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Henry Clay and the American State Portrait

Clifford Amyx

America, having rejected royalty and established a republic, was obliged to create a state portrait without royalist trappings. In fact, when Pres. Andrew Jackson was accused of exercising unwarranted executive power he was caricatured with precisely the most familiar of the royalist attributes—the ermine robe, the sceptre of power, and the crown. American painters, seeking to create a sense of authority in the portraits of their statesmen, retained from Europe two of the basic attributes of formal or stately presence, the flowing heavy drape familiar in Baroque court portraits, and the classical column with its connotation of a formal or stately milieu.

These attributes were familiar to the American artists who learned their art in England. John Copley and Benjamin West remained there, but Gilbert Stuart and John Trumbull returned to establish the early state portrait in America. Trumbull learned “boots and saddles” painting from West, who became president of the Royal Academy after the death of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Trumbull returned to become the “official” painter of Independence and Revolution. When in 1790 he painted George Washington for the city hall in New York, he showed the general in full battle dress, standing with his white charger with the city in the distance.

It was Gilbert Stuart, however, who was to transmute the General Washington into the President Washington, in the noted 1795 “Lansdowne” portrait (Fig. 1). The portrait incorporates the standard attributes—the columns in pairs and with a heavy drape flowing between them, tied at the right with a heavy, braided cord with hanging tassels. The columns are placed high, the base standing at nearly shoulder height of the president. In addition, there is a table and chair, appropriate to a state occasion, with papers and a book on the table, an inkwell and a quill pen. The table is also covered with a heavy cloth, which is disposed so as to reveal books under the table.

The president stands with feet firmly planted. He makes an openhanded gesture, which may be one of accommodation to his

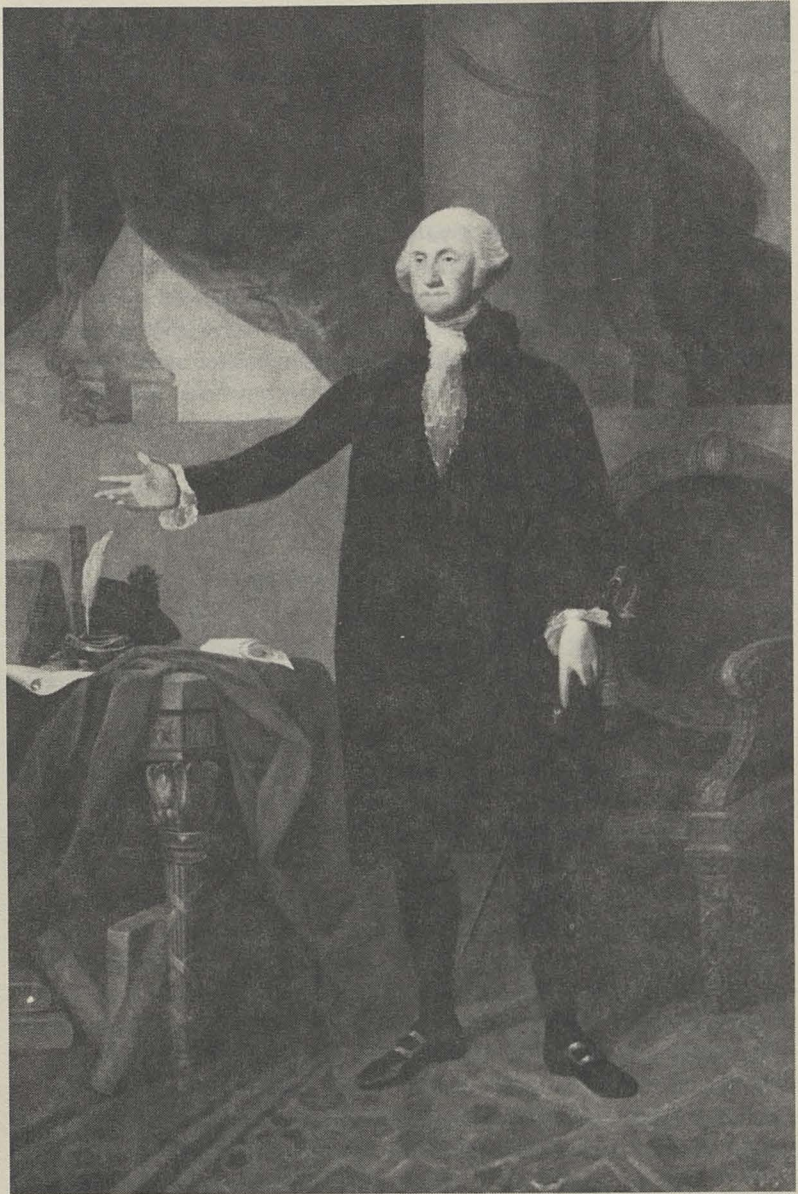


Fig. 1. Oliver Frazer and William Shackelford, George Washington (after Gilbert Stuart's "Lansdowne" portrait). Collection of the Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort.

unseen audience, or of persuasion to some cause he addresses. The occasion is superbly formal. The likeness is the one familiar from Stuart's "Athenaeum" portrait bust. The most obvious reference to Washington's history as a soldier is the sword he carries at his left hand.

A more recondite reference appears in the manner in which the legs of the table and chair are represented. These are shown as bundles of rods tied together, as the Roman *fasces*, the symbol of the authority of the old Roman magistrates. However, instead of the axehead which protruded from the ancient symbol of authority, the table legs are carved with eagles (looking somewhat strangely like harpies) surmounting the bundle of rods. The chair legs add no such birds. Washington was President-General of the Order of the Cincinnati, and in 1795 a reference to his role as a citizen soldier, the Roman Cincinnatus, would have been understood.¹

Instead of a central and single executive authority, governmental power in America was to be exercised in the three branches of government. By extension, cabinet officers serve the executive, and when Trumbull was again called on to paint portraits for the New York city hall in 1805, his portraits of Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, both New Yorkers, were full exemplars of the now standard formal state portrait. In both portraits the columns—one or more—and the flowing drape, appear. There is also the table covered with a heavy cloth and set with books and papers connoting a formal occasion. Hamilton makes the same open gesture as Stuart's *Washington*. Jay appears to pause while negotiating or conferring, his left arm resting on a high backed chair, his right hand "indexing" a place in a volume he may wish to cite. These portraits offer no complex iconography beyond the "bare bones" of the formal occasion, and there is nothing to denote either Hamilton or Jay other than their likenesses and their "entitlement" in the offices they hold.

The judicial portrait in America discarded the long white wig—originally wool—of the English judiciary, and opted for only the long black robe. The portraits of Justice Marshall, who all but created the power of the judiciary, show him in one case in knee breeches, and a fairly long "enveloping" robe. In another portrait the robe is somewhat more heavy and flowing, possibly velvet. Finally the judiciary began to be represented in more reserved and plain robes, without frills.² When Jefferson yielded to Marshall on

the matter of "executive privilege" the power of the judiciary was established, and it has retained that same power.

The third branch of authority in America is the Congress, assembled in two legislative bodies. After "imperial" Andrew Jackson threatened to suppress nullification by force of arms, the presidency appeared to weaken, and the great senators who were to dominate the Congress and agonize with the nation over slavery, moved into the forefront. Daniel Webster from New England, John C. Calhoun from the South, and Henry Clay from Kentucky, dominated the Congress for much of their lives. Except for brief tenures in other offices these three were almost continually in the Congress. Webster and Calhoun were born the same year; Webster and Clay died the same year. Calhoun and Clay were "war hawks" together in the House in 1812. Calhoun served as secretary of war and as vice-president. Webster served two terms as secretary of state. Clay served only one term as secretary of state under John Quincy Adams, but disliked the chore greatly. He would rather have been in the Congress. All these men were ambitious for the presidency, and it eluded them. Clay was the most frequently disappointed in his search for the highest office.

Clay and Webster were to be the most depicted men of the half century. Clay most clearly exhibits the full range of the legislative portrait, once in its most complicated personal iconography, and at other times in its utter plainness. Webster was "rock hard," and the artists never doubted his presence; they certified it. Calhoun's deep-set and piercing eyes were as firmly fixed as his positions on Constitutional matters. Clay, on the other hand, was mobile, charming, elusive, almost a chameleon. He was a trial to the painters who sought his likeness. Harriet Martineau said in the mid-1830s that she had seen no satisfactory likeness of Clay. Yet he was soon to begin to complain about the time he had spent sitting to the artists—by the later 1830s, to perhaps more than a hundred. All three of the great trio of senators lived through the age when the painters and sculptors were still the primary image makers, and all three lived to "face the light" for the daguerreotype camera. The state portrait thereafter began its decline as an instrument of American politics.

I.
George Cooke of Maryland

Henry Clay began his search for highest office in 1824, but the presumed "deal" to make John Quincy Adams president was to plague him and to make Andrew Jackson his lifelong enemy. He sought the presidency again in 1832 but was defeated by Jackson. Until that time, there is no known full-length portrait of Clay. It was as late as 1839 when the first full statesman's portrait of Clay was to be painted, and this by a journeyman painter, George Cooke of Maryland, who began a series of portraits of noted Americans.

Cooke failed as a merchant in the West, and in the early 1820s turned to painting portraits. By 1826, in spite of a certain success, he became aware of his deficiencies and decided to go abroad for study. Clay, who was secretary of state at the time, wrote letters on his behalf to various American officers abroad, and Cooke set out with his wife for Europe. They were to remain five years, principally in Italy, with Cooke devoting most of his time to copying masterpieces. Returning home he tarried briefly in London, where an American patron gave him the commission to copy Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, a very large painting which has been called the first "journalist" painting of modern times. It is a veritable horror story of shipwreck, and a protest against the official neglect which caused the suffering of the shipwreck's survivors. Cooke returned home to become a showman-exhibitor of such dramatic paintings, as well as other copies made in Europe. He attained considerable notice.

By 1839 George Cooke was in Washington, engaged in painting a "full life-size portrait of Henry Clay."³ But this was no single effort, since Cooke was painting other notables as well. He carried these out looking to the South, both for exhibitions and with the expectation of possible sales. He completed three portraits of Clay full-length, as well as a bust portrait. The latter may have been from a sitting, though there is no record of such a sitting. Of the three heroic portraits, one is at the courthouse at Ashland, Virginia, and another remains at the University of Alabama. The third was at the Chicago Historical Society until destroyed by fire in 1954.

Cooke's portrait (Fig. 2) shows the standard columns and a



Fig. 2. George Cooke, Henry Clay. Photograph courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society.

flowing drape which is parted to reveal the United States Capitol in the distance.⁴ The dome has not been completed to its present form, nor is Thomas Crawford's "Armed Freedom" atop the dome as yet. Still, the Capitol was not only a major architectural expenditure by Congress over the years, it was already a significant detail in the history of state portraits, as well.

In Cooke's portrait Clay appears in the act of speaking, his left hand resting on papers at the table, his right hand moving across his body to reinforce this reference. Heavy books are at the back of the table. A patent new "Americanism" appears in the special design of the table support, which is carved as a shock of grain. (Cooke may have known of the "corn" capitals in the Capitol building, which had for a moment replaced the standard acanthus leaves which signify, if anything at all, longevity.) Cooke also indulges in a special floral pattern in the rug on the floor. (This would have horrified Edgar Allan Poe, who harbored a curious distaste for floral patterns on floors.)

Clay was a tall man, and Cooke shows him tall, perhaps with his shanks thinned too much. The painting, heroic in size, would always be placed higher than the spectator, who would necessarily look upward to the head of Clay, which Cooke retained in relatively good size. Whether he intended this as an optical accomplishment is moot. Cooke's likeness of Clay is barely adequate. In 1839 Clay was active in the East exploring the possibilities of the Whig candidacy of 1840; in the event, the nomination went instead to William Henry Harrison, the hero of the early Western frontier.

Hiram Powers, the Cincinnati sculptor, sensed that he had been "snubbed" by Clay, and this perception rankled Powers throughout his life. Clay denied ever intending to snub Powers, although he did complain forthrightly that the sculptor Greenough's bust of him was an utter failure.⁵ It may be that he had no time for Cooke, and that Cooke's portraits were derivative rather than from life.

This first portrait of Clay as a legislator was a journeyman effort by a painter who remains relatively unnoticed in the history of American art. Cooke's aim was merely to add another notable to his gallery of Americans. William Dunlap, the first historian of American artists, who knew of Cooke's work even before Cooke left for Europe, was puzzled by the success he had as a painter, when better painters were lacking commissions. Cooke was surely

an engaging and charming man, and one whose manner won him attention wherever he went, especially in the South during his later life. He died of cholera in New Orleans in 1849, and his works there were soon dispersed, several to his principal patron, who then exhibited them in the offices of the Pratt Gin Company.⁶

II.

John Neagle: Clay and his "American System"

As a young man, John Neagle of Philadelphia ventured to Lexington, Kentucky on the chance that he might settle there as a painter. He found Matthew Jouett occupied with a good practice and a sound art learned from the aged Gilbert Stuart in Boston. Neagle decided to go on downriver to New Orleans. He did not tarry there but came back to Philadelphia, where he began to learn much of the English tradition through Thomas Sully. He married Sully's daughter, became still more proficient, and painted one of the major early figure paintings of this time, *Pat Lyon at the Forge*.⁷

Neagle himself was a Whig, and in 1842 he was sent by the Whigs of Philadelphia to paint Henry Clay, then at his estate, "Ashland," near Lexington. Clay was waiting out the disappointment that had befallen him when William Henry Harrison was elected in 1840, only to die. "His Accidency," John Tyler of Virginia, had then become president. Arriving in Lexington in 1842 Neagle began a bust portrait of Clay and then the full-length figure. Clay wrote:

I am now in the hands of a Philadelphia artist, Mr. Neagle, who has advanced so far in his portrait of me, and with so much success, that I feel authorized to say that I think he will make a faithful and spirited likeness of me."⁸

When the full-length figure was completed Clay wrote a letter on behalf of Neagle commending the painter, and undoubtedly intended to convey Clay's satisfaction to the Philadelphia Whigs.

Ashland, 29th May 1843

In returning to the City of Philadelphia you will naturally

desire to carry with you, along with the full length portrait of me, which you have taken at this place, some evidence of the opinion which is entertained of it in Kentucky. . . . It is the judgement of my family and friends that you have sketched the most perfect likeness of me that has hitherto been made. My opinion coincides with theirs. I think you have happily delineated the character, as well as the physical appearance, of your subject. You take with you the cordial wishes for fame, success, and happiness of all of us.⁹

Neagle's heroic *Clay* (Fig. 3) represents the statesman speaking. The required column, signifying the Congress, is to his back and his left, but the drape is replaced by a very large American flag which falls to the floor and is made to disclose a globe turned to show South America, representing Clay's long championship of independence for the Latin American colonies. The symbols of "The American System" are to Clay's right, and they recede into the distance. Here are seen the shuttle, the anvil, the plow, cattle, and, in the far distance, a vessel. If Neagle as a convinced Whig did not already understand the importance of these symbols, he almost surely discussed them with Clay.

Sometime later Calvin Colton asked Clay about a proper coat-of-arms for the Kentucky Statesman, but Clay replied,

I really have no coat of arms . . . in lieu, would it not be better to employ some objects drawn from the interests I have sought to promote in the national Councils? A loom, a shuttle, anvil, plow, or any other article connected with manufactures, agriculture, or commerce.¹⁰

Neagle's portraits were extraordinarily effective as a part of the coming campaign of 1844, especially in the West. When the portraits were shown in Frankfort, where Neagle was engaged in painting other portraits, the response was wholly favorable, and even exuberant. The *Frankfort Commonwealth*, June 1843, remarked on the splendid ability and matchless fidelity of the artist.

It is indeed a great masterpiece, a most perfect likeness, embodying with the highest and most truthful effect the full

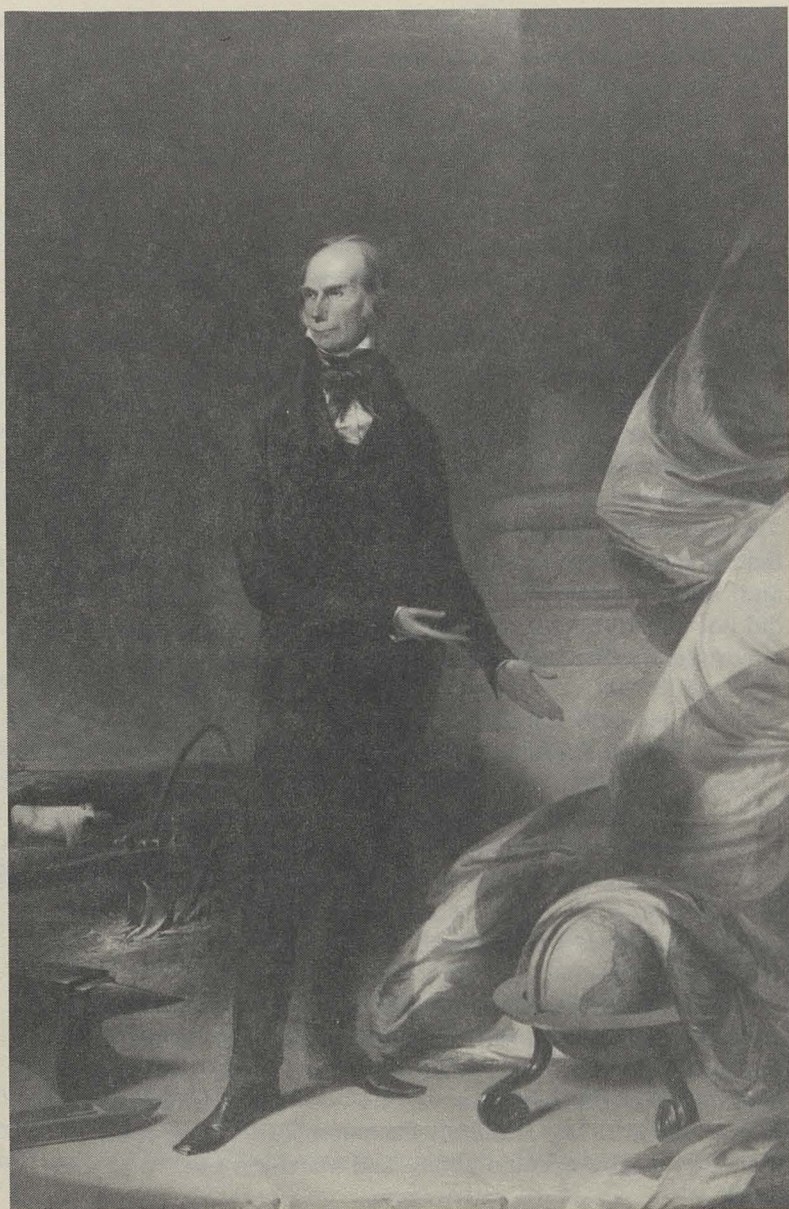


Fig. 3. John Neagle, Henry Clay. Photograph courtesy of the Architect of the United States Capitol.

action and animation of debate, the dignity and majesty of the intellectual greatness of the distinguished subject.

The *Nashville Whig* reported that the painting had received the highest commendation from gentlemen of importance in Kentucky, including governors. Richard Mentor Johnson, who was painted by Neagle, sent a letter of commendation and appreciation to the painter. The *Knoxville Post* was sent a report from the *Lexington Intelligencer*.

The artist has displayed great taste in avoiding the usual style of such paintings. No fine carpets, curtains, desks, inkstands or useless paraphernalia, encumber and destroy the beauty of the picture. Mr. Clay stands in a portico, upon a plain Republican platform of Kentucky marble, with the pillar of Constitutional Liberty upon his left.¹¹

The gentleman in Lexington clearly understands the difference between Neagle's painting and the ordinary legislative portrait, and sees the advocacy in the painting. He extends it considerably by taking the column to be the "Pillar of constitutional liberty," and the plain floor as a "Republican platform."

Neagle showed great acumen, and consistency with Clay's almost patrician feelings, in rejecting all the elements of the "hard cider" and "log cabin" campaign of 1840, for a portrait which surely satisfied the Whigs of Philadelphia, looking toward the campaign of 1844. The painting was to attract considerable attention in the East through the engravings by John Sartain. Sartain was so delighted by the portrait that he called it equal to *Pat Lyon*, and he regarded these two as Neagle's best paintings. Sartain was also advancing the fortunes of Clay through an engraving of a painting by the almost unknown James Wise, and a slightly different engraving published in Louisville, which Sartain claimed to be from his own work.¹²

Neagle's painting has been much reproduced and copied. A full-size replica by Neagle himself was made and purchased by Congress in 1871, though Neagle retains the date 1843 with his signature on the painting. A nearly full-size replica by Ambrose Andrews is at "Ashland" in Lexington. There are several copies by various other hands, some of which fail in the matter of accurate scale.

Though other painters were inclined to discount Clay after his defeat in 1844, the Whigs of Philadelphia, and the painters there, were always his partisans. At a testimonial dinner for Clay, Neagle and Mrs. Neagle, and seven other Neagles, were in attendance. That same year Sartain, and the painters, were able to see that Joel Tanner Hart's busts of Cassius M. Clay and Henry Clay were admitted to the Philadelphia Artists' Fund Exhibition. Characteristically, Hart was late in submitting his works for the exhibition. James Reid Lambdin, who had painted Clay in Lexington in 1831, was soon again to paint Clay in 1846. Clay, shown in old age and with fully gray hair, still preserves the jauntiness which Lambdin had portrayed in 1831.

Neagle's portrait of Clay is one of the exceptional extensions of the state portrait, more precisely the legislative portrait, in America. Neither Webster nor Calhoun were painted with such a personal and complex iconography. Neagle as an avowed Whig realized the full connotations of "the American System," which had been Clay's true platform since the early toast given to him in Paris, Kentucky, in 1824, when the term was first heard. Neagle codified this "system" perhaps in the light of discussions with Clay himself, however much it may have been qualified and fought over in the halls of Congress. The art historians have not, however, agreed that Neagle's *Clay* is the equal of his *Pat Lyon*. No one today would argue that Sartain was correct in assessing the two paintings as equal in merit. Neagle's *Clay* remains primarily a political document rather than an important contribution to the history of art in America.

III.

The Last Decade of Clay Portraits

If John Neagle's complex painting of Clay and his "System" broke the mold of the standard legislative portrait by expanding it toward a complex personal iconography, other painters were not usually so ambitious as they limned the Great Compromiser in the closing years of his life. If the columns and drapes of the standard portrait still appeared, they faded away to an innocuous setting for a full-length figure of the statesman. Possibly the most significant of these portraits, though it has been little noticed until very recently, is by Chester Harding, who had painted a bust portrait

of Clay as early as 1822.

When William Dunlap addressed Henry Clay as "a noted friend of the arts" and asked for his opinions about the painters in the West, Clay mentioned Matthew Jouett, recently deceased in Lexington, and William Edward West, the painter of Byron, Trelawny, and other notables in Italy, still abroad. The third painter he mentioned, though not a native of Kentucky, was Chester Harding. Harding is best known in Kentucky even today as the painter of the only authentic portrait of Daniel Boone, and for this he made a special journey into Missouri to paint the aged hunter, then nearing his death, in 1820. Harding had painted for a while in Paris, Kentucky but went East soon after painting Boone. Harding painted Clay in Washington in 1822 and then went to England where he attracted considerable notice as a "native genius."

At the time of the campaign of 1844 Harding was commissioned by a group of Clay supporters in Washington for a portrait. Harding, a friend of Webster who had "messed" with the Senator from Massachusetts, had no special interest in painting Clay. He remarked that the tedium of sitting for a portrait was well enough known to Clay so that he had met Harding with some "apprehension." In discussing the matter Harding wrote, "I suppose that I am to paint Mr. Clay"¹³—as if the commission were a duty. When Clay was defeated in 1844 the subscriptions for the painting were not forthcoming and Harding was in the embarrassing position of having to seek out the money. Nevertheless, the portrait was completed.

Harding's portrait (Fig. 4) shows Clay in a forthright pose in a legislative setting which becomes merely a background for a full-length figure. Clay's right hand rests lightly on the back of the chair rather than in any gesture of speaking. His left hand holds a book indexed with his finger. The covered table shows a top hat and a single book, opened. There is no gesture of "persuasion" in the portrait.¹⁴

After the campaign of 1844, and well into the later years, Clay was still sought out by the artists, and he complained about the time necessary for sittings. Only G. P. A. Healy's visit to "Ashland," fulfilling the commission of King Louis Philippe of France to paint American notables, was of some pleasure to Clay. Healy had been to "The Hermitage" to paint Andrew Jackson, and the artist and Clay exchanged badinage about the general. Clay,



Fig. 4. Chester Harding (?), Henry Clay. Photograph courtesy of the Department of State, Washington, D.C.

too, enjoyed Healy's gossip about Europe.

As he came again to Washington and New York, Clay was the subject of commissioned portraits by relatively less well-known artists. The painter Charles Wesley Jarvis was the son of the irascible John Wesley Jarvis who had painted Clay as secretary of state just as he was leaving New York for the Peace Conference at Ghent, ending the War of 1812. The younger Jarvis painted Clay three-quarter length in 1851, a year before his death, for the Union League Club of New York. Clay appears behind a table on which papers are laid, but there is no standard legislative setting with drapes and columns, and the implication may be that he is addressing the club in New York. Just after Clay's death Jarvis extended this portrait into a full-length portrait for the Aldermens' Chambers in New York's city hall. In both of these late portraits Clay is clearly aged, appears slightly hunched, wears a flat collar, and his long gray hair falls below his ears. In the full length portrait Clay stands under a portico with his right hand raised in what could be taken as a gesture of farewell rather than an impassioned defense of some subject. Jarvis's likeness of Clay is very good, and his representation of the aged statesman is a sound verification of his appearance in his later years.¹⁵

A singular portrait of Clay, now in New York, is a full-length treatment, and depicts him speaking to the matter of the annexation of Texas. It appears to be the work of one A. Gibert, but the size of the painting (29" × 24") makes it more nearly a cabinet-size portrait than a full "state portrait." Gibert also made a bust portrait of Clay now in North Carolina as well as a lithograph after a daguerreotype by Haas which he surely used as a basis for the likeness of Clay. Whether there was a commission for the full-length *Clay* has not been established.¹⁶

IV.

The Posthumous Paintings: Bingham and Frye

George Caleb Bingham is known today as one of the principal early painters of American genre, especially political life in Missouri, stump speaking, canvassing for votes, local elections, and still more especially, life on the great rivers. Bingham was elected to the Missouri legislature as a Whig, and he was a life-long partisan of Clay. By 1841 he was in Washington with a

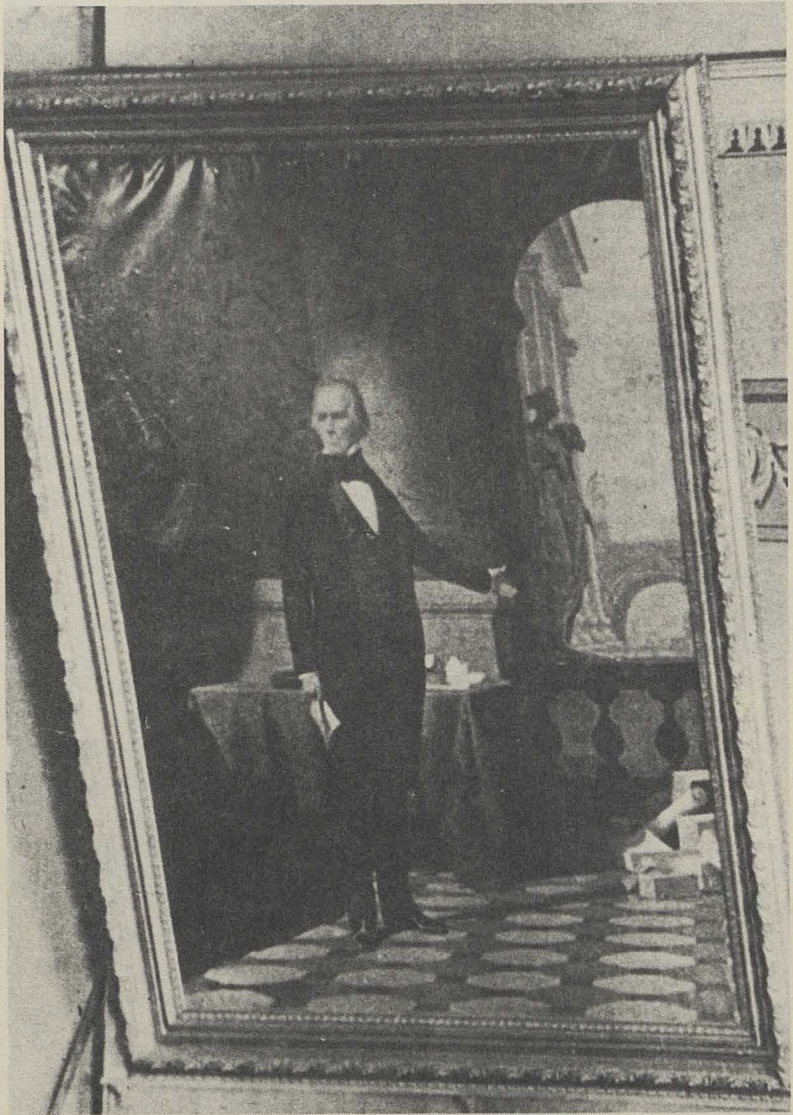


Fig. 5. George Caleb Bingham, Henry Clay. Photograph courtesy of the State Historical Society, Columbia, Missouri.

painting room in the Capitol, but there is no record that he painted Clay at the time.¹⁷

When Bingham was back in Missouri he began to look toward the campaign of 1844. For the Missouri convention of the Whigs at Boonville he painted four banners. He wrote to his friend Rollins that he intended these four banners, painted on good linen, to be substantial oil paintings. Unfortunately, only one survives, "The Mill Boy of the Slashes," a charming recreation of the boy Clay on horseback (muleback?) with grain sacks slung over the animal.¹⁸ The other banners were destroyed by fire. In describing these banners Bingham wrote:

. . . on one I shall give a full length portrait of Clay the statesman with his American System operating in the distance, on the other I shall represent him as the plain farmer at Ashland—each of them will also have appropriate designs on the other side. . . .¹⁹

The portrait of Clay as the "plain farmer" would have been unique since all the portraits of Clay walking about his estate at "Ashland" show him dressed in a formal walking habit, with top hat, walking stick, and long coat; some paintings show him with his dog when he rests on a hillock at the foot of a great ash tree.

Bingham was finally to paint Clay, heroic in scale, on commission from the legislature for the state capitol at Jefferson City. This painting was completed in 1860, just before the Civil War, along with a portrait of Andrew Jackson which proved more difficult for Bingham. These paintings were also destroyed by fire when the Missouri capitol burned in 1911. Fortunately, a negative of the interior of the legislature has been preserved, and from an enlargement of a portion of this negative some idea of Bingham's portraits can be known today.

The portrait of Clay (Fig. 5) is enigmatic. Clay stands in a great hall, and his left hand points generally toward certain objects slightly to the back of him, then past a balustrade and through an archway to an architectural facade moving into the distance. Against this facade appear two sculptured figures which may signify some general concept of abundance or fruitfulness.²⁰ The objects which appear in a casual collection on the floor to Clay's own left appear merely geometric, and of recondite meaning. In commenting on these Prof. E. Maurice Bloch says only that "the

figure of Clay is surrounded by numerous accessories."²¹

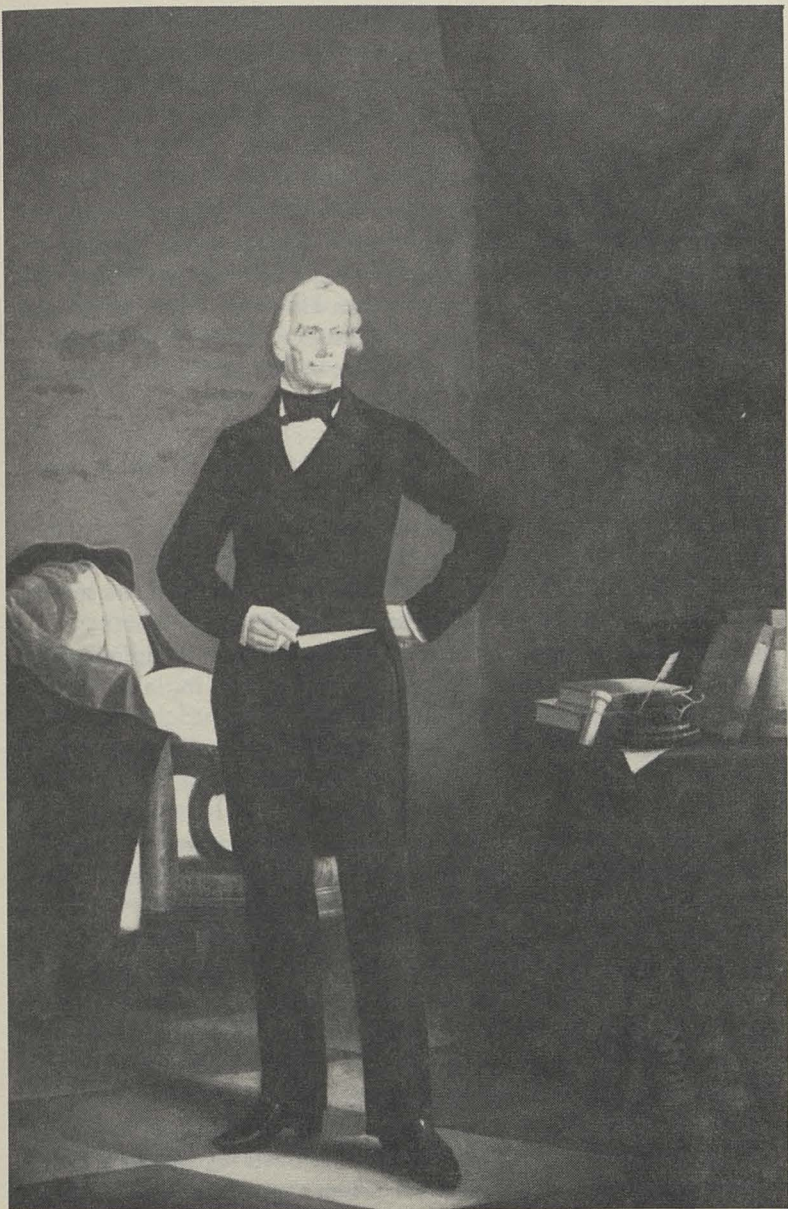
It is doubtful whether a better photograph of the lost portrait would provide a more incisive interpretation for the "accessories" of the portrait. Bingham had just returned from Düsseldorf, and he may have turned regressively toward certain standard or relatively open appurtenances for Clay which have no very special public meaning in America. A search through Bingham's letters has provided no answer from the painter himself.

When Bingham had visited the Kentucky state capitol in 1852, near the time of Clay's death, he was surprised to find no suitable representation of the Kentucky statesman in the senate chambers. He considered seeking such a commission for himself, but did not. Instead there was to be no heroic portrait of Clay to join Washington and Lafayette in the old Kentucky capitol until just at the close of the Civil War. This portrait was painted by one William Frye from Huntsville, Alabama, on commission from the Kentucky General Assembly. Frye was originally George Wilhelm Frey from Bohemia, and as an art student he read Cooper's *Leather Stocking Tales* and set out for America. He settled finally in Huntsville, and his major work was to be in painting the heroes of the Confederacy.²²

Frye worked often from such secondary sources as prints and photographs rather than "from the life." His portrait of Clay (Fig. 6) is a straightforward enlargement from an engraving by Albert Hay Ritchie, published as a memorial near the time of Clay's death.²³ Ritchie's engraving was distributed widely and the figure of Clay was "excerpted" to serve as an engraved frontispiece to A. H. Carrier's *Monument to the Memory of Henry Clay* (Philadelphia: D. Rulison, 1858). Clay's head alone was also cropped from Ritchie's engraving and published with elaborate scrollwork in yet another engraving.

Ritchie's engraving was enlarged and colored by Frye in his painting. The interior is plain; there are no drapes and columns. Clay's cloak is thrown over a chair; the table is set with papers and books. Clay's walking stick leans against the table. The attitude of Clay is vigorous and forthright as he pauses in the act of speaking. The likeness, however, appears to derive from popular lithographs of Clay, mostly from the campaign of 1844, and principally by the Kelloggs at Hartford rather than Currier and Ives.

Frye's painting was submitted to a legislative commission at



*Fig. 6. William Frye, Henry Clay (after an engraving by Ritchie).
Collection of the Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort.*

Frankfort near the close of the Civil War. There may have been only one other formal competitor for the commission, Phineas Stanton, Jr., who submitted a group portrait which was described in the *Frankfort Commonwealth* as Clay.

. . . surrounded by his friends, men of national reknown, listening to the entrancing words which always charmed those who heard them . . . on his right is seated Wm. H. Seward, and on his left his lifelong friend, John J. Crittenden, with Douglas, Benton, Cass, Sam Houston, Underwood and Robertson, the two latter of Kentucky. In the Lobby stand Webster, R.M.T. Hunter, Letcher of Kentucky, and General Scott. . . .²⁴

Stanton's group portrait has recently been offered to and accepted by the University of Kentucky.

Though Stanton's painting was approved by at least one of the Commissioners, John M. Clay, Frye's work was chosen and now hangs in the Old State Capitol. One of the Commissioners might have suggested that Frye make the enlargement of Ritchie's engraving, but in view of the time allotted for the completion of the work it is more likely that Frye was prepared initially with a large and possibly completed work.

A painting of 1847 which Stanton had made of Clay earlier, in New Orleans, is not mentioned in connection with the commission. This painting (or one derived from it) is a single figure portrait of Clay. It is a very disappointing picture and a poor likeness of Clay. The speaker is in an indecisive gesture at the speaker's table; the press might now term it a nearly "wimpish" Clay. The painting is today in the Aldermens' Chambers, New York City Hall.²⁵

V.

The Decline of the State Portrait

Clay, Calhoun, and Webster had been dead for nearly a decade at the beginning of the Civil War. When the legislatures of Missouri (1860) and of Kentucky (1865) commissioned portraits of Clay they were memorial rather than functional. Neither Webster nor Calhoun were portrayed as often in a purely legislative posture

as Clay. Daniel Webster, "Black Dan," whose firm image so thoroughly became him, according to almost all the artists and critics of the time, was never to be painted with a complex personal symbolism such as that which Clay evolved for "the American System." Nor did Calhoun appear hardly more than conventional in Thomas Buchanan Read's painting (Fig. 7), which may have been reworked. The portrait shows the usual columns and drapes, and a table laid with papers at Calhoun's left hand. To the left appears the flag and a glove, and on the papers appear the words "strict" and, less clearly, "construction," possibly added after Calhoun's death.²⁶ Read, who in later life was to turn to poetry and painting and away from sculpture, was never an assured painter. Here, for example, Calhoun's left foot extends beyond the point of support for his body.

It is an ironic footnote to the decline of the state portrait that this portrait of Calhoun suffered the indignity of having the body "excerpted" from the painting and the head of Abraham Lincoln then pasted over the head of Calhoun. This unhappy collage was created as an advertisement for the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company of Indiana.²⁷ If this was not a mendacious eclipse of Calhoun, it was undeniably a degradation of the imagery of statesmen.

As to sculpture, Clay was to be almost the property of the Kentucky sculptor Joel Tanner Hart, of Winchester. Hart was to make two life-size marbles of Henry Clay, and a heroic bronze statue for the city of New Orleans. The first marble statue was made on contract for the Ladies' Clay Association, of Richmond, Virginia to be placed in the state capitol. The contract was signed in 1846. Hart, however, then decided to go to Italy, following on the Cincinnati sculptors Powers, Clevenger, and Brown, and to carve Clay in pure white Tuscan marble at Florence.

Working for three years on the full-length Clay at Lexington, the models he made there were lost at sea on the way to Europe. Hart was delayed further in waiting for other models from Lexington, and in the meantime turned to other projects, especially the perfection of his pointing machine.²⁸ The *Clay* was not finished until 1860, though Hart worked with dispatch on the bronze statue, which was cast in Munich and dedicated the same year, 1860. Criticisms of the Richmond statue reached Hart's ears, and when he received another contract for a nearly life-size Clay (Fig. 8) from Louisville, he agreed to "improve" the statue. James

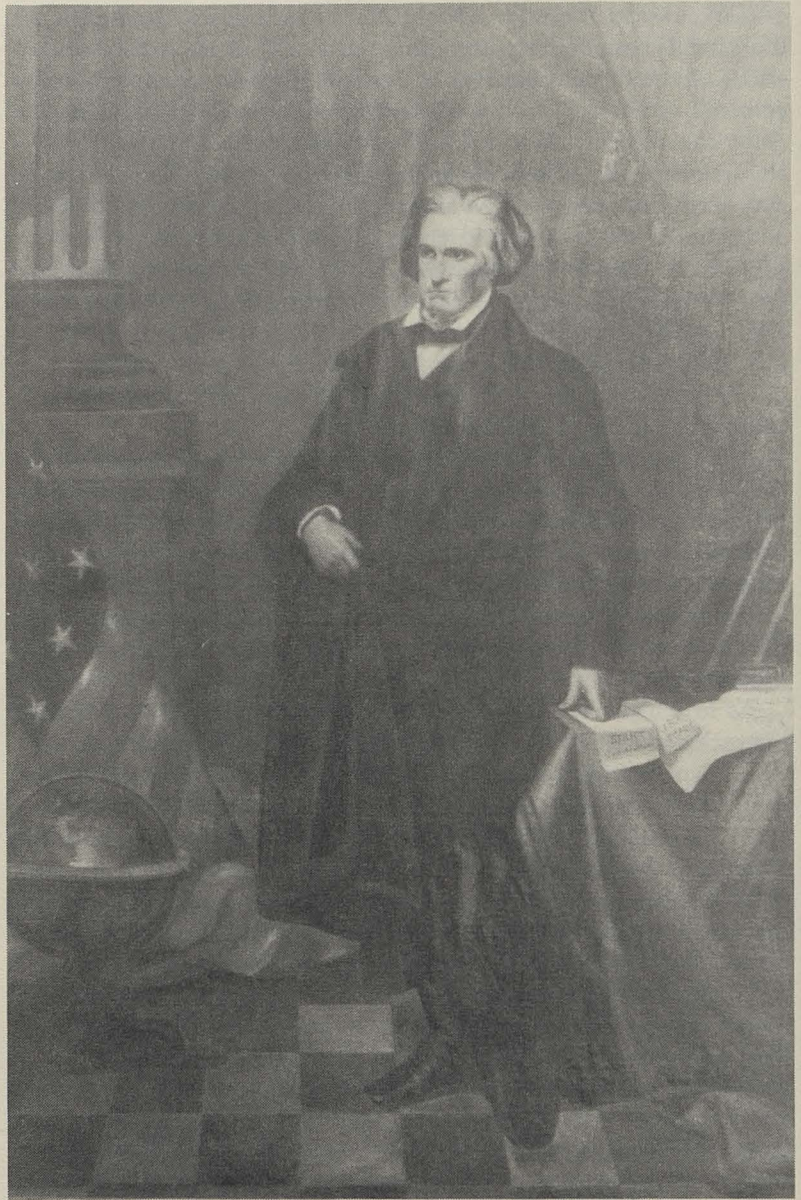


Fig. 7. Thomas Buchanan Read. John C. Calhoun. Courtesy of the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.



Fig. 8. Joel Tanner Hart, Henry Clay. Photograph from the Caufield and Shook Collection, University of Louisville Photographic Archives. Courtesy of the University of Louisville.

Jackson Jarvis had complained about "old clothes" statuary, and this criticism—"baggy trousers, fullled up by wind and storm"—was heard again in 1903 from Lorado Taft.²⁹ It was said, too, that though Clay may have been represented speaking, he had little inner animation, and it has been said that Ball's *Clay* (Fig. 9), a statuette, was better than Hart's life-size marbles of Clay.

Ball's statuette in bronze was a foreshadowing of future work. In 1927 Edmond T. Quinn made a bronze statue of Clay for the city of Caracas, Venezuela. It represented Clay as the "young cockerel" striding into oratorical combat with a sheaf of papers in hand.³⁰ When Charles Niehaus came to make the statue of Clay for the United States Capitol he also worked in bronze, and Clay is shown only in a walking habit, with top hat in hand, and with his cloak over his arm, looking much as he might have in returning from some formal occasion, or possibly from the long journey from Lexington to Washington. There is no hint of statesmanship beyond Clay's own fashionable person.

There is still no adequate history of the state portrait in America. The earlier strands of the history of state portraiture—such as the symbolic use of the *fasces* to portray Republicanism in Jean Antoine Houdon's treatment of Washington as "Cincinnatus"³¹—would not be understood among contemporary viewers for whom the traditions of classical iconography are no longer alive. This display of the symbolic *fasces* recurs, for example, in the statues of two Revolutionary heroes, James Otis and Roger Sherman, in mid-nineteenth century marbles; and, for a last and nearly unnoticed moment, they reappear on the chair in which the heroic *Lincoln* sits in his memorial at Washington. The American statesmen portrayed as orators on canvas have yet to be studied for their formal relationships to the ancient orators as realized in stone. (These comparative relationships, however, have been examined for the medium of sculpture alone.³²)

The three great senators, Webster, Calhoun, and Clay, all lived to face the light of the daguerreotype. Though they may have complained earlier of the hours required before the artist's easel, the exposure now of a few seconds' time, demanded to capture their images while uncomfortably frozen against iron supports in a photographer's studio, robs these men of their mobility and of their color, and they appear merely as arrested, undynamic human specimens, clinically and scientifically recorded in black and white on tin. Image begins to replace symbolism. Only likeness itself

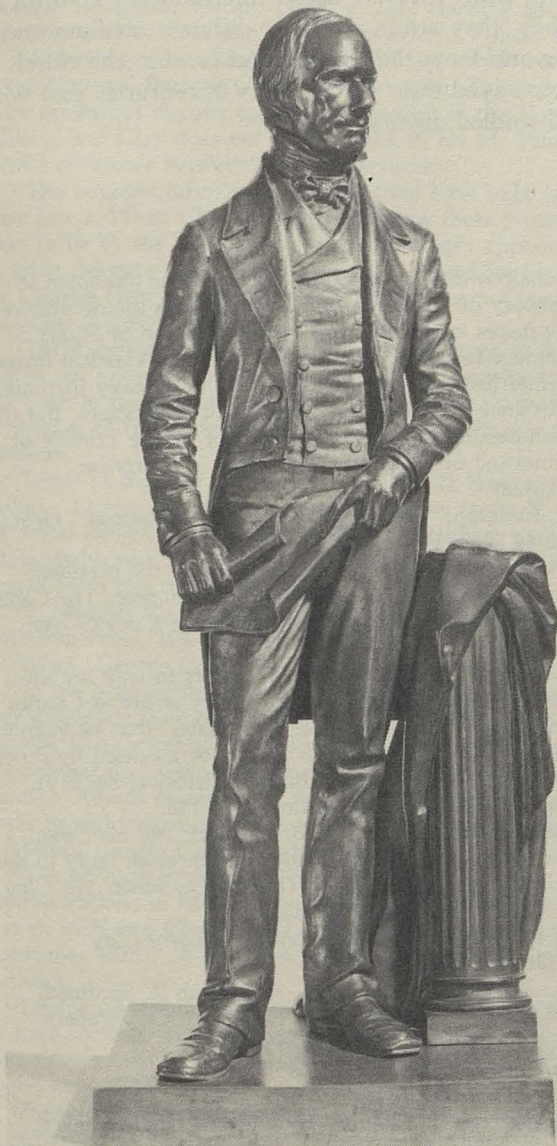


Fig. 9. Thomas Ball, Henry Clay. Courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.

becomes meaning. Today the statesmen suffer or even seek "photo opportunities," and while they are again entertainingly colorful and casually mobile, they are in a wholly different medium and a wholly different world from the brushes and canvas, the chisels and stone, that portrayed their predecessors in centuries past with high purpose and studied dignity.

NOTES

¹The table and chair with legs bound as *fasces* appear unknown to authorities on the history of American furniture; perhaps the decorative incorporation of the *fasces* in this instance is the invention of Stuart, based on a commonplace familiarity at this time with the classical image.

²A portrait of Chief Justice Marshall shows him in a heavy (perhaps velvet?) robe, also in knee breeches, stockings, and buckle shoes. But the plain black robe soon becomes the rule. The robe of Justice Trimble of Kentucky may be smocked or gathered slightly, but is otherwise apparently "plain" (1828).

³Marilou Alston Rudolph, "George Cooke and his Paintings," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 44 (June 1960): 140.

⁴A portrait of Andrew Jackson by Ralph Earl shows the president standing at a portico but not with his military appurtenances. The Capitol is seen in the distance, and this was also seen in George Cooke's later painting of Clay.

⁵Nicholas Longworth of Cincinnati advised Powers to wait for the future to decide whether Clay had snubbed him. Clay wrote to Charles Edward Lester, who inquired into the matter much later, that he intended no snub and regretted that he had not been able to be modeled by Powers (26 September 1845; Lester Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society).

⁶Rudolph, "George Cooke and his Paintings," p. 146.

⁷Neagle's *Pat Lyon* shows a more fluid brush work and his closer discipleship to his father-in-law, Thomas Sully, and through Sully to the English portrait tradition of the time of Sir Thomas Lawrence. His *Clay* is much more clearly "drawn" and sharp in imagery.

⁸Calvin Colton, *The Private Correspondence of Henry Clay* (Cincinnati: H. W. Derby, 1856), p. 473.

⁹Clay to Neagle, Ashland, 29 May 1843; Ainsworth R. Spofford Papers, Library of Congress. Transcribed by the Henry Clay Papers Project, University of Kentucky, Lexington.

¹⁰Colton, *Private Correspondence*, p. 727.

¹¹Knoxville *Post*, 21 February 1843.

¹²Three Sartain engravings of Clay are known: one from Neagle's painting, one from a painting by James Wise (otherwise unknown), and one from a version of Wise's painting which Sartain boldly claimed as his own. The one after Wise was published by U. B. Ewatts in Louisville, and possibly in other places, as well.

¹³Chester Harding, *Chester Harding, Artist, Drawn by his Own Hand* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), p. 186. Harding also wrote *My Egotistigraphy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: J. Wilson & Son, 1866).

¹⁴A version of Harding's portrait of Clay, which may be the original, is in the National Portrait Gallery, Washington. The facial features in Figure 4 are somewhat blander than in the portrait in the National Portrait Gallery, and Clay does not hold a book in his left hand. Otherwise there is little difference between the two versions.

¹⁵The younger Jarvis's portraits of Clay have been attributed to the elder Jarvis. When Charles Henry Hart saw these portraits he assumed them to be by the elder Jarvis, who had sought appointment from Clay as an artist delegate to a Panama Congress when Clay was secretary of state. See Charles Henry Hart, "Life Portraits of Henry Clay," *McClure's Magazine* 9 (1897): 491.

¹⁶There are two Giberts, Antoine Placide, born in Bordeaux, France but who is not known to have been in America. Jean-Baptiste Adolphe Gibert was born in Guadeloupe and was in the United States for a time. The attribution of the portraits of Clay to Antoine Placide is almost surely mistaken.

¹⁷Letter of Bingham to James S. Rollins, 21 February 1841. See C. B. Rollins, "Letters of George Caleb Bingham to James S. Rollins," *Missouri Historical Review* 32 (October 1937): 11. Bingham painted John Quincy Adams (who was not pleased), but no Bingham portrait of Clay has been located from this time.

¹⁸E. Maurice Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), I: plates 45 and 46.

¹⁹Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham*, I: 211.

²⁰In the later eighteenth century "garden figures" were considered appropriate for symbolizing fruitfulness, abundance, or good fortune, perhaps, in an exoteric symbolism. When John Adams was in Britain he was painted by Copley with such a garden figure (with a wand) in the distance. Adams regarded the portrait as a "vanity" and left it in England; it was brought home much later by John Quincy Adams.

²¹Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham*, I: 211.

²²The primary information on Frye is to be found in the communications of Minnie Frye Coleman to Mary C. Haycraft. See "The Portrait of Henry Clay" in the *Kentucky Historical Society's Register* 13 (September 1915): 39-41. There is little information on Frye's career in Alabama.

²³Ritchie's engraving was from his own painting, but the painting has not been located. The engraving, of which there is a copy in Special Collections at the Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, is of a good size, 27" x 17".

²⁴*Frankfort Commonwealth*, 26 May 1866.

²⁵Charles Henry Hart, "Life Portraits of Henry Clay," p. 491. Hart states that the single figure portrait of Clay by Stanton, which may not have been offered to the Legislative Commission, was painted in New Orleans.

²⁶The portrait of Calhoun attributed to Thomas Buchanan Read is in

poor condition, and the inscription on the papers shown in the portrait may be due to a later hand.

²⁷The affixing of the head of Lincoln to the body of Calhoun was noticed by Curtis D. McDougall in *Hoaxes* (New York: Macmillan, 1940) and reprinted in Marianna Jenkins, *The State Portrait, Its Origins and Evolution* (New York: College Art Association, 1947). Jenkins does not expand on the state portrait in America.

²⁸Hart's decision to patent his pointing machine in Britain was influenced by the Massachusetts lawyer Frederick Gale, who had helped Hart in dealing with Italian metal workers when Hart did not know enough Italian to deal with the craftsmen. The letter Gale wrote on behalf of Hart in explanation of the delay in completing the Clay statue is in the Addison G. Foster Papers, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky. Thomas Buchanan Read also wrote a letter the same day, at Hart's request. I am indebted to James D. Birchfield for bringing these two letters to my attention.

²⁹Lorado Taft, *History of American Sculpture* (New York: Macmillan, 1903).

³⁰The original model for Quinn's statue, sometimes attributed to his assistant, is in the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.

³¹Houdon's *Washington* shows the general standing beside a very large *fascis*, more than waist high, with his cloak and his sword hanging from the bundle. The plow which reinforces the connotation of Washington's role as President-General of the Order of the Cincinnati is nearly hidden behind the figure as seen from the front. The statue is in the state house at Richmond, Virginia.

³²John Stephens Crawford, "The Classical Orator in Nineteenth Century American Sculpture," *American Art Journal* 6 (November 1974): 56-69.