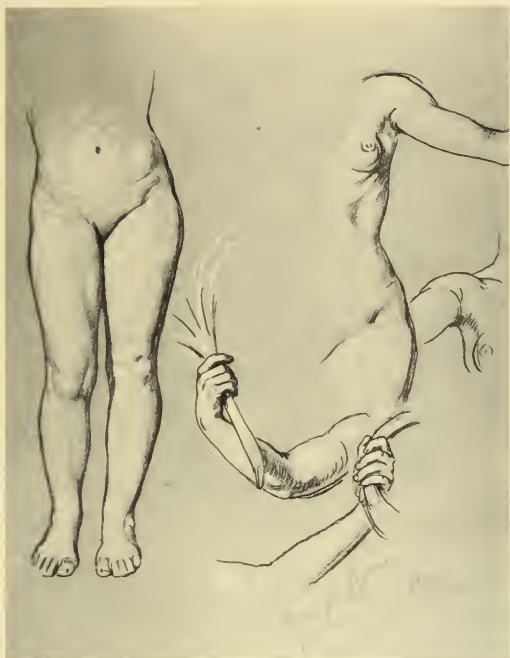


Fig. 16. *Studies for "Natura."* Black crayon and white chalk on light brown paper, 16¾ x 12¾ inches, ca. 1894. Elihu Vedder. Gift of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. 1955. 4. 3



Fig. 17. *The Sin of Adam and Eve.* Fresco and mosaic, 1509-1511. Raffaello Sanzio, 1483-1520. Stanza della Segnatura, Rome. (Photo Anderson)

was placed against the wall, and that space well fastened by a board holding it in place; and you can imagine that the least difference in matching the marks previously made would have resulted in a disastrous misfit. And to my horror this happened. A cold chill ran down my back, and I instinctively felt in my pocket for a flask,—but alas! I was in Maine; Prohibition was against it. However, Hesselbach rose to the occasion. He had the courage to pull off the canvas,—had it held up on all sides by help hastily summoned (covered as it was with paint) and replaced it correctly. Now when I tell you that the picture was painted on a dull surface like fresco,—and that any touch of this oily paint would have made a shiny spot,—and that being lighted from above, any such spot would have been most disagreeably evident, you can imagine the care and skill required in this operation.¹⁹

By the end of the century the standard way of mounting murals on canvas to walls and ceilings was as described by Vedder, using white lead and varnish as a binding medium. All four murals were doubtlessly mounted this way, with varying degrees of success. The matte finish which Vedder used to give his mural the appearance of a true fresco has, with subsequent cleaning and coating, disappeared.

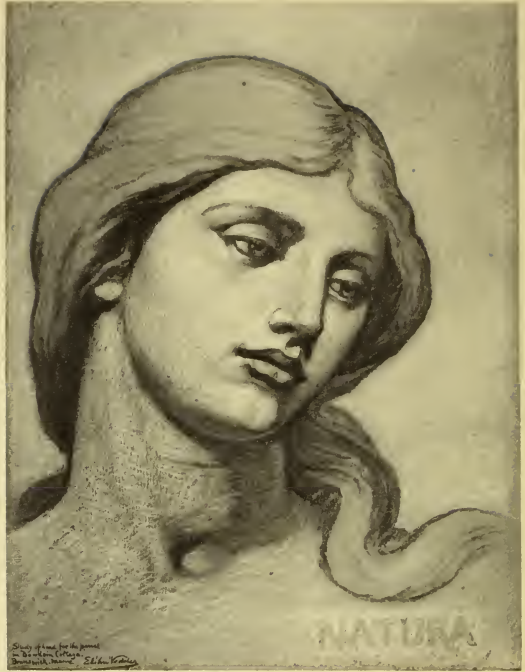


Fig. 18. *Head Study for "Natura."* Pastel on brown paper, 23¼ x 15 inches, ca. 1894. Elihu Vedder. Gift of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. 1955. 4. 2

Although entitled *Rome* by necessity, the program for the Vedder mural is indeed that of "The Art Idea." In the center stands Nature (*Natura*)—for Vedder the source of all art—her right hand resting on the Tree of Life (*Vita*), marked by the Alpha and rooted in a skull symbolizing death. In her left hand she holds a tree branch bearing fruit, marked by the Omega. Beneath this is a lyre as symbol of harmony (*Armonia*). On Nature's right is a group which Vedder intended to represent Knowledge (*Sapienza*), symbolized by the anatomical figure, the architectural floor plan and the celestial globe; Thought (*Pensiero*); and Soul (*Anima*). On the left hand of Nature is another group, representing the elements of art: Love (*Amore*), represented by a winged Cupid; Color (*Colore*); and Form (*Forma*).

Fortunately, this scheme could with some justice apply to Rome. Vedder felt that the groups on the right and left, respectively, might "stand for the genius of Michelangelo and Raffaello, who in their turn fairly represent the art of Rome."²⁰

In concept and execution, the mural reveals the artist's long acquaintance with the fresco work of Michelangelo and Raphael. The decorations by Raphael and his pupils for the Stanza della Segnatura in Rome seem to have been a particular inspiration: the figure of Nature (although reversed) parallels in pose and proportions that of Eve in one of the soffit panels of the ceiling depicting Original Sin (Figure 17). It is tempting to think that Vedder had in mind some symbolic relationship between the Tree of Knowledge, grasped by Eve, in the center of Raphael's composition, and the Tree of

Life, designated by the Alpha, held by Nature. The figure of Thought could be based on the allegorical figures of the same ceiling, such as Philosophy, or ultimately, the seated Sibyls in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel.

Despite a variety of sources, the mural is not a pastiche or an eclectic assemblage. Vedder's own vision of art as an almost spiritual process is imposed on the material and permeates the formal design. The twisting, serpentine sweep of drapery, for example, comes from similar depictions in sixteenth-century Italian painting, in turn adopted from Roman and neo-Attic decorative devices.²¹ Yet here the handling of the drapery, based on such models, is manipulated to assume an existence independent of the figures, a tendency one notes in the flowing treatment of the hair as well. Such a decorative and sensuous linear pattern can also be seen in the slightly earlier works of the English painter Walter Crane, whom Vedder knew well, and parallels the usages of Art Nouveau.

By emphasizing the surface of the mural through the linear arabesques of drapery and eliminating in the composition any indication of deep spatial recession, Vedder's painting operates most successfully as architectural decoration. Even the cosmic winds and clouds glimpsed behind the figure of Nature echo the lines of drapery and act as a screen blocking any further penetration. Vedder himself felt that the mural, when compared to those of Cox and Thayer, was "the most *distinctively mural* painting of the three."

His pleasure at the successful completion of the mural was marred, however, by the realization that a large and ornate chandelier, about which he had not been told, blocked the view of the painting from the entrance of the building.²² The lantern (visible in Figure 1), purported to be a copy of one in the Chateau de Blois, was purchased personally by the Walker sisters for the Museum. As one might expect, Vedder protested its placement and demanded removal of the offending object, but despite sarcastic gibes at McKim and complaints to the Walkers the chandelier remained. It is still in place.

V

The Museum has no sketches or studies by Abbott Thayer for his mural of *Florence* (sometimes called *Florence Protecting the Arts*), but we can reconstruct some of the events surrounding its inception and subsequent history from letters written by various *dramatis personae*. The artist seems to have begun work during the summer of 1893, some months after he accepted the commission. By late summer Thayer was working out the central figure of his composition and was anxious to view it *in situ*. Wrote Professor Johnson in a letter to Mary Sophia Walker, dated August 15:

Mr. Thayer brought an oil sketch with the chief standing figure seven feet in height and had it put up in the western semi-circular space in order to test the actual effect of a drawing to that scale, viewed at that height. His drawing is still in place, awaiting the view of Mr. McKim and Mr. La Farge whom Mr. Thayer expected to visit Brunswick soon. . . .

Evidently reassured, Thayer finished the work on the mural and had it installed

about the same time as that of Cox. The harmony in which Miss Walker saw the artists working during her visit in January 1894 was rudely shattered at this time, as Vedder notes: “. . . the young student with the key told me that Thayer had a row with Cox in which he told Cox that he, Cox, did not know how to paint. . . .”²³

Cox's reply is not recorded.

The word of “the young student” must be accepted with some caution, however, as the so-called row might have been an exaggeration, one which Vedder gleefully would have recounted. Certainly, one can imagine grounds for disagreement. Although Thayer and Cox as students had been associated with the atelier of J. L. Gérôme in Paris, the fountainhead of Academicism as it was then conceived and the mecca for an entire generation of aspiring Americans, they were poles apart as artistic personalities. Their murals at Bowdoin reflect utterly different concerns about painting and architectural decoration. Since both artists were present at the installation, it would have been surprising had there *not* been some discussion, and inevitably disagreement, about the relative merits of the murals. Thayer felt that the painter should be a poet, not a craftsman, who responds in his art to the cumulative impact of every form of beauty. The cultivated taste of the artist would resonate “like the violin string” to the inner greatness of his subject, going beyond the defects and accidents of the surface. Painting was, for Thayer, the act of sifting the essential from the dross of reality, of “erecting before men's sight the crystal type of any desirable attribute.”²⁴ This approach gives Thayer's mural the rather extemporaneous air of an enlarged oil sketch, which contrasts sharply with the carefully drawn and worked up architectonic scheme of Cox.

The vision of beauty which Thayer pursued was most often sought in the theme of womanhood, and the Bowdoin mural project provided an opportunity to enlarge upon the quest. In composition it follows the same general scheme as those of Vedder and Cox with one dominant figure providing a strong central axis. In contrast to Vedder's complex and learned symbolic language, Thayer's allegorical program is straightforward: the winged central figure represents the “heavenly guardian spirit of the arts” protecting painting and sculpture, represented by the two children at her feet. They, in turn, are received by the kneeling figures of a Florentine man and woman whose attitude of adoration is akin to the donor portraits often seen in Renaissance altarpieces. Behind the figures is an atmospheric landscape with the Arno and its bridges, the Duomo and other major landmarks of the city dimly seen. Five shields, the center one depicting the lily of Florence, are ranged along the bottom of the pediment on which the figures are placed (Figure 19).

As was earlier pointed out, Thayer came to the Bowdoin commission with no previous experience in undertaking a large mural decoration. Possibly to avoid the difficulties he imagined would accompany the mounting of one large canvas (and did occur in Vedder's case), the artist decided to divide the mural into three large vertical strips, one for the central group and one for each of the kneeling figures. A horizontal strip formed the base of the pediment and was cut to follow the outlines of the heraldic shields. There is also a thin strip of canvas around the upper edge, no doubt an addition made necessary by the discrepancy in the lunette dimensions noted previously.



Fig. 19. *Florence*, mural. Oil on canvas, 12 x 24 feet, dated 1894. Abbott H. Thayer, 1849-1921. Gift of the Misses Walker. 1893. 36



Fig. 20. *Caritas*. Oil on canvas, 1897. Abbott H. Thayer. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Warren Collection

When the decoration was mounted, the effect surpassed Thayer's expectations, although he felt that portions of the steps and center figures were too dark. He undertook to repaint the offending parts *in situ* while the scaffolding was still in place. Also, in consultation with Cox, the wall color was decided upon. By the time Thayer's initial visit to Bowdoin came to an end he had changed his mind about his colleague's mural, writing to his wife that "Cox's [decoration] is much finer than I said it was."²⁵

Sometime after its mounting, Thayer began to have renewed qualms about the mural. Finally, in November 1897, he was moved to write Professor Johnson:

At last I see a photo of my decoration and after making all allowances for defects of reproduction I am sunk in regret at having foisted so defective a piece of work as the babies and the male figure. Now my "Caritas" at the Boston Museum has this same baby group, and I want to be allowed to paint it soberly and well in my decoration at Brunswick. I should copy it straight from a photograph of the Caritas. I have also a much more dignified male figure to copy in.

Is it possible to allow me to do this? and how soon? and could you put up the staging (at my expense of course). The side figures want to fade down a little fainter . . . I had a good time with you all, but I was not at my best. I was really

sick which is my excuse for the defects in the work, which I could vastly harmonize by a few dear touches since the personality in the upper part of the center figure and of the female at the right are of my best kind.

The painting mentioned in this letter, *Caritas*, represents a further development of the theme of the guardian spirit (Figure 20), and Thayer wished to incorporate his new insights into the mural. Professor Johnson demurred making a decision, and referred the artist to the Walker sisters. In January 1898 Thayer wrote to Mary Sophia Walker:

Are you willing to let me touch up the Bowdoin decoration? The children figures, and that of the man at ones left I find very bad and I have now a fresh perception after this interval that would enable me to bring them up to the quality of the rest, with no risk—I sh'd not want to touch anything else—the two woman figures, i.e. the central and that at ones right are of my best quality.

Miss Walker replied that the art building had been presented to Bowdoin “as is” and that the decision should be made by the College.

Thayer eventually received permission to effect the changes he wished, and proceeded to paint on the mural early in 1898. A comparison of the mural in its original state (Figure 21) with the mural as it stands today indicates the extent of the alterations. The male kneeling figure had his exposed limb covered with a “more dignified” robe, and his shoes changed to sandals. The figures of the children were altered considerably, closely following the models provided in the painting *Caritas*. The palette was painted over, and the artist took the opportunity to make some significant changes in the lower portion of the guardian figure. In the original, this figure stood rather stiffly with the drapery falling in parallel, columnar folds and right foot forward. Following the example of the *Caritas* figure, Thayer altered the ponderation so that the left foot was extended and the right knee thrust forward, permitting a softer and freer treatment of the drapery. These changes, while minor, did much to improve the effect of the individual figures. The central group, in particular, stands more solidly on the spot allotted to it.

Unchanged was the mural's noticeable spatial ambivalence in which the kneeling figures appear to be perceived from different angles. This may be due, in part, to the fact that three areas were painted separately. As a result, the illusion of space in the mural is disjointed, an effect abetted by the discontinuity of the horizon line behind the figures. Apparently, the mural was painted and meant to be seen at eye level, with little adjustment made for viewing it in its intended spot; consequently, the outer figures seem to topple out of the picture toward the viewer when seen from below.

The problem of the mural's internal consistency in relation to its position in space is, of course, a historical one with which all mural painters have had to make their peace. Thayer was a painter, not an architectural decorator, and seems not to have been interested in grappling with technical points for fear of stifling the inspiration on which he depended. Seen as an oversized painting, rather than as architectural decoration, *Florence* is both effective and successful. What allegory there is, is subdued and transmitted in personal terms. When presented with the choice of making better



Fig. 21. *Florence*, mural. Original state, 1894-1898. From Edwin H. Blashfield, *Mural Painting in America* (New York, 1913)

allegory or a better painting, as in the case of the elimination of the palette originally held in the hand of one of the children, Thayer let aesthetic considerations dominate his decisions. The same might be said of painting over the exposed leg of the kneeling man; while the original costume was more or less historically correct, the dark, sharp outline of the leg was an element which distracted attention from the main group. Thayer simply was not interested in creating an archaeologically precise historical diorama nor an intricate symbolic scheme, but rather in using the minimum number of props to evoke the spirit of Florence in painterly terms.

Another problem confronted Thayer when he came to repaint the mural. He was dismayed to discover that the seams were parting and the canvas lifting and crackling in some spots. At first the artist felt that he would tackle the job himself, with perhaps the help of Charles Clifford Hutchins, a member of the Bowdoin faculty who had photographed the murals. Thayer wrote to Professor Johnson on January 20, 1898:

I am full of the scheme for restoring the decoration and shall fight it out. You see at that height even strong crack marks are harmless, not to speak of my doctoring them afterward.

I can't help thinking that Prof. Hutchins if he were willing would be a master hand at it. I propose a thin palette knife to insert obliquely at the cracks to scale off the paint thus [diagram] and the point being that only one piece be off at a time thanks to some perfect cement.

I shall soon write you results of inquiry with restorers. . . .

Thayer was mortified by the apparent technical failure of the mural, and his growing despair is reflected in another letter written to Johnson early in February:

I feel you have misconstrued my proposal that a busy and important Professor should work for me! I was desperate about the picture and felt that both you and I could do almost anything that proved best. I feared the opinionated-ness of a professional restorer and thought that just such a gifted man as Prof. Hutchins would alone be safe, being conscious that the job was *not for the man who painted the thing*, it would wear his nerves *out*. I am however writing to a man who knows this Bruce, and if I am assured of his valuableness, I propose to send him (of course at my expense) to Brunswick to judge for us whether that paint is doomed to come off. You shall hear. The whole thing is to be at my expense. . . .

Professor Johnson sought to placate the disconsolate artist, and replied that he was not so anxious about the state of the painting as Thayer. He recommended that the artist wait a year or so before deciding on a course of action. Thayer did not forget; in 1903 his wife wrote on his behalf to inquire about the state of the mural and to ascertain whether lathing existed beneath the plaster to permit nailing. Again, the reply must have been reassuring; there is no further record of discussion about its condition.

Florence remained Thayer's only venture into large-scale decoration. He was by temperament unsuited to the technical demands of such commissions and did not execute another in spite of subsequent opportunities. An ill-starred episode for the artist, it must nevertheless be counted as a major landmark in his career.

Its importance was recognized at the time and subsequently. Although the mural was unorthodox in some ways, it received warm praise from its admirers. Pauline King, writing shortly after the turn of the century, claimed that the "breadth of Mr. Thayer's style gives his compositions a quality which is closely akin to the true spirit of decoration. . . . He has thrown away all the conventions of academic training; and his technique is marvelously personal, expressing the most subtle, indefinable aspects of nature broadly, simply, and with striking directness, and produces an *ensemble* which is distinguished by the largeness of the entirely aesthetic impression, by grandeur and originality."²⁶ The mural was not universally admired, however. Vedder, to whom Thayer's improvisatory and sketchy approach to mural decoration must have been anathema, wrote sourly: "Whatever his other work may be, Thayer's picture is simply rot."²⁷

Two decades after King's appraisal, Royal Cortissoz, who admired Thayer but felt that he was too impatient of material issues to become a "merely adroit craftsman," cited the uneven quality of the artist's approach, particularly in parts of a painting that did not interest him. In respect to *Florence* "The decorative quality of the thing is not the secret of its spell; that lies in the central winged figure, in the divine creature of the painter's imagination. He was not a great inventive designer. He was just the consummate interpreter of a grand ideal form."²⁸ By the middle of the twentieth century, even the central winged figure had lost her spell over critics; the distinguished art historian E. P. Richardson surely had Thayer's mural in mind when he wrote concerning the ambitious decorations of the era:

The men who produced these decorations were apparently convinced that the secret of mural painting was to represent a vaguely pretty woman in a long white robe. Standing with the Duomo and the Ponte Vecchio behind her, she represented Florence; seated or standing with appropriate emblems, she was Law, Fate, the Pursuit of Learning, the Telephone, or the Spirit of Ceramic Art; walking with the Bible clasped in her hands, eyes upturned, the Pioneers crossing the Plains.²⁹

Although we now find little nourishment in the elaborate allegories and allusions which animated most of the mural productions of the nineteenth century, the fact that many still possess positive aesthetic qualities should not be overlooked. The very reasons that made Thayer's decoration an atypical product of its period are perhaps the reasons that should put it at the head of any study to rehabilitate an overlooked and misunderstood episode in American pictorial history.

VI

The decoration commissioned from John La Farge took the longest to find its way to Bowdoin. This is not surprising. Despite his perennial ill health, the artist was busy on at least two dozen projects at that time, although we have few documents which throw any light on the development of the mural. Vedder and La Farge had a long-standing friendship, going back to their mutual admiration for William Morris Hunt and collaboration on the illustrations for Tennyson's *Enoch Arden* in 1864. Vedder admired La Farge's talents and honored his judgment. So one must assume that it was in a spirit of friendly interest that Vedder's daughter Anita was prompted to inquire of La Farge about the state of his mural in March 1894. The artist admitted that only some sketches had been done, but that he expected to begin work on the composition within a short time.³⁰

Later that year, La Farge made a short trip to Italy, his first to that country. Upon his return in August, he was able to write the Misses Walker:

I hope that you will be pleased to know that I am engaged upon your work and that it is progressing, not rapidly but well I think. I propose to transfer it to Newport because my health is not sufficiently reestablished to stand the whole brunt of New York summer. Still I see no reason why I should not have it done in time. Perhaps you have learned all this from Mr. McKim but it is pleasant for me to make the statement myself.

McKim's letter to the sisters on August 22 reported further progress:

It is also gratifying to learn from Mr. La Farge, who has recently returned from Europe and whom I have seen within a week, that he expects to have his decoration filled out in color at fullsize during the present month.

It must have been soon after this that a photograph was taken of La Farge in his studio working on the mural with assistants (Figure 22). The composition appears blocked in, and the figures beginning to take shape. Yet, if this is late 1894 or even



Fig. 22. *John La Farge in His Studio with Athens*, ca. 1895. From *The World's Work* magazine, Vol. 21, No. 5 (March 1911)

1895, why was the mural not put into place until 1898? It is possible that precarious health forced the artist to defer the final personal touches that could not be entrusted to assistants. Also, a more urgent patron may have diverted his energies. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the mural had been finished for some time before being installed in the Walker Art Building. Pauline King, referring to the La Farge mural in 1902, states that the “canvas was quite widely shown at picture exhibitions, and was felt to be a little disappointing . . . a just or valuable judgment cannot be made under these circumstances.”³¹ If this report is correct, then it would seem that the artist attempted to have his newest work seen by the public and critics before exiling it to the hinterlands of Maine.

By the spring of 1898 La Farge was ready to send the mural to the College. His son Bancel wrote to Professor Johnson on March 25:

I am about to make preparations for sending the canvas for the Walker Art Bldg. . . . Would it be convenient to have a measurement taken of the space in which the canvas is to go? I make this request since a statement by Mr. Cox regarding the size of the space would lead us to suppose that there was some discrepancy in the sizes, and I do not wish to send the painting & then find it is the wrong size. It is necessary for us to know definitely beforehand. . . .

Obviously, La Farge had ample time to hear about the problems encountered by his colleagues and wished to be spared the same embarrassment. But Bancel's request for

accurate dimensions also reflects another problem that faced the artist. He had presumed that the ornamental stucco moulding which framed the circumference of the lunette extended along the bottom as well and had composed a mural that was less than a semicircle. This was apparently the original scheme for all the murals, but the subsequent decision to abandon the idea was not transmitted to La Farge. The other artists simply carried their canvases down to cover the entire space and filled it with painted architectural forms, festoons or shields.³² Dismayed at being odd man out, La Farge complained to the architect's agent that he had designed the mural to the contract specifications before learning of the change more or less accidentally from Cox. He asked that a moulding be made to fill the gap.³³ Discussion about a proper frame delayed mounting until late in the year. Tired of the drawn-out proceedings, La Farge added to his signature and date *Enfermo e Stanco* ("Sick and Weary").

In composition the mural departs somewhat from the general scheme of the other three decorations (Figure 23). It is tripartite, but asymmetrical. On the left stands Pallas Athena (Minerva) making a drawing from life with a stylus and wax tablet. Her model is the presiding nymph of the sacred grove in which the scene is set. This figure, perhaps representing Nature, leans on a herm of Pan (symbol of Nature's earthier aspects) and holds a smoldering torch, sometimes associated with Persephone. On the right, gazing at the tableau, is the *tyche* (personification) of the city-state of Athens seated upon a block on which is carved an owl (symbol of Minerva). Behind the group can be seen a landscape with a towering mountain (perhaps Olympus), a portion of a Doric column and a distant temple facade.

Mather claimed that La Farge "was the most learned painter of our times" who "never hesitated to appropriate an older motive when it fitted his need."³⁴ In the Bowdoin mural the artist displayed that penchant by choosing classical allusions appropriate to the subject of Athens. Some of these allusions took the form of direct copies of antique prototypes, such as the herm and the carved owl. The particular depiction of an owl utilized by the artist is the one often found on the reverse of Athenian coins dating from the late sixth century or early fifth century B.C. The three figures are much more loosely adapted from Greco-Roman types. The seated personification of Athens draws on the widely known Hellenistic statue of the Tyche of Antioch by Eutyichides for pose and costume. The goddess Minerva, seen in profile, is reminiscent of the so-called Mourning Athena found on a fifth-century B.C. grave stele. The nonchalant nymph combines a standard draped Aphrodite or Muse type found in later Greek sculpture with similar depictions found on Pompeian wall painting of the first century A.D. In the nineteenth century all this material had been published and disseminated widely; La Farge had most likely decided upon the elements to include in the mural before his trip to Italy in 1894.

There is no question here, of course, of an attempt by La Farge to imitate or re-create a classical *style*. The disparity of the sources, ranging from archaic Greek to Augustan Roman, would mitigate against such an attempt. The only available classical model for architectural decoration of this sort existed not in Greek sculpture but in Roman wall painting, the effect of which La Farge clearly had no interest in emulating. The evi-



Fig. 23. *Athens*, mural. Oil on canvas, 9 x 20 feet, dated 1898. John La Farge, 1835-1910. Gift of the Misses Walker. 1893. 35

dence of the mural suggests that the artist was largely independent of the restrictions of the nineteenth-century academic tradition and did not feel bound to observe any classical canon or mannerism, using references to antiquity only as the basis for poses and suitable props.

Although *Athens* seems the most naturalistic of the murals at Bowdoin, one must be cautious in labeling this phenomenon Naturalism. As in the case of a number of his works from the 1870s on, the mural shows that the artist possessed a range of styles—more correctly, modes—which could be combined in one work. Here it is clearly evident in the contrast between the figures and the landscape. The figures are painted quite literally from the model, with little or no idealization of the features or proportions. The central figure particularly seems a direct studio study incorporated intact into the composition. The draperies are all carefully observed, and great care is taken in capturing the effects of light and cast shadow on the folds of the material and objects in the foreground. The landscape, on the other hand, is much more the romantic evocation of the vistas seen and painted by La Farge during his trips to Japan and the South Seas than it is of the harsh geography of Greece. The volcanic mountain seen to the left in the mural is enveloped in lush atmosphere at odds with the dry light thrown on the figures and is reminiscent of some of the artist's brooding studies done of volcanic peaks, such as Fuji or Moorea.³⁵

Color is another important aspect of the mural that must be considered when attempting to establish the limits of the artist's naturalism. In its use of color *Athens* diverges from the practices exemplified in the other three decorations. Vedder, Cox and Thayer, each in his own fashion, adhered to the accepted dictum that color in architectural decoration should be subservient to its surroundings.³⁶ Vedder had noted at the time of the installation of his mural that the "flesh is certainly very colorless but you can't imagine how well it goes with the color of the architecture."³⁷ Cox based his palette on that of Venetian murals; although rich, the hues are all in a high key with little contrast. Thayer's mural is almost monochromatic, with delicate hints of local color. La Farge, instead, emphasizes local color with highly saturated, deep tones. In this one can perhaps discern the influence of murals by Delacroix, an artist whom La Farge admired.³⁸ A factor which might have reinforced such color usage in decoration was La Farge's wide experience in the execution of stained-glass windows. The rich reds and blues which characterize the mural seem particularly related to the colors of stained glass and certainly betray a decorative rather than descriptive intent.³⁹

Because of its dichotomous nature—the juxtaposition of classical motif with naturalistic rendering and confrontation of discursive elements with decorative ones—the mural must be considered the most problematic of the four at Bowdoin. In its heterogeneous aspects are displayed not so much the eclecticism of which La Farge has been accused, as a record of the dilemmas facing an independent artist trying to enlarge the limits of traditional painting without actually breaking away from them.

NOTES

1. 1968.130. Gift of Allyn Cox. *Compositional Study for "Venice,"* 1893. Oil on canvas, 19¾ x 36 inches. Kenyon Cox, American, 1856-1919. Inscribed upper left and right: DECORATION IN WALKER ART BUIL- | DING-BOWDOIN COLLEGE- | BRUNSWICK, MAINE. . . . FIRST SKETCH OF COMPOSITION | SUBMITTED MDCCCXCIII. | KENYON COX. On reverse: ORIGINAL SKETCH. This study was found by the donor in the artist's old studio where it had been since 1893.
I should like to express my thanks to Mrs. Regina Soria, Mrs. Helene Weinberg, Henry La Farge and Mr. Cox for their assistance during the inception of this article.
2. A watercolor study of the Florence lunette was reported at one time in the possession of Henry O'Connor. Its present whereabouts is unknown. The Thayer journal for 1893, however, makes reference to "many studies" done for the mural during the summer in Dublin, N. H., including a number from the model for the central figure. The set of studies was taken to Scarborough in the fall to be enlarged to full scale. Cf. Nelson C. White, *Abbott H. Thayer: Painter and Naturalist* (Peterborough, N. H.: William L. Bauhan, 1967). Thayer's working method is described by Rockwell Kent, who was associated with the artist for a period around 1905, in *It's Me, O Lord* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1955), p. 99 f. Thayer would work on a painting up to a point where he began to have doubts about continuing. An apprentice would paint a copy and Thayer would proceed to develop it until he reached a solution, which would then serve as a model for the original.
3. Vote of the Governing Boards of Bowdoin College, September 17, 1891.
4. Copy of a letter from Harriet S. Walker to Charles F. McKim, July 6, 1891. Walker Collection, Bowdoin College Museum of Art. In the remainder of this article, only those letters and other documents that are not in the possession of the Museum will be cited as to source.
5. Vedder's indecision and discomfort about undertaking a decoration at the Columbian Exposition is documented in Regina Soria, *Elihu Vedder: American Visionary Artist in Rome* (Rutherford-Madison-Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), pp. 209-213. Vedder did, however, eventually design the commemorative medal for the Exposition.
6. Pauline King, *American Mural Painting: A Study of the Important Decorations by Distinguished Artists in the United States* (Boston: Noyes, Platt & Company, 1902), p. 14.
7. The original color scheme of the Sculpture Hall (Rotunda) has been altered in the course of time. Originally a dark color, probably a deep "Roman" red or maroon, set off by white pilasters and architectural trim (cf. Figure 1), it is now painted in considerably paler hues. The original effect was to set off the murals; the lighter color scheme makes the murals appear darker than was doubtlessly intended.
8. Both French and Saint-Gaudens worked with McKim on his projects. At McKim's suggestion Saint-Gaudens had been placed in charge of the sculpture section of the Chicago Fair. The sculptor had also decorated buildings designed by McKim, most notably the Boston Public Library, and later served with the architect on the Park Commission for the development of the District of Columbia. French was also an associate of McKim's, and at the latter's suggestion was commissioned by the Misses Walker to execute a bronze relief portrait of Theophilus Walker which was installed in the Walker Gallery in 1894.

9. Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, p. 208.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 209. Vedder referred to the surrounding campus architecture as "jig-sawing."
11. Cox had been given the responsibility of a dome and four pendentives in the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building. These decorations all vanished with the dismantling of the Fair, but a reproduction of one of the artist's designs is reproduced in King, *American Mural Painting*, p. 77.
12. Cf. Mahonri Sharp Young, "Stanford White, the Palace and the Club," *Apollo*, XCIII, 109 (March 1971), p. 214, and Royal Cortissoz, *American Artists* (New York-London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 299.
13. Elihu Vedder, *The Digressions of V.: Written for His Own Fun and That of His Friends* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), pp. 491-492.
14. Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, p. 215.
15. Letter from Allyn Cox (son of the artist), November 23, 1970.
16. *Estimates in Art: Series II* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931), p. 288. The essay was written in 1918.
17. Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, p. 214.
18. Quoted by McKim in a letter to the Misses Walker, August 22, 1894. Walker Collection, BCMA.
19. Vedder, *The Digressions of V.*, pp. 492-493.
20. *Ibid.*
21. An example in sixteenth-century Italian mural decoration with this adaptation, probably known to Vedder, is again by Raphael: cf. the mythological figures in the decoration of the Villa Farnesina.
22. Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, pp. 215-216.
23. *Ibid.*, letter to Carrie Vedder.
24. Royal Cortissoz, *American Artists*, p. 32, in a letter from Thayer to the author.
25. White, *Abbott H. Thayer*, p. 67.
26. King, *American Mural Painting*, p. 160.
27. Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, p. 214.
28. Cortissoz, *American Artists*, p. 33.
29. *Painting in America* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1956), pp. 357-358.

30. Information kindly supplied by Mrs. Helene Weinberg, who is presently preparing a dissertation on La Farge. This incident is also recounted from Vedder's side in Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, pp. 214-215.
31. King, *American Mural Painting*, p. 156.
32. In this connection, it might be noted that Cox's early compositional study (Figure 4), was painted with a Doric meander frame along the bottom as well as around the circumference of the semicircle. The bottom portion is no longer evident in the scale cartoon (Figure 10).
33. Information supplied by Mrs. Helene Weinberg.
34. Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., "John La Farge—An Appreciation," *The World's Work*, XXI, 5 (March 1911), p. 14086.
35. Similar contrast between the handling of figures and background can be noted in at least one other major mural, *The Ascension*, completed in 1887 for the Church of the Ascension in New York after La Farge's return from Japan. The figures and composition are based on several Renaissance models, an obvious one being Titan's *Assumption of the Virgin* in the Church of Santa Maria dei Frari in Venice. Katherine C. Lee in "John La Farge: Drawings and Watercolors" (*Museum News*, Vol. 11, No. 1 [Winter 1968], The Toledo Museum of Art, p. 5) points out other sources: Masaccio for the figures of the Apostles and Raphael for the figure of Christ. The background, on the other hand, is a reflection of La Farge's generally overlooked activity as an observer and recorder of landscapes, an interest which began in the 1860s and extended throughout his career. Inspired by his trip, the artist utilized studies of the Japanese landscape (including Mt. Fuji) to create an atmosphere in which the process of Christ's levitation would not appear unnatural and yet not suggest the hills of Judea. See Royal Cortissoz, *John La Farge: A Memoir and a Study* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), pp. 163-165.
36. See Edwin H. Blashfield, "Mutuality Between Architect and Mural Painter," pp. 111-121 in *Mural Painting in America: The Scammon Lectures* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913).
37. Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, p. 215.
38. See Royal Cortissoz, *John La Farge: A Memoir and a Study* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), pp. 85-86 and passim.
39. This observation was already made as early as 1902 by Pauline King, *American Mural Painting*, p. 30.

APPENDIX

MURAL STUDIES

Listed below are all the studies related to the murals by Kenyon Cox and Elihu Vedder now in the Museum collections. The Museum does not possess any mural studies by Thayer and LaFarge, although the Walker sisters presented the Museum with several watercolors and two sketchbooks by the latter artist. For the sake of completeness we also list two studies by William Morris Hunt for the murals (now destroyed) painted in Albany (1875-1878), purchased by the Walker sisters in Boston and given to the Museum.

KENYON COX (1856-1919)

"Venice"

oil on canvas, 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 61"

1959. 3. 1

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Drapery Study for "Venice"

pencil on paper, 14 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

1959. 3. 2

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Study of Small Wings

pencil on paper, 16" x 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

1959. 3. 3

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Drapery Study for Figure of "Venice"

pastel, 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

1959. 3. 4

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Study of Jewelry and Coins

pencil on paper, 16" x 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

1959. 3. 5

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Study of Campanile of St. Giorgio Maggiore

pencil on paper, 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ "

1959. 3. 6

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Compositional Sketch for "Venice"

pencil on paper, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

1959. 3. 7

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

3 Sketches of Shield

pencil on paper, 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ "

1959. 3. 8

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Study of Hermes' Right Foot

pencil on paper, 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ "

1959. 3. 9

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Sandal Study for Hermes (verso, Sandal Study)

pencil on paper, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

1959. 3. 10

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Sandal Study for Hermes (verso, Ship's Rudder)

pencil on paper, 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ "

1959. 3. 11

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Sandal Study for Hermes (verso, Laced Boot Study)

pencil on paper, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

1959. 3. 12

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Study of Sails

pencil on paper, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

1959. 3. 13

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Study of Caduceus and Ship's Rigging

pencil on paper, 6¼" x 3⅞"

1959. 3. 14

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Study of Sails

pencil on paper, 6¼" x 3⅞"

1959. 3. 15

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Study of Sails

pencil on paper, 6¼" x 3⅞"

1959. 3. 16

Gift of Col. Leonard Cox, Mrs. Caroline Cox
Lansing, and Allyn Cox

Study—Figure of "Commerce"

pencil on paper, 15⅞" x 18⅞"

1959. 9

Transfer, Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Decora-
tive Arts and Design

Study—Drapery for "Commerce"

pencil on paper, 18¾" x 14⅞"

1959. 10

Transfer, Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Decora-
tive Arts and Design

Study—Figure of "Painting"

pencil on paper, 15¼" x 19"

1959. 11

Transfer, Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Decora-
tive Arts and Design

Study—"Lion"

pencil on paper, 14¼" x 11¾"

1959. 12

Transfer, Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Decora-
tive Arts and Design

Study for "Venice," 1893

oil sketch, 19¾" x 36"

1968. 130

Gift of Allyn Cox

ELIHU VEDDER (1836-1923)

The numbers in parentheses after the title re-
fer to the catalogue listing in Regina Soria,
Elihu Vedder (1970). Nos. D493-501 are
not related to the Bowdoin mural but are
possibly studies for the Huntington ceiling.

"Natura" (D484)

pastel on brown paper, 23¼" x 15"

1955. 4. 1

Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

"Natura," detail of head (D485)

pastel on brown paper, 19½" x 16¼"

1955. 4. 2

Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

"Natura," torso and arms (D486)

black & white conte on green paper,
16¾" x 12¾"

1955. 4. 3

Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

"Natura," torso (D487)

black & white conte on dark brown paper,
18½" x 12¾"

1955. 4. 4

Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

"Natura," head (D488)

black & white conte on grey paper, 7¾" x 6"

1955. 4. 5

Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

"Amore," head and chest (D489)

black & white conte on grey paper, 9½" x 8½"

1955. 4. 6

Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

"Amore," body entire (D490)

black & white conte on grey paper,
16⅞" x 8½"

1955. 4. 7

Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

"Colore," head and torso (D491)

black & white conte on green paper,
15¼" x 10"

1955. 4. 8

Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

"Anima," body entire (D492)

black & white conte on light brown paper,
15¾" x 11"

1955. 4. 9
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

Initial Study for Panel (D493)

black & white and sanguine conte colored with
oil, 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

1955. 4. 10
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

Woman with Fruit and Branch (D494)

black & white conte on grey paper,
21 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

1955. 4. 11
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

Woman with Musical Instruments (D495)

black & white conte on grey paper, 22" x 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

1955. 4. 12
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

Woman with Masks (D496)

black & white conte on grey paper, 20" x 14"

1955. 4. 13
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

Woman with Pen and Paper (D497)

black & white conte on grey paper, 21" x 16"

1955. 4. 14
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

*Woman with Palm and Laurel Wreath
(D498)*

black & white conte on grey paper,
20 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

1955. 4. 15
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

Woman with Jewelry (D499)

black & white conte on grey paper, 16" x 23"

1955. 4. 16
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

Woman with Grapes and Wine (D500)

black & white conte on grey paper, 20" x 15"

1955. 4. 17
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

Woman with Trumpet and Wreath (D501)

black & white conte on grey paper, 21" x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

1955. 4. 18
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and
Letters

WILLIAM MORRIS HUNT (1824-1879)

Compositional Study for "Discoverer" Mural
crayon, 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

1897. 7
Gift of the Misses Walker

Study of Female Head
charcoal, 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

1897. 8
Gift of the Misses Walker

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* Died February 6, 1972.

