

An Uncollected Letter of Horatio Greenough

HORATIO GREENOUGH, the first American professional sculptor, was born in Boston in 1805 and died there in 1852. He spent most of his life abroad, residing from 1828 to 1851 in Florence. His most ambitious works were two colossi executed for the United States government: one of Washington, seated, half draped, for the rotunda of the Capitol; the other a group of a pioneer rescuing a woman and child from an attacking Indian for a pediment of the east front of the Capitol. In general he worked in the then-current tradition of neoclassicism.

David Claypoole Johnston, engraver, lithographer, and actor, was born in Philadelphia in 1799 and died in Dorchester, Massachusetts, in 1865. He settled in Boston in 1825. He was at his best in illustrating and making drawings for comic prints. In this capacity he achieved wide popularity.

Johnston's etching depicting Greenough's group *The Chanting Cherubs* and the letter from Greenough to Johnston of August 30, 1832, printed below, are the only known links between the two artists. The letter is in the possession of the American Antiquarian Society, in the David Claypoole Johnston Family Papers. I am indebted to Prof. David Tatham of Syracuse University for calling it to my attention and providing me with photocopies of the numbers of Johnston's *Scraps* that are mentioned in it. For collected editions of Greenough's letters see Frances B. Greenough, ed., *Letters of Horatio Greenough to his Brother, Henry Greenough* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1887), and Nathalia Wright, ed., *Letters of Horatio Greenough, American Sculptor* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972). The editorial method of the latter edition (pp. xxv-xxvii) is followed here.

Nathalia Wright

Well the coat fits me to day better
 than it did yesterday & I havnt ate
 dinner yet, that makes some difference
 Next week I guess I'll be big enough
 Now glad I shall be cause grandpa
 said I might wear all his overalls
 when they fit me!



MILITARY PREGOCITY

Fig. 2



WHO ARE YOU LOOKING AT?

Fig. 1



NE PLUS ULTRA OF DELICACY

Fig. 3

Florence—August 30th 1832—

Dear Sir

I received yesterday from Mr Ritchie¹ the volume of etchings² you were so kind as to send me and beg you will accept my hearty thanks for your present, redolent as it is of home and full of proofs of rare talent and a knowledge of the resources of your art for satire, which is as far as I know unique in America.

The fellow scowling under his flopped hat with the motto "what are you looking at?"³ I think very fine; there's a decision and firmness of design and a clear silvery effect in the hatching which convinces me that you would do yourself infinitely more justice on a somewhat larger scale than you generally employ—"Military precocity"⁴ is also fine for effect and execution—

I am happy to see by the way in which you have treated the Exhibition of the Chanting Cherubs,⁵ that you think with me that those who would fain improve us by rendering us ignorant of our nature—who would teach us to be ashamed of our glory—and make life one continued dissimulation are the worst enemies of true virtue—I hope my dear Sir that the talent and wit displayed in your works will, if it have not already, prove as profitable to yourself as delightful to the public—Begging that you will command me when I can serve you or any friend of yours I remain

Dear Sir

With the highest Esteem

Yours

Horatio Greenough

[Addressed:] To / D. C. Johnston Esqre / Artist— / BOSTON MASS.

¹ Alexander Ritchie (1782–1862), painter of landscapes and battle pieces.

² Beginning in 1830 Johnston issued annually a series of comic etchings under the general title of *Scraps*. He evidently sent Greenough the volume called *Scraps No. 3 for 1832* (Boston, 1832).

³ A reference to an etching numbered by Johnston Plate 2 in *Scraps No. 3*. Johnston's caption actually reads, "Who are you looking at?" See fig. 1, above.

⁴ A reference to an etching numbered by Johnston Plate 2 in *Scraps No. 3*. See fig. 2, above.

⁵ In 1830 Greenough executed for the novelist James Fenimore Cooper a group of two cherubs taken from a detail in Raphael's *Madonna del Baldacchino*, which was named *The Chanting Cherubs*. It was exhibited in Boston in the spring of 1831, eliciting praise on the whole but causing such consternation in some quarters because of its nudity that the figures were for a while provided with cloth aprons. The present whereabouts of the work, if it has survived, is unknown. Obviously Johnston followed the fate of the little group in Boston, which inspired him in one of his etchings in *Scraps No. 3*. See fig. 3, above.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.